The Book of Revelation
Textual Notes and Commentary

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Our Lady Queen of Peace
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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apocalyptic Genre</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israelite Prophecy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Testament Letters</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Background</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Book of Revelation as Scripture</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual Notes and Commentary</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Prologue, Address, and Inaugural Vision</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prologue (1:1-3)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address (1:4-8)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inaugural Vision (1:9-20)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. The Messages to the Seven Churches</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ephesus (2:1-7)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smyrna (2:8-11)</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pergamum (2:12-17)</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thyatira (2:18-29)</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sardis (3:1-6)</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia (3:7-13)</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laodicea (3:14-22)</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. The Scroll Vision</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Heavenly Temple (Ch. 4)</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lamb and the Scroll (Ch. 5)</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dirges Over Babylon (18:9-19) ................................................................. 329
The Judgment of Babylon (18:20-24) ...................................................... 332
The Vindication of God’s People (19:1-10) .............................................. 336

XII. The End of Evil .............................................................................. 344
The End of the Beasts (19:11-21) ............................................................ 344
The End of Satan (20:1-10) ................................................................ 351
The Last Judgment (20:11-15) ............................................................... 361

XIII. The New Jerusalem ..................................................................... 366
The New Heaven and Earth (21:1-8) ..................................................... 366
The New Jerusalem (21:9 – 22:5) .......................................................... 380

XIV. Epilogue and Conclusion (22:6-21) ............................................. 392

XV. Conclusions ................................................................................. 406
Revelation as a Model for Christian Life ............................................ 406
Revelation as a Model of Biblical Interpretation .............................. 411
Revelation as Narrative .................................................................... 415
Preface

The impetus to put together these notes on the Book of Revelation came from a parishioner who asked for a class on the book. I was not thrilled. I have a basic grasp of the features of apocalyptic writing and an awareness of what sets the Book of Revelation apart from other examples of the genre. Apocalyptic writings are intended to give hope to people in hopeless situations and envision a dramatic act of God to overthrow evil and raise up the good. What is distinctive about the Book of Revelation is that it contends that that decisive action of God has already happened in the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Okay, I was happy with that. My understanding of the book was that it was largely a time-conditioned piece of writing, appropriate for the late first century of the Christian era, that it had some interesting things to say about justice and right, and that it was largely obscure. I was not intrigued.

After working through the book, I find that I owe that parishioner a large debt of gratitude. The book is fascinating. But it is also not something the average reader can pick up, read in an English translation, and every come to any appreciation or sense of understanding. To come to grips with the theological insights of the Book of Revelation takes work. In itself, the book is a mixed bag of apocalyptic, prophetic, epistolary, psalmic-liturgical, and narrative forms. There are no direct quotes from other biblical books, but allusions to biblical and apocalyptic literature abound. A large part of the task of understanding Revelation involves tracking down those allusions, their original settings, and come to grips with how the author of the book adopted and adapted the insights of other biblical and non-biblical writers to serve his purpose and develop his images.

In completing this study, I am indebted to Wilfrid Harrington, whose book on Revelation identified for me the multiple allusions contained in the book. I am also indebted to Colin J. Hemer whose study of the historical and social background of the Seven Churches in the Province of Asia who formed the original audience for the book was crucial to helping me understand the life and times and the challenges faced by these communities existing side by side with Jewish communities and pagans in the larger Roman world. Much of the
imagery in Revelation reflects the social circumstances of the time and the struggles evident among the various groups making up the population of the cities of the Seven Churches and the modus vivendi of these groups with and within the Roman Empire.

And in any biblical study I owe much to Brevard Childs whose ‘canonical criticism’ has influenced me in every biblical study I have ever conducted. Childs’ premise is that it is the final form of the text that is the object of our study, that the process of not only writing and editing the book, but the process by which it was included in Scripture is of importance in accepting the words of the text as God’s revelation, as revelation addressed to all believers of all times and places.

Many other writers and teachers are in evidence in this notes, and that is as it should be. Knowledge and appreciation of the biblical text unfolds in a community of scholarship. The work of each advances the work of all, so I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to engage in formal biblical study and be enriched by a vast community of believers seeking the truth of God within his word.

What’s In These Notes

To engage in the study of any aspect of Sacred Scripture demands context. We are separated from the original setting of the sacred texts by thousands of years and vast cultural differences. To provide a context in which to read and study the book of Revelation, I have included an Introduction. First and foremost, Revelation is generally identified as an apocalypse – the word means ‘Revelation.’ But apocalypse is a particular genre of writing common in the ancient world. The introduction begins by laying out the main features of the genre and its purpose in the world of late Judaism and early Christianity.

Secondly, prophets and prophecy appear frequently in Revelation. ‘John’ the author of the book is called a prophet. Israelite prophecy is another widely misunderstood concept. In the Introduction I lay out a summary of the purpose of Israelite prophecy and various features of this form of writing, features that are encountered in Revelation.

At the very beginning of Revelation, ‘John’ is commanded to write to the Churches in Asia. The beginning of his words are a typical introductory formula common in New
Testament letters. The messages to the Seven Church are all in letter form. And the final verse of the book is a closing formula for a letter. The third section of the Introduction, then deals with New Testament letters and their literary features.

While all these literary genres and features are reflected in Revelation, it was also written at a particular time in history and in a particular place. To be able to understand the images of the book it is necessary to have at least a fundamental grasp of the historical background of the writing. That is the focus of the fourth section of the Introduction. Historical background is necessary to understand the book in context and it is this understanding of what the book says in its own particular context that allows for us to find points of contact between the ancient setting and our own world.

Finally, the Book of Revelation is much more than an interesting, historical artifact. It is Scripture. It is God’s revealing word to all people of all ages. The fifth section of the Introduction, then, attempts to give an overview of and insight into the Book of Revelation as Sacred Scripture.

The bulk of these notes divides the Book of Revelation into logical segments. Each segment includes my translation of the Greek text. Every translation is already an interpretation. There are nuances of meaning in Greek, words and phrases that are idiomatic, words and phrases that can be ambiguous or ambivalent. My translation is not intended to be a smooth rendering of the Greek for proclamation, but a ‘clumsy’ rendering that points out ambiguities, variant meanings and the like so that those who do not know Greek can grapple with the complexity of the language of the text. There are a number of instances in the text where multiple meanings are possible. It is my contention in the commentary that the author deliberately intends to deploy multiple meanings and multivalent images to more fully engage his readers.

After the text of a given section is presented, textual notes follow. These contain detailed analyses of the the meaning of words, the grammatical features of phrasing, the literary techniques employed in the text, and the unpacking of particular symbols. This is the area of formal study – exegesis. (Note: for the seven letters, some historical notes are also included with background for each of the seven individual Churches).
Finally there is a set of Commentary Notes. These are a summary of and conclusions drawn from the detailed, exegetical study of the text in the Textual Notes. After the analytical examination of the text, the Commentary presents ‘conclusions.’ In the end, if the Commentary notes hold true, this is what we want to walk away with. Here is the text and here is a reasonable understanding of what the text wants to communicate.

Each Commentary section includes blocks of reflection questions based on the text and its understanding. These reflection questions are intended to spur us to appropriate the text of our lives and times. What does this text say to us now.

How to Use These Notes

1. We need to start with context, so I would highly recommend reading the Introduction.
2. For each segment of the text, read the translation included and compare it with a standard English Bible.
3. Read the Commentary notes (and historical background for the Letters in chapters 2 and 3). Do the Commentary Notes make sense of the text? If you disagree with anything in the Commentary, you are encouraged to offer an alternative view - but that view has to be based on the text. At this point you might need to work through the Textual Notes to make sure your alternate view is actually in accord with the text.
4. Formulate answers to the Reflection Questions to share (and debate) with others.
5. (Optional) For those looking for more, work through the Textual Notes. Remember these are more formally scholarly. But they do provide the basis for forming the conclusions presented in the Commentary Notes.

Enjoy the Book of Revelation - I did!
Introduction

It is by no means an exaggeration to state that the Book of Revelation is one of the most difficult books in the Bible to read, understand and with which to find any point of contact. The book is generally regarded as an Apocalypse, a form of ancient writing with which we have largely lost contact. As such, the book has suffered from many misinterpretations due to imposing modern mind-sets and points of view on a text that was thoroughly at home in its original context.

Three approaches to the Book of Revelation have largely dominated the ways in which the text has been understood and appropriated. The first is the literalist approach, taking the text simply at face value. This is the approach of fundamentalist Christianity, which seeks to plumb the book to find the signs of the end-time. The fundamental flaw with this approach is that it divorces the Book of Revelation from its original context and renders that context, meaningless. It also absolutizes the current context of the interpreter as the point from which the end-time is to be calculated. Calculations have been made from the 18th, 19th, 20th and now the 21st centuries, all to no avail. The approach fails to take seriously that the Book of Revelation is scripture, addressed to all people in all times and places.

A second approach to the book is the polar opposite of the first. This approach regards the Book of Revelation as a writing tied to a specific time and place, a specific crisis in the life of the early Church. It has relevance only for that particular situation in the history of Christianity. In this approach, the original context in which the book was written, that of the Churches in the Roman province of Asia during the reign of the emperor Domitian, seriously, but, like the first approach, it fails to take the book seriously as scripture. In this case, the book is seen as relevant only for the situation in which it was written and functions only as of some historical interest, but of no relevance to later believers.

The third approach attempts to take the book seriously in its original context and to find points of contact with the lives of believers in all times, situations to which the book now speaks. This approach is dominated by the conviction that the Book of Revelation is an example of apocalyptic writing and the oversimplification of the notion that apocalyptic writings are crisis literature. In modern times, this has led to the idea that Revelation speaks primarily to Liberation Theology, a theology that attempts to address the crisis of Christian life in largely Third World countries. A dualistic outlook is characteristic of apocalyptic writings, the divide between good and evil played out in absolute terms. While this may fit the context of Third World countries which are generally two class societies – the haves and have-nots, the powerful and the powerless – the struggle between good and evil is also played out in modern, industrialized countries where the majority of the population, the middle class, lives somewhere in between the haves and have-nots, the absolutely powerful and the absolutely powerless. This third approach recognizes that the book speaks to some people in our world, but not to all.

All three of the approaches proceed from seeing the Book of Revelation as an apocalypse, pure and simple. It is certainly true that the book displays apocalyptic features. But the author also identifies himself as a prophet and couches his work in the form of a letter to the Churches of the province of Asia. It is this mixture of genres that contributes to the uniqueness of the book and it will be necessary to look at each genre and its purpose to be able to appreciate how the mixture of these forms of writings has produced a book capable of speaking to all believers in all times and places.
Apocalyptic Genre

P. D. Hanson, in his article in the Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Supplement, has briefly defined the major characteristics of the apocalyptic genre. An apocalypse features:

1. A revelation from God
2. Given through an ‘otherworldly’ messenger (angel)
3. To a seer – a human worthy of receiving God’s word of revelation
4. What is revealed involves future events

Typically, an apocalypse involves the use of rich and lurid symbolism in need of interpretation and the interpretation is most often given by the ‘otherworldly’ messenger, the interpreting angel. While some hold that the source of the apocalyptic visions are the ecstatic experiences of the seer, it is much more likely that they represent conventional forms and images common to apocalyptic literature as it developed in later Judaism.

To Hanson’s observations can be added, especially in examples of apocalyptic writing that relate multiple visions, that there is often a narrative sense to the writings. There is a narrative fiction in which the seer, sometimes presented as a notable person from the past, ‘sees’ visions concerning things that have already happened in the past of the audience, but that are presented as future events from the perspective of the ‘seer.’ The narrative builds to the time of the audience and offers assurance that, just as what the ‘seer’ had seen in his earlier visions had come to pass, so too would the vision for the time of the audience become a reality. God will be consistent. In this, pseudonymous authorship is a mainstay of the apocalyptic genre.

Apocalyptic writings are notably dualistic, contrasting two polar opposites – the good and the evil, the people of God and Gentiles, the things of heaven and the things of earth, and the like. The dualistic outlook is often expressed in statements of Woe contrasted with exhortations to the faithful. In contrast to the Woes, the exhortations often take the form of “happy/blessed are..., for they will...” Two separate outcomes are the fate of those opposed in the writing. Exhortations either end with a judgment on the wicked or a call to those addressed to remain faithful to the end.

The earliest example of an apocalypse is probably to be found in Dan 7-12. The non-scriptural, intertestamental writings of the Jews also have numerous examples of the genre. Close examination of the dualistic nature of the writings, combined with a determination of the historical context in which the works were produced and the actual situation of the audiences they addressed, has led to the conclusion that an apocalypse basically represents crisis literature. The rich and powerful are contrasted with the poor and vulnerable and the writings envision a situation in which God will become involved and overturn the present situation in favor of the oppressed. As such, a primary purpose of apocalyptic writing is to give hope to the hopeless in crisis situations in which they are vulnerable and without any control over their own fate.

While the Book of Revelation certainly displays apocalyptic themes and imagery, and deploys a dualistic perspective on the world of the writer and his audience, it is not likely that the book was produced in a crisis situation. Moreover, the event that will transform victims into victors has already occurred – in the Cross of Jesus Christ. As such, recognizing apocalyptic characteristics in the book and applying what is known about apocalyptic writing to come to an understanding of the book’s message, is too narrow of an approach and largely inadequate for understanding the writer’s intent and message.

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Israelite Prophecy

While it is likely that apocalyptic was an outgrowth from Israel’s prophetic tradition, prophecy and apocalyptic are two distinct genres of writing, each with its own particular characteristics and specific purpose. As Wilfred Harrington notes:

Recognition of apocalyptic and prophetic dimensions in Revelation goes a long way toward explaining seemingly contradictory trends in the work. Standard apocalyptic sharply distinguishes the righteous from the wicked, most emphatically in the eschatological denouement when the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked definitively punished. In contrast, the distinction, in prophecy, between righteous and wicked is nuanced. Here, the wicked may repent and change their ways; the righteous stand in need of admonition and of exhortation to faithfulness, and may be threatened with ultimate rejection.

In his two-volume work, Klaus Koch traces the origins of Israelite prophecy, its purpose within the nation of Israel, and its ultimate demise as an institution. Originally, the word nabi referred to a type of soothsayer, someone who ‘read the signs,’ cast lots and the like. This was a common phenomenon in the ancient world. Kings and potentates would consult with nebiim to determine whether or not they should go to war, build a fortress, enter an alliance with another king. Casting lots resulted in one of two outcomes, “yes” or “no.” The nabi had a fifty/fifty chance of being correct. While such nebiim were likely to have existed in Ancient Israel, they were not the source of the institution of prophecy and Israel’s prophetic tradition. In fact, early Israelite prophets refused to refer to themselves as nebiim. It was only later in the tradition that the name was applied to them, after the practice of ‘soothsaying’ was eliminated from Israelite life.

There is a sense in which Israel’s prophets were ‘seers.’ They could read the signs of the times and point out the logical consequences for actions and courses of actions. Amos gives a clear example of what this means. He spoke out against the kings and princes of the Northern Kingdom for maintaining a lavish life-style at the expense of the common people. Through excessive taxation and exploitation of the people, they supported a kingdom and power structure that was bound to fail. You can only go to the well so many times. They wasted and depleted the resources of the kingdom to the point that it could no longer sustain itself. The result was defeat at the hands of the Assyrians and the destruction of the northern kingdom. The message of Amos was simply, “Don’t you see that this is the inevitable consequence for what you are doing and the way you are living? Don’t you see that you are not living by God’s plan, by his covenant, and this will turn out badly?” This is very much an over-simplification, but it illustrates, in a general way, the function of Israel’s prophets.

The institution of prophecy in Israel began with the rise of David’s monarchy in about 950 BC. The institution passed out of existence – with formal, writing prophets – soon after the return from the Babylonian Exile, when kingship failed to re-emerge. That is, prophecy in Israel is intimately tied to the institution of the monarchy. With the rise of the monarchy and the formation of the nation of Israel, two institutions were in place, the ruling king and nobles, and the priestly class who oversaw worship in the temple built by Solomon. Prior to the monarchy, local leaders may have exercised both functions of defending the people in battle and governing in the social arena, as well as being the ones to offer sacrifices and lead the people in worship. After the inauguration of the kingship, civil and religious leadership were definitely separated. Both institutions exercised power over the people, and power is

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always in danger of being exercised for its own sake and for the benefit of those in power. It was in this context that the institution of prophecy emerged.

Prophets were spokesmen for reform, as the example of Amos illustrates. Prophecy existed outside the spheres of civil rule and religious leadership, but attempted to correct abuses and infidelity to God’s covenant from within. In this sense, the writings of the prophets can be understood broadly as satires—not so much in the sense that they were funny lampoons of the powers that be, but in the strict, literary sense of the word. A satire is a form of speaking or writing that adopts the point of view of the opponent in order to show its weak points, to critique the state of affairs from within.

Within Ancient Israel, there was a class of stories that encapsulated much of what our life with God is like. These were Crime-and-Punishment stories. The version of these stories that stand behind much of the content of the Book of Judges is illustrative of a basic pattern in prophetic literature.

1. The people of Israel do what is evil in the eyes of God.
2. God acts to punish them— the punishment is absolute.
3. The people are led to admit that they have sinned.
4. While there are still consequences for their actions, God’s absolute judgment is mitigated.

In the Book of Judges, the pattern unfolds as follows:

1. The people of Israel do what is evil in the eyes of God.
2. God hands the people over into the hands of a foreign enemy.
3. The people cry out to God from their oppression.
4. God raises up a ‘judge’ to lead the people to victory over the foreign oppressors.

In general, prophetic writings are addressed to specific situations in the life of the people, circumstances in specific times and places. With a specific situation in mind, the prophet writes:

1. The situation is described, often with exhortations to change, turn back, repent.
2. When the exhortations go unheeded, there is sometimes a ‘prophetic lawsuit.’ The ‘lawsuit’ states specifically God’s reason for judging the people.
3. Then the oracles against Israel detail the results of their recalcitrance. These are basically the logical consequences for the folly of kings and people. And their purpose, again, is to try to reform the situation before it is too late, or at least to let the people know that the judgment could have been avoided.
4. But, as with the case in Crime-and-Punishment stories, God’s mercy is the final word. The prophetic writings often conclude with oracles against the foreign powers who are used as the means of God’s punishment of his people. But their abuse of power will fare no better than Israel’s.

While the institution of prophecy disappeared from Israel, it is reasonable to assume that there were still prophetic voices. Early in the life of kingship, a Wisdom School was born. Originally, Israel’s Wisdom Tradition provided a means of education for nobles and princes. But, like prophecy, the Wisdom tradition produced thinkers who stood outside the main streams of Israelite life and critiqued them. After the demise of kingship and the formal institution of prophecy, the Wisdom Tradition remained. In New Testament times, the Pharisees, the teachers of the Law are the descendants of the
Wisdom School. They formed a voice of reform, calling people back to adherence to faithfulness to God as his covenant people.

In the New Testament, prophetic voices are an accepted phenomenon. Paul sees prophecy as one of the gifts of the Spirit, given for the building up of the Church. These ‘prophets,’ in line with the tradition of prophecy in the Old Testament, were not magical diviners of the future, but voices of criticism and reform, who again had the insight to see the inevitable consequences for peoples’ actions. It is in this role that the author of Revelation casts himself.

New Testament Letters

It is likely that we are most familiar with New Testament Letters in the letters of Paul. It is also likely that Paul’s letters, or at least some of them, were known to the author of the Book of Revelation. It is evident, in Revelation, that the writer continues to grapple with some of the same problems Paul faced in his correspondence with the Churches he founded. Among these are the influence of Judaizing preachers, perhaps an incipient Gnosticism, but definitely an antinomian misinterpretation of Paul’s teaching on freedom from the law.

Paul’s letters are known as occasional letters. They were written to specific communities in specific places to answer questions arising in the Church and deal with problems that confronting believers in the community. There is another type of letter found in the New Testament, the circular letter. These letters, rather than being intended for a specific audience, were intended to be circulated among all the churches. These letters include I and II Peter, James, Jude and Hebrews. A significant aspect of the circular letters is that they are all pseudonymous. They all claim to have been authored by a significant figure from the past to address present needs in the wider Church.

Calvin J Roetzel, in his treatment of the Pauline letters has noted that the form of the letters is modeled after the typical form of a business letter common in the period of the Roman Empire. He outlines the basic structure of the letter as follows:

1. Salutation containing
   A. Naming the sender
   B. Naming the Recipient
   C. A greeting.
2. The Thanksgiving (prayer)
3. The body
4. Closing commands
5. The conclusion containing
   A. a peace wish
   B. greetings
   C. kiss
   D. The close (grace-benediction)

The salutation is the most stable part of a Pauline letter. The thanksgiving is a formal element of most Pauline letters. It terminates the letter opening, signals the basic intent of the letter, and may serve as an outline of the major topics to be considered. Coming immediately after the salutation, the

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4 Calvin J Roetzel, The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context, Atlanta: John Knox Press. 1975
thanksgiving appears in all of Paul's letters except Galatians, his angriest letter. It seems he could not find anything good to say about the Galatians. In the thanksgiving, using the language of prayer, Paul places himself and his hearers in the presence of God. In the body of the letter, Paul interprets the claims made on him and his hearers by God in Christ. The conclusion is a stable element in the epistolary structure. We usually find there a peace wish, greetings, and a benediction (or grace). Occasionally, we see an apostolic pronouncement. And generally, all of this is preceded by a battery of last-minute instructions. Bridging the gap between the instruction cluster and the conclusion is the peace wish. Once Paul crosses this threshold with his readers he has committed himself to parting and he soon brings the conversation to a close.

The basic content of the Gospel Paul preached is:

1. The arrival of the messianic age was foretold by the prophets.
2. The inauguration of this age occurred in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
3. The exaltation of Jesus.
4. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the church is a sign of Christ's power and glory.
5. The imminent return of Jesus will be the consummation of the messianic age.
6. The call to repentance coupled with an offer of forgiveness.

Special themes in Paul's writing was his conviction that salvation is a free gift that cannot be earned and its corollary, that faith alone, not works of or adherence to the Jewish law led to salvation.

The letters to the Seven Churches in the Book of Revelation are related to and display at least some of the structural elements of Pauline letters. They are addressed to specific communities and each takes up a specific issue within the community addressed. However, the entire book is couched in a framework of a circular letter. After the introduction, the author, John, announces that he is writing to the Seven Churches, standing for the whole Church in the province of Asia. Nearly all of the seven letters end with a call for anyone who hears the word of the letter to pay heed. And the entire book ends with a typical farewell greeting/blessing. As with the circular letters of the New Testament, it is likely that the designation of the author of Revelation is a pseudonym.

The Book of Revelation, within the structure of a formal/formalized letter, blends apocalyptic visions with prophetic challenges to seven specific communities and the messages to the seven churches become warnings and exhortations to the Church at large to live the Christian life without compromise.
The Book of Revelation is a mixed genre, blending apocalyptic elements, prophetic elements, and the New Testament letter form. Each of these genres are characteristically addressed to specific audiences within specific historical situations. To understand the Book of Revelation, it is necessary to have some idea of the social and historical situation of the Seven Churches of the Roman province of Asia.

The Roman Province of Asia lies at the extreme northwest of the area known as Asia Minor. In general, Asia Minor forms a Fertile Crescent extending from Mesopotamia to Egypt. In the ancient world, Asia Minor provided the main trade and travel routes between Assyria and Babylonia in Mesopotamia to Egypt in the south. The area is one of the oldest cradles of civilization.

Asia Minor was home to one of history’s earliest empires, that of the Hittites who ruled from about 1900 to 1200 BC. That empire fell to the Phrygians from Persia and the whole area entered a period of decline for the major players – Mesopotamia and Egypt. Local city-states vied with each other for control of fertile areas, but no dominant power emerged. It was at this time that groups of migrant shepherds in the central hill country of what would later become Palestine, began to merge into larger tribes and seek a settled way of life on the fertile plains. This was the beginning of the people of Israel and their struggle with indigenous peoples to establish a foothold in the land is roughly described in the Book of Judges.

In about 1000 BC, in order to solidify their hold on the land and provide protection for the people, kingship was established in Israel under David and his son, Solomon. The independent tribes were united into a nation, a capital city was captured by David, a religious center for the people was built by Solomon in the capital city and, for a brief period, Israel had the status of a small empire.

It appears that the tribes that formed the nation of Israel were originally two separate groups, a northern group and a southern group. David and his dynasty hailed from the southern group. David’s
political genius was to conquer an independent city that lay in an area between the holdings of the two groups of tribes and make this his capital, the Jebusite city of Jerusalem. To further seal the unity between the two groups of tribes, David brought the Ark of the Covenant, a religious symbol of the northern group, to Jerusalem and enshrined it there as the center of a national religion. Solomon built the temple of Jerusalem in which the Ark was enshrined.

The unity of the two groups, however, proved to be tentative, and after the death of Solomon, the kingdom was split in two, the Southern Kingdom of Judah, ruled by the Davidic dynasty, and the Northern Kingdom of Israel, ruled by successive dynasties. With this, the power and influence of Israel over the whole area all but disappeared.

It was after the division of David’s kingdom that major powers in Egypt and Mesopotamia began to strengthen and reassert themselves. Notably, Assyria in the northeast, had designs on the power and wealth of Egypt. Assyria set out on a path of conquest and empire building and the route to reach Egypt ran through Asia Minor. In 721 BC, Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, deported and re-settled most of its citizenry throughout the growing Assyrian empire and re-settled the lands of the Kingdom of Israel with captives from other conquered lands.

The Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem, but internal problems at home forced the armies to withdraw. Egypt regained its independence and Babylon emerged as a power to challenge Assyrian dominance. The Assyrian empire fell to the combined forces of the Babylonians and Medes in 612 BC. After this, Babylonia emerged as the major power throughout the Near East.

In 587 BC, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and all but the extremely poor and vulnerable were exiled to Babylon. The Babylonian treatment of conquered peoples was not nearly as harsh as that of the Assyrians. The captives were allowed to build homes and take up their trades. Some prospered.

The Babylonian empire played an important role in the history of Asia Minor until 539 BC. In that year, the Babylonian empire fell to the Persians under Cyrus the Great. All lands controlled by Babylon now fell under Persian rule. It was the policy of Cyrus to allow all populations exiled by the Babylonians to return to their native lands. Some, however, who had prospered in Babylonia, chose to remain, and this included a good number of Jews. This, then, is the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora.

Cyrus allowed people in occupied lands to maintain some self-rule and allowed them to follow their own religious practices. For the Jews, this meant that they could rebuild Jerusalem and its destroyed temple and take up again the sacrificial practices conducted in there. With the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora, some of the people remained in Babylon, and others found favorable conditions and settled in lands along the route to their homeland. This began a long-standing tradition of pilgrimages to Jerusalem for major festivals as Jews strove to maintain their identity and ‘citizenship’ in God’s chosen people no matter where they lived. In all this, we see the beginnings of Judaism as it was lived and practiced, at home and abroad, in the New Testament period.

From this point onwards, Israel and the homes of the Jewish people throughout Asia Minor, were occupied lands, were nations and cities subject to foreign powers.

Persian dominance of Asia Minor lasted until the conquests of Alexander the Great. The last kings of the Persian emperor were more tyrannical and more meddlesome in the life and practices, especially the
relational practices of their subject peoples. It is to the late Persian period, with the Book of Daniel, that the beginnings of an Apocalyptic tradition can be traced.

In 334 BC, Alexander the Great defeated the Persians and established Macedonian rule throughout Asia Minor. His conquests brought the whole Middle East under his domain, but illness cut short his successes and within 10 years after his extraordinary conquests he died. His domains were divided between his two leading generals and heirs, Ptolemy and Seleucus. The Seleucids dominated the Middle East while the Ptolemies reigned in Egypt.

In the northwest of Asia Minor, the territory that would become the Roman Province of Asia, in the early 3rd century, Philaitaros of Pergamum, resisted Seleucid rule and established a dynasty that ruled over the area until Roman times. Alliances between Syria, the Kingdom of Pergamum, and Rome were forged to hold off Seleucid attempts to regain control over the area. In 133 BC, the last Pergamene king, Attalus III, bequeathed his kingdom to Rome. For a while, the city retained some independence, but Roman imperial designs and the gradual annexation of surrounding territories by Rome, soon threatened that independence. A revolt against Roman expansion led by Mithradates was crushed by Pompey in 63 BC and Asia Minor came fully under Roman control.

In 63 BC, Augustus Caesar was born. He was the great nephew of Julius Caesar and his heir to power in Rome. Under Augustus, the empire continued to expand. The genius of Augustus was to institute the Pax Romana (Roman Peace). Under this policy, occupied territories were given a measure of independence and self-government. They were required to pay tribute/taxes to Rome and to maintain the peace, and in return, they could expect help and support from Rome in times of trouble or natural disaster. This policy allowed for free travel throughout Roman controlled territories, expansion of commerce and trade, and the creation of ‘cosmopolitan’ cities, centers of culture and learning, where peoples from far reaching parts of the empire could exchange ideas and beliefs. On the downside, Roman legions were stationed throughout the empire to maintain the peace and it was common practice to require the sheltering and feeding of soldiers in the provinces. Far from Rome, it was also common for Roman Provincial Governors to abuse their power and extract more in tribute and taxation than was strictly required to be sent to Rome. It was in the provinces that temples were built to Rome and Roman emperors were first celebrated as ‘gods.’

Asia Minor was now a permanent province of Rome and would remain so long after the fall of the west. With the reign of Augustus the "Pax Romana" was never more evident than it was in this region. The new Roman province of Asia Minor was a land of prosperity and highly defined culture. Already heavily Hellenized in the Greek custom, with Persian artistic influence, Roman civilization in the east thrived and culminated in Asia. Fantastic building projects spread throughout cities like Pergamum and Ephesus.

It is likely that the worship of emperors that emerged in the provinces developed out of Greek influence where the great heroes of Greek mythology were eventually honored as of divine descent. During the Pax Romana, that Greek influence began to take root in Rome itself. Divine honors were granted to ruling emperors by the Senate and the Imperial Cult took root in the heart of the empire. When this happened, the worshipping of an emperor as a god in the provinces was no longer an option, but a requirement for citizenship and/or for membership in the trade guilds. Not only livelihood, but life itself could be determined by participation in the Imperial Cult. This is the situation that obtained in the
Churches of the Seven Cities to which the Book of Revelation was addressed during the reign of Domitian.

Colin J Hemer has examined the particular situations of each of the Churches addressed in the Book of Revelation. He has noted that there is a Gentile/Pagan population in each of the cities. According to ancient tradition, the citizens of some of these cities would have been exempted from taxation and tribute, an exemption granted by Persian or Greek overlords and honored by Rome. The citizenship of some of the cities would have included a significant Jewish population. In some cities the Jewish population would have been long-standing, part of the Jewish Diaspora. In others, the Jewish population would have been composed of migrants to the cities seeking a better way of life, a place to practice their trades more profitably. It is also possible that there was an influx of Jews to cities in the Province of Asia after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD, a migration to avoid the hardships in the Land of Israel after the unsuccessful rebellion against Rome. In the cities there would have arisen controversy over who might legitimately be exempt and who was obligated. The controversies existed between Gentiles and Jews and between long established members of the Jewish population and the relative newcomers.

There was also a Christian component to each of the Seven Cities. We know with certainty that Paul visited the Province during his missionary journeys and that he established a Christian community at least in Galatia. How many of the Christians of the Province were pagan converts to Christianity and how many were converts from Judaism is not known with any certainty, but the relationship of Christians to Pagans and to Jews forms a crucial aspect in the background to the letters. It is possible that some Jewish converts retained association with the synagogue community to enjoy that community’s exempt status while not strictly following Jewish law. These may have been denounced by the non-Christian Jews. And it is evident from the letters themselves that some Christians, whether from Jewish or Pagan backgrounds, compromised with strict adherence to Christian principals in order to maintain their livelihoods with the trade guilds, which often required participating in sacrifices to the patron gods and goddesses of the trades. Refusing to participate would mean that they were no longer free to make a living. And, in the era of the Imperial Cult, those not otherwise exempted risked their lives for non-participation.

It will be necessary to look more carefully at the particular situation of each of the Seven Churches in order to perceive what the author of Revelation is addressing in each specific community. This will be presented as an introduction to the commentary on each of the letters.

At this point, one final note is worth attention. Domitian was, by all accounts, not a vicious tyrant, but a capable and just ruler. Still, the policies of Rome and the abuses of the legions and Roman Provincial governors created an uncomfortable situation for the Christians of the Province. As such, the Book of Revelation does not address a crisis situation, but a situation that calls for the Churches to examine how they are living their Christianity. The author of the book is fully aware that, if the Churches hear his call to radical Christianity, that, in itself, may provoke a crisis; yet in his approach to living the Christian life, the author will brook no compromise.

In his ground-breaking book, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*⁶, Brevard Childs set a new direction for Biblical scholarship that continues to influence the work of serious Biblical scholarship today. Against other forms of biblical analysis that attempt to identify the most original forms of a writing and to strip away later editorial layers, Childs proceeds from a very simple starting point: the final form of the biblical text, as it exists in the most authoritative Hebrew and Greek versions, is the object of our concern. That is the text of Scripture that we are called upon to understand and interpret today. Childs’ canonical criticism takes the biblical text seriously as we have it in its final form. His method involves an attempt to discern the processes that lead from an original text and its message to the communities to which it was originally addressed, the way the text was adapted and interpreted to address later believers, to its final form that is now intended to function as Scripture for all later generations.

In 1984, Childs applied his canonical method to the New Testament.⁷ In his treatment of the Book of Revelation, he noted the general agreement of nearly all modern commentators that the book arose during the first century AD and was addressed to the needs of its audience in this period within the thought patterns common to the age. It was never intended to be a blueprint for future history nor any type of timeless symbol system. However, he also notes the dissatisfaction with a traditional approach to the book that attempts to correlate biblical imagery with historical figures. This leads to an approach that concludes that once the ‘de-coding’ has been accomplished, the work of the critic is done.

Childs notes that 19th century studies of the book began to move away from merely ‘de-coding’ symbols to an appreciation of the genre of Apocalyptic, its purpose in the life of the believing community, and a recognition of various pieces and traditions woven together to make up the Apocalypse of John. Building on the work of earlier scholarship, Childs concludes that the original writer of the Book of Revelation set out to reinterpret inherited prophetic traditions in such a way as to give faithful witness to God’s word for a new generation of Christians. The original message of the book is directed to the contemporary community of faith with a word for the future, a view of the end-time. The significance of the first three chapters of the book is that they firmly connect the subsequent visions with the contemporary situation of the Seven Churches. The author of Revelation attempted to present to the Seven Churches a fresh interpretation of God’s plan of salvation, based on Old Testament imagery, especially that of Daniel. It is not an exaggeration to state that the author offered a profound reinterpretation of the whole Old Testament in the light of his understanding of Jesus Christ.

What Childs notes as particularly significant in the Book of Revelation is the interplay between the heavenly and earthly realms. The book begins with a description of God ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come, the First and the Last.’ Within this perspective, human time is transcended. The same description is repeated in 22:13, creating a bracket for the entire book, but it has now been transferred to Christ. God is pictured enthroned above his creation and worshipped by every living thing. God’s heavenly rule is a present reality, the kingdom has come. Divine judgment has already taken place, Satan has been defeated by the Lamb and cast from heaven; the holy ones of God surround the throne, singing the new song in celebration of God’s victory. The effect of the transfer of titles to Christ is that the whole apocalyptic scenario, inherited from Daniel and fleshed out with multiple allusions to Old Testament prophecy, when viewed from the perspective of the heavenly reality has been interpreted

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as a completed action. It does not lie in the future because Christ has encompassed the past, present
and future into one redemptive purpose, accomplished on the Cross.

Yet, the Book of Revelation portrays another dimension of reality, which is viewed from the perspective
of earth. The Church still lives in space and time. She experiences the realities of suffering and death,
and, in the context of the Seven Churches, the face of the beast is mirrored in the emperor cult which
grows more threatening with each passing day.

The author of Revelation nowhere denies the reality of the present situation/predicament of the
Church. That evil exists in present reality is not an illusion. As such, the author allows the tension to
continue between the two perspectives of reality, a heavenly and an earthly. But the major point being
made is that in the Cross, which is God's decisive moment within history, human history receives its
meaning. Christ's victory is in the past, but unfolds gradually throughout human history.

The effect of all this, Childs concludes is that the writer of the Book of Revelation has encompassed all
the cosmological evils which plague the church within the sphere of God's power. Judgment comes
when God breaks the seals, signals the trumpets to be blown, and orders the pouring of the seven vials
of his wrath. Because of the slain Lamb, the ancient enemies of the Church have been robbed of their
independent power and made to play out their subordinate roles within God's great plan.

From a canonical perspective, the decisive move by which the Book of Revelation could be appropriated
by successive generations of believers has already been made by the original author. The continuing
message of the book was indeed moored in history, namely, God's history in Christ. However, the
traditional apocalyptic scenario which the first-century author has painted with a Roman backdrop now
serves only as a vivid illustration of that recurring eschatological (end-time) threat by which each
successive generation of the faithful was challenged to endure.

In the end, the Book of Revelation was never simply a tract for the times or an occasional letter which
later was assigned a religiously authoritative status. Rather, its author laid claim to its being divine
revelation at the outset. The introduction of the book makes its distinctive canonical function
immediately evident. 1:1-3 are presented by a voice different from the author and distinct from God
and Christ who are also referred to in the third person. Someone else offers an introduction to the
entire book in which its function for the reader is outlined. First, its content is defined – it is the
revelation of Jesus Christ, who is its author. Next, its transmission is described – it was mediated by an
angel to John by means of visions. Then its purpose is given – it testifies to Jesus Christ concerning what
must soon take place. A blessing is then pronounced on its being heard and obeyed. Finally, the entire
introduction is grounded in the urgency of the imminent end.

The introduction reflects a stage beyond that of the epilogue within the canonical process of the book.
In the epilogue the author has reaffirmed the book's divine author. However, in the introduction,
someone belonging to the community of faith, who had received the book, offers a canonical guideline
by means of which the book was to function as authoritative scripture for generations long after the
author. It defines the special quality of this writing which is not hindered by its time-conditionality from
conveying the divine Word. That the Christian Church understood almost immediately the Seven
Churches in Asia in their representative, universal roles reflects a canonical reading fully commensurate
with the introduction.
Wilfred Harrington⁸, in dealing with the fact that, contrary to the usual setting of apocalyptic writings, the Book of Revelation does not specifically address a situation of crisis or acute persecution in the life situations of the Seven Churches, offers an observation on the context out of which the book grew that supports Childs’ canonical observations. It cannot be denied that Paul’s teachings were influential among the Churches in the Province of Asia. Within the Pauline school/tradition of presenting the Christian message, the Pastoral Letters (I and II Timothy and Titus), pseudonymous writings based on Paul’s thought, attempt to come to grips with the idea that the second coming of Christ may not be imminent, that the Church will be around for a while. The letters deal with matters of Church order and structure and with the way the Church needs to interact with the larger world.

The Christian communities to whom the Pastoral Letters were addressed had come to terms with the world in which they lived. In this world, the Pastoral Epistles present a church coming to terms with the world: an eminently sensible Church, concentrating on structure, orthodoxy, and respectability. It is the sort of Church with which we are familiar because, historically, the Christian Church has followed the Pastoral model. The author(s) of the Pastorals looked to an ongoing world and asked that Christians should be good citizens. The question remains: is the label ‘good citizen’ too high a price to pay for passive acceptance of institutions and structures that are, in fact, sinful? The author of Revelation, in this context, decided to write. Given the Christian situation as he perceived it, it was not surprising, and well nigh inevitable, that what he wrote was an apocalypse.

The author of Revelation viewed all authority based on power as demonic. As a prophet, he could not settle for half-measures. The civil authority of his day, the Roman Empire, was, without doubt, based on power. He had a two-fold reason to attack Rome. First, his conviction that imperial Rome was an instrument of Satan. Second, he had to wean his fellow Christians from their willingness to work within the contemporary social system and, even, from their admiration for features of that world. Sharing as he did a widespread early Christian expectation of an imminent end, he predicted that the fall of the empire would be soon. Surely, then, it was utterly foolish for Christians above all to place their trust in a regime that was sick unto death.

Apocalypse was a genre ideally suited to the author’s purpose. It gave him full scope to paint the empire in the most lurid colors. He could depict history as a stark struggle between the forces of evil and the worshipers of God and of the Lamb. His encouragement was paradoxical. Victory was won on the cross. He would encourage, not by conjuring up false hope of miraculous intervention but by his reinterpretation of the suffering of Christians.

Harrington’s observations of the conflict between opposing models of Christianity in the context of the situation out of which the Book of Revelation emerged, are perennially poignant in the life of the Church in all ages. The Book of Revelation raises the question for all believers in all times and places: When do we work with our surrounding world and when does faith in Jesus Christ call us to stand against it?

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⁸ Wilfred Harrington, op. cit.
Conclusions

1. The Book of Revelation is a work of mixed genre; it combines apocalyptic writing, prophetic writing, and elements of New Testament letter writing.

2. All of the forms of writing that contribute to the structure of the Book of Revelation share the basic characteristic that they are addressed to particular people, in particular times and places, living in a specific social context.

3. Apocalyptic writings are usually pseudonymous, in which God’s revelation is mediated to a notable figure from the past by an otherworldly creature (angel); the revelation is given in visions or auditions that make use of rich and lurid symbols whose meaning is explained by the revealing angel. Apocalyptic was a conventional form of writing, not the result of ecstatic experiences and was intended to provide hope to people in hopeless situations.

4. Israel’s prophetic tradition was tied closely to the institution of the monarchy and, by means of exhortations, prophetic lawsuits, and oracles against both Israel and foreign nations, was intended to stimulate repentance, to remedy abuses and wrongs from within.

5. New Testament letters were occasional letters, meant to address specific questions or problems with specific communities, or circular, meant to provide encouragement and provide general instructions to the Church at large. New Testament letters follow a specific format drawn from the normal communication of commerce and business of the day.

6. The social/historical setting of the Book of Revelation is that of the Christian Churches in the Roman Province of Asia in the late First Century of the Christian era. It is the time of the Emperor Domitian and not, in itself a time of crisis. Yet, the writer of the Book of Revelation can see the possibility of a crisis developing for the Church if Christians accept his call to a radical Christianity.

7. The Roman Province of Asia was, generally, a prosperous region of Asia Minor and a source of wealth for Rome. There is a long history of civilization in area but it is also a region, throughout its history, that was fought over and dominated by stronger nations and empires. The population of the cities/city states in the region was composed of indigenous Gentiles, Jews of the Diaspora, Jews who migrated for reasons of economic opportunities or to flee Israel after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and Gentile and Jewish converts to Christianity as well as Christian migrants from Israel after the Jewish rebellion. The relationship that existed among these different groups in each of the Seven Cities is crucial to an understanding of the specific situation addressed in each of the letters of Revelation.

8. A full understanding of the Book of Revelation must include an appreciation of its original context and the message offered to the communities of the Seven Churches during the reign of Domitian, as well as an appreciation of how the book was adapted and appropriated to function as Scripture, God’s word to believers of all times and places. A key to this understanding is suggested by the presence of two forms of Christianity in the region: a Pauline form prevalent in the Pastoral epistles which commended good citizenship and finding ways to exist peacefully in the larger world, and a Johannine form of radical Christianity that would resist all forms of power for power’s sake and allow no form of compromise with worldly power structures.
Prologue (1:1-3)

1:1 The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to make known to his slaves (those bound to him) which is necessary to take place in quickness and (which) he made known, having sent by means of his messenger (angel), to his slave, John, who gave witness to the word of God and the testimony (witness) of (to) Jesus Christ, which (whatever) (things) he saw.

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and those paying attention (observing, keeping) to the things having been written in it, for the time is near.

Textual Notes

1. The term *apocalypsis* – revelation, occurs in the entire book only in 1:1. ‘The revelation of Jesus Christ’ is an ambiguous expression. Harrington regards ‘of Jesus’ as a subjective genitive, indicating the ‘revelation’ refers to what Jesus Christ reveals. Alternately, especially in the light of the next phrase, ‘which God gave to him,’ could indicate that the content of the book is a revelation of who and what Jesus Christ is for us. Whatever the case, the action of God initiates a purpose, that what is revealed be given to the servants of Jesus.

2. *Doulos* is the common Greek term for a slave or servant. It is regularly used in contrast to free men. In the LXX, the term is used to translate the Hebrew *ebed*. Both terms, essentially mean a bondsman, figuratively or literally – someone bound to someone else. Harrington notes that, in the Old Testament, the term came to be applied to the prophets, those who speak God’s word, and he argues that, in the New Testament, the word is used to describe Christian communities.

3. ‘Which is necessary to take place in quickness.’ Some commentators believe that this phrase is in reference to the imminent Parousia, the second coming of Christ. It is a somewhat common expression in apocalyptic literature (see Dan 2:28), to refer to a definitive action of God to end the present crisis. However, in Revelation, the definitive action of God in history has already taken place in the Cross of Jesus Christ. As such, Harrington suggest that this phrase more probably represents the author preparing his readers for an impending crisis if they heed his exhortations, and for the salvation, already accomplished, to which they will have access through endurance.

4. *Angelos* has the basic meaning of ‘messenger.’ In Old Testament narrative, especially stories in Genesis, the ‘messenger of God’ is a literary construct used to avoid anthropomorphisms – as when God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. By the late Old Testament and Intertestamental Periods, a belief in ‘angels’ as heavenly consorts of the deity had developed. These ‘other-worldly messengers’ are regularly featured in apocalyptic literature as those who convey and interpret God’s word.

5. ‘His slave/servant, John.’ Whoever ‘John’ might be, he is bound to Christ and will speak his word to the community of faith. Against pious tradition, it is universally recognized that the author of Revelation is not the beloved disciple and supposed author of the Fourth Gospel. Harrington refers to him as an otherwise unknown Christian prophet, most likely an itinerant prophet who probably came from Palestine. This is highly conjectural. It also breaks the convention in which an apocalypse is a pseudonymous writing associated with a notable figure from the past. In light of the contrast Harrington

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9 Wilfrid J Harrington, *op. cit.*
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
sees between Christianity lived on the model of the Pastoral Epistles and the radical Christianity proposed by the author of Revelation, it seems far more likely that the notable figure from the past is a known ‘John,’ whether the apostle or not, and that the author is intentionally contrasting two approaches to living the Christian life.

6. There are no significant textual issues in v. 2, but the verse does set up a significant set of equivalences: the word of God = the testimony of Jesus Christ = all that ‘John’ saw and will relate in the book. As such, the book is characterized as God’s plan in Christ revealed through ‘John’ to the believing communities.

7. *Makarios* – blessed, fortunate, happy. This is the first of the seven beatitudes to be found in the book (1:3, 14:13, 16:15, 19:9, 20:6, 22:7 and 22:14). It would appear that a liturgical ceremony is envisioned in the verse in which one reads and all other hear. In this verse, the contents of the book are explicitly identified as prophecy, a form of Hebrew writing designed to lead to reform, repentance, to change. ‘The time is near’ again appears to refer to, not the final, definitive act of God in history, but a time of tribulation in which only those who have reformed will share in the saving act of Christ already accomplished.

Commentary

In his study of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic History, Robert Polzin made a significant distinction between ‘reported speech’ and ‘reporting speech.’ Essentially, reported speech refers to quotes or paraphrases of another, and reporting speech refers to the words of the author/narrator actually speaking in and through the text. In Deuteronomy, Moses ‘reports’ God’s words to the people of Israel encamped on the plains of Moab right before their entry into the Promised Land. In his reporting speech, Moses is the mediator of God’s words to his people. However, Moses’ words are now mediated to all later generations of believers through the words of the narrator of the book. (‘Then Moses said...) Through the words of the narrator, Moses’ words, quoting God’s words, become Scripture for all later generations. There is an implicit claim that just as Moses was crucial to the people of Israel on the plains of Moab, mediating to them God’s word, so the author/narrator of the book is crucial to all later generations, mediating to them the words of Moses mediating the words of God. This dynamic interplay between and among the voices heard in the text is a staple of Biblical literature and this interplay is at work in the prologue to the Book of Revelation.

The prologue to the Book of Revelation makes some significant introductions. First, almost unwittingly, we are introduced to a narrator’s voice. This is the dominant voice we hear, not the voice of a long-ago prophet sharing his ‘visions,’ but the voice of a narrator who announces that what he has to tell us is nothing short of the very revelation of God’s word, a ‘word’ in Johannine thought that became flesh and dwelled among us. The prologue announces that the word of God that will be reported to us is identical to the testimony of Jesus Christ, what he had to say to his followers and especially his ‘servant John,’ whoever that might have been.

The narrator identifies the contents of the book as an apocalypse, revelation. As an apocalypse, it is to be expected that ‘vision’ would be the medium of revelation. But that apocalyptic vision is no longer addressed to Seven Churches in the Roman Province of Asia by a long-ago prophet. It is addressed to us who now hear these words and share the visions about to unfold. In this way, the narrator of the book has freed the contents of the visions from the particular situations of the Seven Churches, but has also made the experiences of those Churches, in their particular time and place, normative for the understanding of later Christians. As the ‘prophet’ applied Old Testament prophecy and apocalyptic

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imagery to a particular situation in time, we are to apply the contents of this book to our situation in our time.

It was suggested that the end-time was not near in the late First Century Province of Asia, nor can we expect it in our time. What is near is a moment of crisis, a moment when we are called on to be servants of our master, to live a radical Christianity in the here and now, no matter what the cost. As Harrington has said: “For each of us, our time is the only time we have to fulfill our calling, and our death is the end for us on earth. Our span of years is important for us, and precious in the eyes of the Lord.”

In the Old Testament, the relationship of the people of Israel with their God was expressed in terms of a covenant. The idea of covenant was an analogy that tried to capture what this particular God-human relationship entailed. While there is no covenant text to be found anywhere in the Bible, there are descriptions of covenant making. At the end of such a ceremony comes an enumeration of blessings and curses for being true to the conditions of the covenant or not. These ‘blessed are...’ sayings were widely used in the Psalms and Israel’s Wisdom literature and are to be found in the ‘Beatitudes’ of the New Testament. Such a ‘beatitude’ forms the conclusion of the prologue to the Book of Revelation. Keeping to what one hears in this book is the condition for blessedness, for sharing in the salvation accomplished once and for all in the Cross of Jesus Christ.

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13 Wilfrid Harrington, op.cit.
Address (1:4-8)

4 John, to the seven churches that are in Asia: “Grace to you and peace from the one who is and he (who) was, and the one coming (appearing), and from the seven spirits who are in front of his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, the witness, the faithful one, the first-born of the dead and the ruler (chief) of the kings of the earth.

“To him loving us, and having releasing us from our transgressions (missing the mark) in (through) his blood, 6 and he made us a kingdom, priests for his God and Father, to him (be) glory and power until the ages of the ages. Amen. (In truth, so be it).

7 Behold! He is coming (making an appearance) with the clouds and every eye will see him and those who pierced him through, and they will mourn because of him, all the tribes of the earth. Surely, Amen. (Certainly, it is so).

8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord, God, ‘The one who is and he who was, and the one who is coming, the Almighty.’”

Textual Notes

1. Given the extensive use of ‘seven’ as a symbol of completion or perfection in Revelation, and in Johannine writings in general, most commentators regard the ‘seven churches’ as a designation for the whole Church in the Province of Asia. Harrington follows this line of thought, noting that, at the time, there are at least three other known Christian communities in the province: Troas, Colossae, and Hierapolis. Hemmer, on the other hand, sees in the seven churches a natural circuit a messenger would follow in taking a message to key communities along the main travel routes, beginning with Ephesus, the natural entry into the area. These communities, then, would dispatch the message to surrounding communities in their area. He suggests the beginnings of a ‘diocesan’ structure in which various ‘churches’ are associated with and subordinate to a main church in a given area. While his observation that the seven churches lie along a natural travel route is correct, his contention that there is an established structure among the Christian communities of the Province is probably over-pressed for this period.

2. As discussed in the Historical Background section of the Introduction, ‘Asia’ designates the Roman Province of Asia during the late first century. The area comprising the Province lies in the western part of modern Turkey.

14 Ibid.
15 Colin J. Hemer, op. cit.
3. ‘From the one who is, and was, and is coming’ is a common type of expression from the Rabbinical writings, based on the revelation of the Divine Name in Ex 3:14. Dennis J. McCarthy has argued that the divine name, Yahweh, is derived from a causative form of the verb ‘to be.’ As such, the name suggests ‘I am he who causes all to be.’ In developing Jewish tradition, it became the practice to honor the divine name by refraining from uttering it at all. When the Masoretes added vowel points to guide pronunciation of the Biblical text, they used the vowels for Adonai whenever the consonants ‘hwh’ appeared in the text as a reminder to readers not to pronounce the sacred name. Whether understood as ‘I am who I am’ or ‘I cause to be what is’ the divine name implies a permanence to God who precedes what is, causes and/or is involved with the present moment of reality, and sustains it into the future. It appears, then, that the phrase, in later Jewish writings, familiar to the author of Revelation, likewise use the three-fold phrase as a designation for God, capturing the meaning of the sacred name, but avoiding actually saying it. It can also be noted that similar titles are used for the gods in the Greek world (Zeus who is, and who was, and who will be). This may also, then, sound a polemical note in which the supremacy of God is asserted over the gods of the Greek and Roman world.

4. ‘Seven spirits before the throne.’ The phrase appears to be an allusion to Old Testament and later Jewish writings, ‘the angels of the face’ in Tobit 12:15 and Enoch 90:21, and the ‘seven lamps’ and ‘seven eyes’ of Zechariah 4:2, 10. Based on these allusions, the phrase appears to function as a symbol for God’s activity in the world.

5. Martyrs. The primary meaning of the Greek word is ‘witness,’ ‘one who testifies.’ In later Christian tradition, the word, martyr, is applied to those who give their lives for their faith. This is the ultimate example of giving witness to the faith and is modeled on the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. In Revelation, the word is used with its primary meaning, giving witness, testifying to the Word of God. There is an implicit revelatory function to the use of the word: those who witness to God’s word, reveal God and his plan.

6. V. 5 includes Jesus Christ with ‘John’ and the spirits before the throne as co-senders of the letter. The verse lists a number of titles for Jesus, ‘witness,’ ‘faithful one,’ ‘first born of the dead,’ and ‘chief of the kings of the earth.’ In his translation, Harrington treats ‘witness’ and ‘faithful one’ as a hendiadys, an expression of a single idea using two connected words – ‘faithful witness.’ While this is a possible translation, it is not necessary and, in the light of the fact that the ‘faithfulness’ of Jesus is stressed throughout the book, implying his conformity to God’s will, and in the light of the fact that members of the churches of Asia are exhorted to a life of ‘faithfulness,’ it is probably better to see these words as representing two distinct attributes of Jesus Christ. In the context of the Book of Revelation, addressing the situation of the churches in the Roman Province of Asia in the late first century, the titles of Jesus are polemical, sharply contrasting the Christian community’s adherence to Jesus Christ with the claims of the Roman Empire. It is the word and plan of God, witnessed to by Jesus Christ, whose faithfulness (loyalty) is to God alone is a model for all Christians to follow, that demands the full loyalty of not only Christians, but of all creation; Jesus’ resurrection makes him the ‘first born of the dead,’ the true source of life – eternal life – for those who believe; as such, Jesus is the arche, the chief, principal king of the earth. These titles, repeated throughout the book, characterize Jesus in a fashion similar to ‘who is, was, and is coming’ as a characterization of God himself. It is Jesus, not Caesar, who is the ultimate ruler, who demands ultimate loyalty.

7. There is a deliberate shift in tenses in the substantive participles in the second half of v. 5. ‘To him loving us,’ a present participle indicating continuing action, an eternal love, is balanced with an aorist (past tense) participle, ‘and to him having released us.’ The second participle indicates an action already accomplished. That action is the action of redemption, ‘releasing us from our transgressions.’ Already we are introduced to the major premise of the Book of Revelation, the definitive action of God in history for

[19] Ibid.
the sake of his people and for all creation, has already taken place in the cross of Jesus Christ. It can be noted that some ancient manuscripts replace λύσαντι, (having released) with λουσαντί (having washed). The word, λύσαντι, is found only here in the Book of Revelation, but is better attested in manuscripts so that there is no cogent reason for adopting the variant reading.

8. That salvation is a free gift that cannot be earned and that it is mediated to us through the cross/blood of Jesus Christ is a dominant teaching in the writings of St. Paul.

9. The result of Christ’s ‘releasing’ is that his followers are constituted ‘a kingdom, priests for God.’ This is a direct allusion to Ex 19:6, ‘You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ This is a clear example of how the author of Revelation is adapting and interpreting the Old Testament to ground the meaning and mission of Jesus Christ in the plan of God for all of creation. If the titles of Jesus above, in the context of the Roman world, are somewhat polemical, such allusions to and adaptations of the Old Testament are more apologetic. An implication to be seen here is that the followers of Christ are not dominated by their king; they share his authority. Harrington notes that the author of Revelation regards the Church as a prophetic, priestly, royal community.

10. ‘To him be glory and power until the ages of ages. Amen.’ This is the first of many doxologies – acclamations of praise – to be found in the book. Especially in the light of II Pet 3:18, it is possible that the doxology echoes an early baptismal formula.

11. V. 7 is richly allusive, building on Dan 7:13 (I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.) and Zech 12:10 (And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.) This combination of verses also occurs in Mt 20:30 and the Zechariah verse is alluded to in Jn 19:37.

12. While ‘inhabitants of the earth’ or ‘all the tribes of the earth’ are frequently used in Revelation in contrast to the elect, to the communities of the Church, that sense does not obtain here. Following especially Zechariah, what is envisioned is a global lament of all creation when they see the pierced and triumphant Christ. Throughout the letters to the seven churches, there are continued calls to repentance. Here, the lament, the sorrow at all creation over the wounds of Jesus Christ, is the first hint in the book of the idea of universal salvation at the heart of God’s plan for all humanity.

13. V. 7 ends with a double affirmative – nai (Greek) and amen (Hebrew). The double affirmation is appropriate for the solemn moment reached at this point in the text and suggests a continuity – from the past (Hebrew) to the present (Greek) and beyond – the perspective of the whole book.

14. V. 8 contains the first of the only two passages in Revelation in which God is identified as the actual speaker, the second coming in 21:5-8. In the book, there are four ego eimi (‘I am’) statements. Such statements have long been recognized to be allusions to the name Yahweh, revealed in Exodus 3. Two of the statements are spoken by God (1:8 and 21:6), and two are spoken by Christ (1:17 and 22:13). The deployment of these statements at the beginning and end of the book reinforce the notion that God reveals himself in Christ and the belief that Christ likewise shares in divinity. Such ego eimi statements were significant in the Gospel of John. God’s identification of himself as the Alpha and the Omega (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet), correspond to and provide an allusion to Is 44:6 (I am the first and I am the last: besides me there is no god.) and Is 48:12 (I am he; I am the first, and I am the last.) While the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, aleph and tau, are not used in Isaiah, the idea of ‘first’ and ‘last’ is made explicit in the repeated statement of God in Rev 21:6.

15. Pantodrator. ‘The Almighty.’ This word is regularly used in the LXX to render ‘Yahweh Sabaoth,’ Lord of Hosts. In Revelation, this is a regularly repeated title for God (see 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; and 21:22). Though this term is never applied to Christ/the Lamb, Revelation regularly contrasts the all-embracing rule of God and his Christ with the kings of the earth.

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20 Ibid.

21 NRSV translation of Dan 7:13 and Zech 12:10

22 NRSV translation of Is 44:6 and 48:12
Commentary

With v. 4, the anonymous voice of the introduction, vv. 1-3, takes up the ‘reported speech’ of John. A variety of attempts have been made to identify this John. Early Christian tradition associated the name with the ‘Beloved Disciple’ of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel and assumed that this John was John the Evangelist, the author of the Fourth Gospel, of the three letters attributed to ‘John,’ and of the Book of Revelation. On historical grounds, specific situations addressed or alluded to in the Johannine writings, and grammatical and stylistic features of each of the Johannine writings it is clear that, while the writings share a certain theological perspective, it is not likely that any of them have the same author as any other. It is far more likely that the letters, like the Catholic Epistles and the Pastoral Letters, are anonymous, but attributed to a notable character from the past, and the practice of pseudonymous attribution of authorship is also well attested for apocalyptic writings. What is most likely to be the case is that the Book of Revelation, as well as the other Johannine writings, represent a stream of thought in early Christianity that opposes the dominant Pauline line of thought, at least as it was commonly misinterpreted by those proposing misguided ways of living Christianity based on a corruption of Paul’s doctrine of ‘freedom from the law.’

V. 4 begins the letter form that governs the rest of the book.

1. Salutation containing
   A. Naming the sender
   B. Naming the Recipient
   C. A greeting.
2. The Thanksgiving (prayer)
3. The body
4. Closing commands
5. The conclusion containing
   A. a peace wish
   B. greetings
   C. kiss
   D. The close (grace-benediction)

So, ‘John’ is the sender and this likely implies for the ancient readers that the letter is coming from an alternate ‘branch’ of Christianity. The letter is addressed to the Seven Churches of Asia. Within the Book of Revelation, ‘seven’ is a number of perfection and completion. This suggests that the apocalyptic letter is intended for the whole Church in the Roman Province of Asia, addressed to the particular circumstances in which the members of the Church live within that province of the Roman Empire. That this is true is supported by the fact that most of the seven letters in chapters 2-3 end with the call for everyone to hear and respond to what is said to the ‘Churches,’ not just the particular Church addressed in the letter.

The greeting is particularly Pauline – a wish for grace and peace for those to whom the letter is addressed. (See, for example, I Cor 1:3 – ‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’) The fact that the letter follows the typical Pauline form and that it echoes themes and phrases common to Paul’s writings, suggests again that the Book of Revelation intends, at least in part, to function as a corrective to misinterpretations of Paul’s thought. There are at four instances in the

23 NRSV translation
Book of Revelation where ‘John’ will identify himself as a prophet, and the role of prophet will be ascribed to the faithful in the Church. Prophetic features of the book have long been recognized. In Israelite tradition, the role of prophecy is to point out the inevitable consequences of actions and offer a corrective to misguided actions, along with a call to reform. The prophetic function of the book is already, subtly, being introduced here.

We can note the expansion of the greeting here, especially in comparison with the example in I Corinthians. Grace and peace is offered by ‘he who is, and who was, and who is coming.’ That phrase, in later Jewish writings, was used as a substitute for the tetragrammaton, the four letters of God’s name (‘hwh). Grace and peace is offered to the Church from God, the Jewish God. If the content of the book will serve as a corrective for a misunderstanding of Paul’s teaching, it will no less function as a corrective to Jewish misunderstandings of Christianity and the nature of Jesus Christ. Hemer has argued that, within the cities of Asia, some groups of Jews denied Christian claims for who Jesus is because they did not find them grounded in and in accord with Jewish Scriptures. The Book of Revelation will freely allude to the Old Testament in making its claims to provide such a grounding, and this line of thought begins here with the invocation of the name of the God of Israel.24

In the Textual Notes (#4 above), ‘the seven spirits before the throne’ were presented as an allusion to Old Testament and later Jewish writings as a symbol of God’s action in the world. In Jewish faith, God had always been viewed as both transcendent and imminent. The other-worldly, unapproachable God was also the God whose ‘spirit’ moved over the waters at the dawn of creation, who breathed (inspired) life into ha adam, the man. This greeting of ‘grace and peace’ to the Churches comes precisely from the God of creation, the imminent and transcendent God, the God of the chosen people.

It is in this light that the ending of the greeting becomes significant. ‘And from Jesus Christ,’ literally means ‘Jesus, the Messiah.’ ‘Messiah/Christos’ means ‘the anointed one.’ In particular, in Israelite history, kings were anointed and the title ‘messiah’ came to be attached to the kings of the Davidic line. Ideally, Israel’s kings were understood to be ‘anointed,’ set apart and designated by God to shepherd and care for God’s people. While the ideal was never fully realized and the monarchy passed out of existence, Jewish hopes turned on the expectation of a coming Messiah, someone designated by God to again shepherd and care for God’s people in the face of a hostile world. For the disciples of Jesus, that person of Jesus, the Christ. In Jesus Christ, God’s imminence, his involvement in human history to accomplish his plan of salvation for all creation has been accomplished. The attributes or titles of Jesus makes this clear. As ‘witness,’ Jesus is the revelation of the Father, the Word made flesh, the Word of God in human form; there is ambiguity in the title, ‘the faithful one,’ for it can indicate that Jesus is a ‘faithful witness,’ that his testimony to who God is reveals the truth, and that he is ‘faithful’ to God’s plan, to living out God’s will – it is likely that both aspects of this title are to be understood; as the one faithful to God’s ultimate will and as a faithful witness to God’s truth, Jesus is the ‘first-born of the dead,’ and here we need to remember that belief in the resurrection is the starting point of the whole New Testament, the belief that leads to acknowledging Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah – it is Jesus who is the fulfillment of Jewish hopes; and finally, he is ‘the first or chief among the kings of the earth.’ The final attribute of Jesus is significant. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus mission was to inaugurate the reign of God on earth. That he is first among the kings of the earth indicates that God’s plan of salvation is universal, a theme repeated throughout the Book of Revelation. That his kingship is rooted in God’s continuous action with and on behalf of his Chosen People alludes to the Old Testament traditions, notably those found in the Yahwistic and Priestly sources of the Pentateuch and the prophetic writings

24 Colin J. Hemer, op. cit.
of especially Isaiah and Ezekiel, that Israel was chosen in particular to bring God’s blessings to all the nations of the earth. And finally, that he is the first or chief of all the kings of the earth is a direct challenge to the sovereignty of the Roman Emperor.

In sum, the greeting of grace and peace offered to the Churches of Asia comes from the transcendent God of Israel, a God who is also imminent, intimately involved in the lives and fortunes of his people, an imminence that reaches is completion in the person, mission and ministry of Jesus the Christ, whose authority surpasses all supposed worldly power. As God, in Christ, stands against and subsumes all earthly power under his authority and plan for the good of all creation, so the Church is to stand against all earthly power and incorporate into God’s plan for the good of all.

Typically, after the salutation, Paul’s letters continue with a prayer of thanksgiving. It is in this section of the letter that he gives thanks for the good he perceives in the community to which he is writing. The thanksgiving, realistically, has the effect of softening up his audience before he begins to address the problems in the community. This pattern will be encountered in the letters to the individual Churches in chapters 2 and 3. In this, it would appear that Paul and the author of the Book of Revelation are proponents of the ‘How to win friends and influence people’ theory. Here, however, the ‘thanksgiving’ prayer is the first of several doxologies (prayers of praise) interspersed throughout the book.

In the doxology, ‘John’ offers praise to Jesus Christ, praise that is motivated by thanksgiving that he expresses for the whole community of believers. Thankful for the salvation accomplished by the blood of Christ, releasing believers from their sins, again gives voice to the once-for-all action of God within human history. Several aspects of this prayer are worth noting: 1) the constant act of Jesus love, expressed with a present participle 2) led to his past action of releasing members of the community of believers from their sins. Amartia, sin, transgression, has the basic meaning of ‘missing the mark.’ This mirrors the usual sense of the Hebrew word most often translated as ‘sin.’ In both the Hebrew and the Christian traditions, missing the mark is to be met with shub (Hebrew) or metanoia (Greek). In both cases, the word means ‘to turn back,’ ‘to get back on the right road.’ 3) But we have been released from the consequences of sin, missing the mark, by the blood of Jesus, a clear reference to his death on the Cross. 4) The result of the once-for-all action of God in Jesus Christ in freeing us from sin is that Jesus Christ, who, according to the Synoptic Gospels, came to announce that the Kingdom of God is near, through his sacrifice, has made us a kingdom and priests for God the Father. The Kingdom is here and the community of believers shares in it now, not at some future time. To be constituted a kingdom and priests to God the Father is a clear allusion to Exodus 19:6. The Exodus story is the foundation story of the people of Israel, the Chosen People. They are made to be who they are intended to be in the relationship they have with God established at Mt. Sinai. Yet, sin remained a reality. It is in the Cross of Jesus Christ that we are, at last, fully transformed into God’s people, fully made God’s kingdom. This calls for praise to be rendered to Jesus Christ who effected this final transformation. To him be glory and power – divine attributes.

The body of “John’s” message begins, in v. 7, with the imperative: Behold! Robert Alter has noted, especially in narrative – and there is a narrative quality to the Book of Revelation, that ‘Behold’ carries a special function. It always indicates surprise, a change in perspective, a heightened perception of the reality at hand, an intensification of dawning understanding, or the like. In short, when we encounter idou (Greek) or hinne (Hebrew) in the biblical text, we encounter a red flag that alerts us to pay

particular attention. The voice of the narrator, the speaking voice in the text, is calling us to look and see that something significant is unfolding at this point in the text.

The basic creed of the earliest Christians proclaimed that Jesus died and rose again, that he returned to his father, and would come again to establish once and for all the Kingdom of God. In the earliest days of Christianity, the second coming of Christ, the Parousia, was expected to occur soon. The second coming of Christ was imagined with Old Testament images – one like the son of man coming on the clouds of heaven, coming with the power of God to judge the living and the dead. Such imagery stands behind v. 7. Still, by the time the Book of Revelation was written, the community was coming to terms with the delayed Parousia, with the fact that the Church had to makes its way in the world not knowing when Christ would return.

V. 7 ends with nothing short of a picture of universal salvation. When Christ comes, every eye will see him, even those who were responsible for his death and they, along with all the tribes of the earth, will mourn his death, will change how they see this Jesus Christ who was crucified – change – they will repent, turn back, get on the right track. As the opening statement of the content or main body of the letter, this is surprising enough (Behold), but it is v. 8 that shatters all expectations.

In v 8, we hear the voice of God. God’s voice appears only here and in 21:5-8, his utterances forming a bracket around the main content of the book. God’s words are his self-identification beginning with ego eimi (I am). Such ego eimi statements regularly allude to the divine name, ‘hwh (Yahweh). The next words echo the understanding of God’s name in later Jewish writings, a phrase used to substitute for ‘hwh. What is most significant in the three-part phrase is the third element. God does not merely assert his eternity, “I am, I was, and I will be.” He states, “I am he who is coming, who will appear, who will be with you.” Now a subtlety of meaning emerges from the text. God says, “I am coming,” but God is present in his word, so the God speaking to us has come. This is the moment of salvation; this is the moment to look on the crucified Christ and mourn, to change how we see him. This is the call that the Book of Revelation makes to all Christians – all those in the Church of Asia in the late first century, to all later Christians, and to all Christians in our contemporary world.
Inaugural Vision (1:9-20)

9"I, John, your brother and participant (sharer) in the tribulation and in the kingdom and endurance (steadfastness, perseverance) in Jesus, came (arrived) in the island called Patmos according to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10I arrived (came, was present) in the spirit on the Lord’s day and I heard behind me a great (loud) sound (voice) like a trumpet 11saying, 'What you observe, write in a book and send (it) to the seven churches: to Ephesus, and to Smyrna, and to Pergamum, and to Thyatira, and to Sardis, and to Philadelphia, and to Laodicia.'

12"And I turned around to observe (see) the sound (voice) which was speaking with me and, having turned back, I saw seven golden lampstands, 13and in the midst of the lampstands, (one) like a son of man, having been clothed head to toe and girded about at the chest (with) a golden belt. 14Also (even) his head and hair (was) white like white wool, like snow and his eyes (were) a flame of fire 15and his feet (were) like bronze (fine brass), as if in an furnace having been refined, and his voice (was) like a sound of many waters, 16and having (holding) in his right hand seven stars, and out of his mouth was coming a double-edged sword, sharp, and his appearance (face) shines like the sun in his power (might).

17"And when I saw him, I fell at (before) his feet as if dead and he placed his right (hand) on me saying, 'Fear Not. I am the First and the Last, 18the Living (one) and I became dead and, behold, living am I unto the ages of the ages, and I hold the keys to death and to Hades. 19Write, therefore, the things which you have seen and the things which are and the things which are about to happen after these things. 20(This is) the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand and the seven lampstands, the golden (ones): the seven stars are the angels (messengers) of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Textual Notes

1. Adelphos (brother) occurs five times in the book (1:9, 6:11, 12:10, 19:10, and 22:9). Harrington notes that each instance has an explicitly ecclesiastical reference. ‘John’ is a fellow of those to whom he writes, a fellow worker in the same religious society.26

2. Synkoinonos. The word literally means ‘one having something in common with,’ so a ‘sharer’ or ‘participant with.’ The ‘brotherhood’ of all Christians makes us participants in trials and suffering, but also sharers of a kingdom and participants in the sufferings of Jesus Christ – and the merits of that suffering.

3. Thlipsis means trial or tribulation. It is often used, especially in apocalyptic writings, to indicate persecution, but, especially in this context, it also refers to the Christian’s share in the sufferings of Christ.

4. Hyponome. Harrington notes that this word, ‘patience,’ ‘endurance,’ is used seven times in Revelation (1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; and 14:12). It is the characteristic virtue of the persecuted, of those

26 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
steadfastly enduring ‘tribulation.’ It is founded on faith in Jesus, the Lord who comes, and is inspired by the certainty of his love.27

5. ‘In Jesus’ is a particularly Pauline phrase used to characterize Christian life as already participating in Christ and the redemption he has accomplished. While this is a particularly Pauline expression, it fits with what has been called ‘realized eschatology’ in the Fourth Gospel, that fact that Christians live between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet.’ A key theme of Revelation will emerge in the contrast of “John’s” concept of living in Christ and the accommodating lifestyles of those in his audience to claim to be ‘in Christ’ while compromising with the powers of the world.

6. The Island of Patmos was a small, rocky island about 8 miles long and 5 miles wide, located in the Aegean Sea, some 40 miles southwest of Miletus. It may have been a penal settlement to which the Roman authorities sent offenders.28 A number of commentators have envisioned that ‘John,’ whoever he might have been, because of his radical Christianity, was exiled to Patmos and wrote Revelation from there. This is pure conjecture and nowhere in the book is there any reference to the author being an exiled Roman prisoner.

7. ‘In the spirit.’ Both Harrington29 and Rogers and Rogers30 note that, in the context of Revelation (see 4:2), the phrase refers to prophecy and the prophetic spirit. This is not to be seen as any type of ecstatic experience, but more the role of all believers to announce God’s word. The phrase is to be understood in the manner of Jesus quotation of Is 61:1 at the beginning of his public ministry in Lk 4:18 (The Spirit of the

27 Ibid.
28 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
29 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
30 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.\(^{31}\)

8. *Kyriake hemera.* Where we might expect the genitive of the noun *kyrios*, the phrase makes use of the adjective meaning ‘of or pertaining to the Lord, Lordly.’ There is a certain ambiguity in the phrase. It can refer to the Sabbath and the commandment to ‘Keep holy the Sabbath’ (Ex 20:8), since it is the Sabbath of the Lord. This fits with the liturgical scenes that run through Revelation. On the other hand, Rogers and Rogers note that the phrase could have an eschatological reference to the coming Day of the Lord, so that the prophet was stationed as a spectator among the very scenes of the great judgment.\(^{32}\) In light of v. 8, which suggests that now is the day of salvation, now is the day of judgment, it is also possible to see here a blending of the two themes: in the liturgy celebrated on the day of the Lord, the Sabbath, the community of believers has access to their God present with them, a saving and judging presence. The moment of salvation is now and is acted out in liturgical celebration.

9. In v. 11, the Seven Churches are listed in the order that completes a circuit from Ephesus, to the north, then west, south and finally east back to Ephesus. As Hemer noted,\(^{33}\) with the system of Roman roads in the province, this is likely the route a messenger would follow to deliver communications to be disseminated all around the area.

10. *Hepta lychnias chryas* – seven golden lampstands. Rogers and Rogers note that the *lychnia* is properly a lampstand, with wick and oil, not a candlestick. The seven lampstands allude to the seven-branched lampstands of the desert Tabernacle and the Jerusalem temple. They also appear in the vision of Zech 6:2. In this case, however, there are seven distinct lampstands, and not one with seven branches.\(^{34}\) In monarchical Israel, a special theme of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic History was the centralization of worship in Jerusalem. The Temple on Mt. Zion was the special place where God’s presence was available to his people. While the Deuteronomic reform movement, with its stress on the centralization of cult in Jerusalem, was intended to offset syncretistic abuses that prevailed throughout the country with worship conducted at various shrines. After the Babylonian Exile and the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora, it again became necessary to stress the reality that God was with his people wherever they might be. It is possible that the seven individual lampstands may be an indication that God, in Christ, can be encountered in each individual Church/community – especially when it gathers for liturgy. Again, the number seven gathers all individual Churches/communities into a complete whole. Further, the seven lampstands may allude to Jesus’ words in the Synoptic tradition that his disciples are to be a light for the world (Mt 5:14), a saying drawn from Is 49:6, in which Israel, God’s servant, is seen to have a mission for the wider Gentile world.

11. *Homoion huiou antropou* – one like a son of man. While *ben adam* (son of man) is a regular designation for a human being in the Old Testament, this expression is clearly an allusion to Dan 7:13. In Daniel, as Harrington notes, the phrase refers to a heavenly, other-worldly, being in human form. The phrase is symbolic of the holy ones of the Most High. Harrington concludes that there is a significant difference between the use of the term in Daniel and its use here. In this verse, the phrase refers to an actual man who has died and lives again. But, he states, neither here nor in 14:14, does ‘John’ use ‘son of man’ as a Christological title.\(^{35}\) Against Harrington, it can be argued that the principal self-designation of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, especially in controversy stories, was ‘son of man.’ To his opponents, such a title meant, simply, ‘I’m a human being, just like you.’ To people of faith, however, the title suggested the allusion to Dan 7:13, an other-worldly figure in human form. A basic trajectory through the story of Jesus in each of the Synoptics appears to be movement to the proclamation that the ‘son of man,’ the Jesus of history who suffered and died, IS the glorified Christ of faith, the Resurrected Christ. Especially in light of 1:5 and its designation of

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\(^{31}\) NRSV translation.

\(^{32}\) Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*

\(^{33}\) Colin J. Hemer, *op. cit.*

\(^{34}\) Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*

\(^{35}\) Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
Jesus Christ as ‘the first-born of the dead,’ it seems hard not to see in the heavenly interpreter of the inaugural vision the figure of Jesus Christ.

12. *Endedyemon podere* – having been clothed to the feet. The expression is reminiscent of the description of the High Priest’s robe in Ex 28:4. Rogers and Rogers, however, also note that the expression is used in Ez 9:2, where it is applied to a man charged with setting a mark upon some of the residents of Jerusalem before the city was destroyed by Babylon. They conclude, that of the two possibilities, a priestly ministry or one of dignity and mercy in the face of impending judgment, the latter appears more likely since nowhere else in Revelation is Christ portrayed in a priestly role.36 Harrington notes that the *zonen chrysan* (golden belt, girdle), later in the verse also recalls the garments of the High Priest mentioned in Ex 28:4 and Wis 18:24.37 It would seem more likely that a priestly image is intended, especially when the predominance of liturgical imagery in the Book of Revelation is taken into account. Such a priestly understanding does not preclude the notion of mercy in the face of impending judgment, as suggested by a possible allusion to Ezekiel.

13. The continuing description of the figure seen, in v. 14, especially the references to the whiteness of his hair – white as snow – is another allusion to Dan 7:9. In Daniel, the image is applied to the Ancient One, God. What is suggested by the imagery in Revelation is that, in the one like a son of man, divinity is made present to the seer. This again argues for seeing Jesus Christ as the interpreter of this vision since a core belief of Christianity is the role of Jesus Christ in revealing his Father.

14. *Podes autou homoioi chalkilibano* – his feet like bronze (or fine brass). This phrase is reminiscent of Ezekiel’s vision of God, Ez 1:27 and 8:2. The precise meaning of *chalkilibano* is uncertain, but it likely refers to an unidentified alloy that was a special product of Thyatira. Hemer cites this a one example of intentional linkages between visions of the heavenly realm and the actual situation of the Churches at this particular time and place that permeate the Book of Revelation.38

15. ‘His voice was like the sound of many waters.’ What is envisioned here is rapidly flowing waters. This image alludes to the voice of God in Ez 1:24 and 4:32. Based on this image, Harrington concludes all the power of God is concentrated in his word39 – his word of creation, his word of judgment, his word of salvation.

16. *Rhomphaia distomos* – two edged sword. There are multiple biblical images that associate a sharp sword with the word of God: Is 11:4 and 49:2, Wis 18:14-16, Heb 4:12. What is significant in the image, in the context of the Book of Revelation, is that this is a two-edged sword; it cuts both ways. The book will decry the abuses of power by the Roman Empire, but equally will castigate lax, unfaithful and compromising Christians.

**Commentary**

A common feature of Pauline letters is the apostle’s personal narrative. When this occurs, it is usually at the start of the body of the letter. In his personal story, Paul relates personal experiences and actions. The personal narrative always serves the purpose of grounding and justifying what Paul will have to say to the community to whom he is writing. The account of the ‘Inaugural Vision’ in Revelation 1:9-20 serves a similar purpose. In it, ‘John’ recounts his experience/vision of the heavenly realms and his commission to write to the Churches of Asia. This is a divine commission. The content and imagery of the vision are reminiscent of the prophetic calls of Isaiah (Is 6), Jeremiah (Jer 1) and Ezekiel (Ez 1-3). These allusions serve to ground the author’s mission within the prophetic tradition of Israel. Already this suggests that John’s message will be directed more to the community of faith and its need to reform than it will to announcing the overturn of hostile foreign powers.

36 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
37 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
38 Colin J. Hemer, *op. cit.*
39 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
First, the author claims to be writing from Patmos. He is separated from his community. While this may suggest that he is separated from his community because he has run afoul Roman Authority – Patmos being an island of exile, he claims clearly that his presence there is at the express will of God and the revelation/witness of Jesus Christ. There is a certain ambiguity here. Is he on Patmos because of his witness to Jesus Christ, or has the word of God and the witness offered by Jesus to God brought him there? While his presence on Patmos might suggest to his readers in the Seven Churches that, if they heed what he says and adopt a radical Christianity like his, they can expect to face opposition from Roman power, the primary focus here is that whatever unfolds is to be directly attributed to the power and will of God.

‘John’ arrived at Patmos ‘in the spirit,’ and, as the textual notes pointed out, ‘in the spirit’ is a clear allusion to a prophetic call. Again, ambiguity in the text is apparent. The author of the book arrives in Patmos on ‘the Lord’s day.’ This suggests the Sabbath, the day when members of the community of faith leave off normal activities to give God his due. Throughout the book there are images of heavenly ‘liturgies,’ images of pure dedication and commitment to God. This ‘pure’ dedication functions throughout the book as a measuring stick against which to measure the single-minded dedication of the Seven Churches. They fall short. But ‘the day of the Lord’ in later Jewish and in Christian writings also conjures the image of the final judgment. It is likely that the author of Revelation was deliberately playing on these two meanings, whereby ‘pure’ commitment to God is the ultimate criterion for judgment.

John’s first, other-worldly experience is auditory – a voice commanding him to write what he observes and send it to the Seven Churches. Throughout the Book of Revelation, the number seven has symbolic value. It refers to wholeness, completion, perfection. He is told to address the whole Church of the Province of Asia. Once more there is ambiguity and an implied double-meaning in the commission given to John: “What you observe, write it in a book and send it to the Seven Churches.” Obviously, this refers to what he will see and hear in the visions that unfold throughout the text. But it also can refer to what John observes in the Seven Churches, their moments of fidelity and their failures to live totally committed to God and Jesus Christ. This is a pattern observed in the Pauline letters, in which Paul writes to correct the misunderstandings and lack of true commitment in the Churches he established. This pattern will be seen in the letters to the Seven Churches.

Considering the final, canonical shape of Revelation as a book of Scripture, it appears that we are being asked to consider what would happen if we stepped back, separated ourselves from the complexities of the world in which we live and looked at things from a ‘heavenly’ perspective. Would we be compelled, like ‘John’ to take pen in hand, to speak a message of rejection of what is evil, of reform in the way we live, of rejection of false uses of power?

In v. 12, the auditory experience becomes a vision. What he sees are seven lampstands and one like a son of man, dressed in priestly attire, with hair white as snow and flaming eyes, and feet of bronze. In his hand are seven stars and a two-edged sword came from his mouth. What he sees is an image of the glorified Jesus Christ, a priestly figure and a figure of judgment. The two-edged sword reverberates with allusions to the powerful word of God, a word that cuts both ways, calling and challenging those within and outside his Chosen People to be dedicated and faithful to him, to live in a world inspired by a heavenly design, to ‘merge’ heaven and earth.

The reaction of the one seeing the vision mirrors the reaction of Daniel in Dn 10:8-9, falling on his face in fear. Yet the frightening, awe-inspiring Christ of the vision remains the comforting Jesus of the Gospels.
He meets the fear of the prophet, as he did the fear of his disciples in the Transfiguration scenes, with the words, “Do not be afraid.” Similar admonitions of God to his servants to “Fear not,” permeate the Bible.

Just as the images of Christ in the vision allude to similar images and descriptions of God, so to do his words. Here, he states that he is “the first and the last.” In the opening verses, God proclaimed himself to be ‘the Alpha and the Omega.’ By the end of the book, ‘Alpha and Omega,’ ‘first and last,’ beginning and end’ will be merged and, finally applied to Jesus Christ directly, an affirmation of his divinity, his unity with his Father. He is the risen Lord, holding the keys to death and Hades – Sheol of Jewish tradition. The implication is that, as the one who died and is now alive, he holds the keys to lock away death and the realms of death. Here, it is impossible not to recall Jesus’ words to Peter in the Gospels: “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven... (Mt 16:18-19)” The heavenly, other-worldly power of Jesus Christ will hold back the forces of death, and, in a similar way, the power of the Church will unlock access to the Kingdom of Heaven. A subtle suggestion is being made that the contents of this book, mediated to God’s servant, will empower – or continue to empower – the church to live its mission, to open the way to God’s kingdom for its members and all creation.

The inaugural vision reaches its conclusion in the word of the ‘interpreting angel,’ common to apocalyptic writings. In this case, however, the other-worldly interpreter is none other than Jesus Christ. He explains the mysterion, the ‘secret’ of the vision. The seven stars are the ‘angels’ of the Seven Churches and the seven lampstands are those Churches. Though there is evidence in the Book of Daniel and in later Jewish writings that angels were understood to be ‘guardians’ of the nations, what is more likely intended here is that they represent the counterparts in heaven of the Seven Churches on earth. As suggested in the Textual Notes, the seven lampstands allude to the seven-branched candles of the dessert tabernacle and the Temple. That the vision presents seven individual lampstands suggests the function of each believing community to be a light for the world; that there are seven indicates that this mission of each community is, in fact, the mission of whole Church. What is happening in the text, at this point, is the beginning of drawing out apocalyptic polarities between heaven and earth, light and darkness, good and evil, life and death. A goal of the book and key to its message is the call to bring earthly realities into accord with heavenly realities, to establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

Again, taking into account the final form of the Book of Revelation and its function as canonical scripture, the first chapter has begun to pose questions to each individual Church/community of faith and to the Church as a whole: Are we a light for the world? Are we a means for people to enter the Kingdom of God? Do we stand against death and evil and darkness? Are we transforming the realities of this world into the ‘heavenly vision?’

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40 NRSV translation
2:1 To the angel of the church in Ephesus (lit: the, In Ephesus, church), write:
These things says he holding (having power over) the seven stars in his right hand and
walking about in the midst of the seven lampstands, the golden ones.

2:2 I have known your works and toil and your patient endurance and also (even) you have not been able to endure the evil (ones) and you have tested those saying themselves (to be) apostles and they are not and you have discovered them (to be) false (liars). 3And patient endurance do you have and you have endured (carried on) on account of my name and not have you become exhausted (grown weary). 4However, I hold against you that your love, the first (= your first love) you have forsaken.

5:5 Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen and change (turn back, repent) and do the first works; if however not, (then – if you do not, then) I am coming to you (I will appear – present tense for a future action of God stresses inevitability) and I will remove your lampstand from its place – if not do you change (turn back, repent). 6But this you have, that you hate the works of the Nicolaitans which even I hate.

7:7 He having an ear, let him hear what (that which) the Spirit is saying to the churches: To the victorious (the one who endures) I will give to him to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.”

The City of Ephesus

Introduction
Ephesus was the most cosmopolitan of the seven cities. Ancient Ephesus was a great seaport focused on its harbor. The city reached the height of its wealth and influence in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. When Rome assumed power in 133 BC, the wealthy seaport was open to exploitation by ruthless officials. The hatred for Rome was seen in the massacre of Romans in the Province of Asia in 88 BC. But, in the Pax Romana, extending into New Testament times, Ephesus was a populous and privileged city. Still, throughout this great period, the commercial prosperity of Ephesus was under the potential threat of the irrevocable silting of the harbor. The evidence, fragmentary as it is, suggests a progressive decline, associated with the silting of the harbor, partially masked by a pretentious religious importance.

The Jewish Element in the Background of the Letter
The mention of the ‘tree of life’ takes us back to Gen 2:9. Otherwise, the letter owes comparatively little to the language of the Old Testament. Much of it is written in a relatively direct style of assessment and exhortation. Of its other symbols, the stars and lampstands belong to the structural machinery of the book, the latter recalling the seven-branched Menorah of Ex 25:3. The ‘false apostles’ and Nicolaitans, and the loss of ‘first love’ are evidently particular problems affecting the local church.

There can be no doubt of the great strength of Judaism in Ephesus. There is abundant testimony to the large number of Jews in Asia, and Ephesus was its greatest commercial city. There was in Ephesus a Jewish community with special and guaranteed privileges. These privileges included that of citizenship. It may be conceded that this

41 These notes are a summary of Colin J. Hemer’s The Letters to the Seven Church of Asia in Their Local Setting, Ch. 3.
was an exceptional situation, for the religious structure of civic life ordinarily precluded Jewish participation. There is, then, ground for a cautious acceptance that the Jewish population of Ephesus included a body of citizens with long-established rights, who looked to Rome for the maintenance of their privileges. There was also a particular bitterness between Jew and Gentile, a factor of importance in understanding the environment.

The importance of Ephesus as an apostolic center is evident. As the most strategic cosmopolitan city of Asia it may have become temporarily the headquarters of the whole church after the fall of Jerusalem. The very size and influence of the apostolic church in Ephesus may have rendered it less vulnerable to the pressures which afflicted the other churches. It is likely that Domitian’s reign marked a deterioration in the standing of the Ephesian church. The difficulties of the times may well have attracted to Ephesus either Judaistic or antinomian teachers both of whom might offer the church a tempting rationale for a modus vivendi in the face of persecution.

The Tree of Life

The ‘Tree of Life’ was chosen and applied to the case of Ephesus because it was particularly applicable. There was an analogue to it in the city’s cult of Artemis. There is some indication that the ‘tree of life’ was associated with the cross of Christ in the mind of John. Dendron, not xylon, was apparently the normal and idiomatic word for ‘tree’ in New Testament times. Xylon ordinarily had some more specialized connotation. In the LXX, however, xylon is common as ‘tree,’ and Dendron surprisingly rare. The usual meaning of xylon in earlier Greek is “dead wood,” ‘timber.’ It is noteworthy how often it is applied to an instrument of punishment. The New Testament uses xylon as ‘tree’ only ten times, whereas Dendron is used twenty six times. All uses of xylon may be classified under two headings: 1) occurring in the phrase ‘tree of life,’ five times in Revelation, and 2) in explicit allusions to the cross of Christ, three times in acts, once I Galatians and one in the First Letter of Peter. Conversely, xylon is used freely in the New Testament for ‘wood.’ It is never used for ‘tree’ except in explicit references to the ‘tree of life.’

It is not impossible that here xylon may contain an allusion to the cross. This view puts the cross in the Paradise of God. The theme of the sacrificial death of Christ is prominent throughout the Book of Revelation. His salvation, including salvation from sin, is contrasted with the ‘salvation’ of the imperial cult. In Rev 22, the tree of life is placed in the New Jerusalem. Here the verdict of Eden is reversed. The disobedience of Adam had denied him access to the three of life and inaugurated the curse which here is finally extinguished. The close resemblance between the symbol applied to the heavenly city and to the seven churches suggests that in many particulars Rev 21-22 is the consummation of Rev 2-3. In that city there shall be no more the curse of sin for which the cross was the tree of life, the means of salvation. The shortcomings of the cities are there remedied, and the potentialities of their churches realized.

If, to the Jewish reader, the sacrificial system of the earthly Jerusalem was superseded in the heavenly city, might it not equally have suggested to the Asian Gentile that the power of the pagan temples was finally abolished there? Under Domitian the temple in Jerusalem had long since suffered destruction, but the double influence of the Artemis temple and of the imperial cult was a contemporary fact in the life of the church of Ephesus. Domitian had built a great new temple for emperor worship.

Specifically, the temple of Artemis was founded as a tree shrine. Throughout a long history, a primitive tree shrine was replaced by successive temples on the same site. In inscriptions and on coins, the tree regularly recurs as a symbol of the city and its goddess.

The asylum of Artemis

The fame of the Ephesian temple of Artemis as a place of refuge persists throughout its long history. The safety which it afforded the suppliant was termed soteria (salvation). In concept, the sanctuary/refuge accorded to the suppliant is analogous to the cities of refuge specified in Leviticus, attesting to a common practice throughout the ancient world, among many nations and cultures, to safeguard justice by offering the possibility of asylum to those wrongly accused. However, such systems were open to abuse, providing refuge to the guilty and, in the days of Tiberius, the emperor was seeking to abolish the proliferation of asylums, which had become dangerous places impacting the Pax Romana. An Ephesian embassy to Rome, however, won an exemption for their temple and site of refuge which they were able to demonstrate was an ancient right and privilege.

In the end, the intervention of the Julio-Claudian emperors (New Testament period) had not been able to eradicate the corrupting influence of the asylum upon the city and the most bitter outburst against the corruption of asylum is associated with the time of Domitian himself.
The picture implied in ancient sources is one of a sacred enclosure unchangeably centered upon the spot originally marked by the sacred tree, but varying in extent at different times and sometimes overlapping the bounds of the great commercial city centered on its harbor two miles from the temple. The consequence was that the asylum gave the criminal a sanctuary beyond the reach of the lay. It became a headquarters for organized crime—all in the name of *soteria* (salvation).

**The Paradise of God**

The dependence of Rev 2:7 on Genesis is clear. *Paradisos* was originally a Persian word, denoting an enclosed garden, especially a royal park. In context, then, the tree of life in the garden of Eden, the tree-shrine in the asylum of the goddess, and the cross are all placed in and associated with the paradise of God. In each, we find the presence of the deity. But in the New Jerusalem shall be no temple and no curse, but the glory of God and the tree of life in the midst of its street (Rev 22:2).

For the Christian in Domitianic Ephesus these thoughts would have come to focus in a contemporary reality. The words of the epistle contrasted with a shocking parody which the pagan cult of the city offered. At the heart of its changing fortunes was the theocratic power of the Artemis temple, marked by the fixed point of the ancient tree-shrine which was the place of ‘salvation’ for the suppliant, surrounded by an asylum enclosed by a boundary wall. But this ‘salvation’ for the criminal corrupted the city. In Rev 2:4-5, there is a reiterated insistence on the them of repentance. That was the need of the church which had lost its ‘first love.’ The salvation of the cross was for the repentant sinner, in marked contrast with that of Artemis, which gave the criminal immunity to continue his crimes. Again, in Rev 21:27, only those shall enter the city whose names are found written in the Lamb’s book of life, a symbol taken from the Sardis letter, but suggesting here as there the citizen roll. Grants of citizenship were permanently inscribed in the inner shrine, at Ephesus on the stones of the temple of Artemis.

Amid such ideas we may see the Ephesian Christian as finding a picture of refuge in the presence of Christ who died on the tree, a ‘salvation’ which he might appropriate only there, and an adoption into the citizenship of the kingdom for the repentant sinner and outsider.

**Ephesus as the City of Change**

As we pass from the beginning of the book to its close, the fixed point of the tree in a fluctuating landscape is replaced by the tree of life and the enclosing walls of the eternal city pervaded by the presence of Christ. The conservatism of a dead orthodoxy is contrasted with the need to meet the challenge of changing circumstances, the deadening influence of the temple of Artemis with the eternal glory of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

**Conclusions**

1. It seems likely that a body of Jews had possessed citizenship in Ephesus since early Greek times and that this was a factor in the racial bitterness which persisted in the city.
2. The Old Testament background of the letter is very clear. In the case of the tree of life, it is an idea prominent in Jewish tradition. The church had probably long been separated from the strong synagogue community. Use of the term also seems, then, to allude to the tree shrine of Artemis and the practice of asylum associated with it.
3. John may have seen in the revival of paganism and the imperial cult at Ephesus under Domitian a crisis portending systematic persecution of the church in Asia.
4. The identification of the “false apostles,” whether they are Judaistic or libertarian teacher, both might have had an attractive answer to the difficulties of a persecuted church, or whether they were itinerant evangelists rejected for their character rather than the content of their message. The pagan pressures and the plausibility of the antinomian answer may have been the stronger. This accords with the reference to Nicolaitans.
5. The Ephesian letter has a strongly Asian background. It is suggested that this factor is seen also in the later parts of Revelation, though particular allusions in the later chapters are often partial and elusive.
6. The phrase, ‘tree of life,’ may have carried the connotation of the cross of Christ to the original readers.
7. The ‘tree’ and the ‘paradise’ may have had pointed local analogues in the tree and the asylum of Artemis which gave them a special meaningfulness for the Ephesian Christian. The cross was the place of refuge for the repentant sinner in contrast with the tree which marked the asylum for the unrepentant criminal.
8. These suggestions may be tentatively applied to the attempt to clarify the later chapters of Revelation, especially the New Jerusalem passage, where the faithful have access to the tree of life within the holy city.

Textual Notes

1. To angelo – ‘to the angel...’ Since ‘angel’ is used uniformly throughout the Book of Revelation to designate ‘other-worldly’ beings, the use of the word in the command to write to each of the Churches can be puzzling. This has led some commentators to suggest that the word, here, has its primary meaning of a human messenger. These would be the individuals charged with delivering scrolls to the particular Churches. Hemer goes so far as to suggest that, in this context, the word refers to the bishop. But, let’s get serious. How many angelic bishops do you know??? Perhaps the best that we can do, keeping to the sense in which ‘angels’ are used throughout the book, is to suggest that what the author has in mind is to hint at the ideal merging of the heavenly and earthly realms, stressing a linkage and continuity between the two, and hoping that the contents of the letter will lead to the earthly realm coming more into alignment with the heavenly ideal.

2. Tes en Epheso ekklesias – literally ‘the in Ephesus Church.’ The word order in the phrase, which will be used to address each of the Seven Churches, while not absolutely unique, is unusual. It is generally not common to separate the definite article from the noun it modifies. To create a smooth English translation, the phrase can be rendered as ‘the Church in Ephesus’ or as ‘the Ephesian Church.’ Either of the English translations makes a subtle shift. There is a focus on the particularity of the Church that is in Ephesus. The Greek word order encapsulates and subordinates the idea of being ‘in Ephesus’ to the concept of being ‘Church.’ It is very subtle, but the focus remains on ‘Church.’

3. Tade legei – ‘these things says...’ This is an archaic expression, but it is used regularly in the LXX to render koh ‘amar Yahweh, ‘thus says Yahweh.’ The use of the phrase implies a sense of solemnity and rootedness, similar to using ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ in translating Scripture or another text for which an ancient sense is appropriate. Harrington also notes that the phrase is used in Near Eastern letters to introduce a royal edict. The whole sense is that there is weight behind the words about to be proclaimed.

4. Oida is the perfect tense of the verb ‘to know.’ The sense of the perfect tense is that of a past action having consequences and ramifications in the present. In the Biblical sense, ‘to know’ implies intimacy. It is used to describe sexual intercourse, the intimate relationship between a man and his wife, an intimacy

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42 Ibid.
43 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
that leads to life. On a symbolic level, ‘to know’ always leads to life and ‘not knowing’ always leads to death – at least figuratively. At the beginning of Exodus, ‘There arose a new king who did not know Joseph…” This lead to the oppression and enslavement of the Israelites. But God looked down from heaven and observed the suffering of his people, ‘and God knew.’ God’s knowing sets in motion a whole series of events leading to the freeing of the slaves and the formation of the nation of Israel with the Covenant of Sinai. The interplay of ‘knowing’ and ‘not knowing’ forms an important backdrop in the Deuteronomistic History, and especially in the Books of Samuel. The use of the word here, in the first address to one of the Churches in Asia, speaks volumes about God’s will for the life and well-being of the community of believers. The idea of God knowing the situation of his people and caring for them is also reflected in Jer 48:30, Hos 5:2, and Amos 5:12.

5. Erga – works. As in Pauline thought, works cannot save the individual – salvation is a free gift that cannot be earned, but rather represent responsible Christian action that flows naturally from faith. The sense is that God knows the good works of the members of the Ephesian Church which give testimony to their faith.

6. Hypomene – the primary meaning of the word is ‘endurance’ Elizabeth Fiorenza Schussler has argued that the use of the word in the Book of Revelation connotes the consistent resistance or staying power of the holy ones (hagioi). It is to be noted that there are ‘holy ones’ in both the heavenly and earthly realms within the Book of Revelation.

7. Apostles. Within Christian tradition, apostles refers primarily to the twelve companions of Jesus and witnesses to his preaching and work. The Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles are in agreement that the roll of an apostle is evangelization, announcing the Good News. They are specifically commissioned by Jesus, not only during his public ministry, but especially in the Resurrection appearances, to “Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.” Paul proclaimed himself to be an Apostle, no less than the original twelve, as a grounds for his missionary work. He likewise spoke of different ministries, different gifts, among which was the ministry of apostleship. Yet he argued that all the gifts were given for the building up of the Church, that not everyone had the same gifts, and that love was the ultimate gift that bound everything together (see I Cor 12:27-13:13). What is referred to here, then, is probably a class of itinerant preachers common in the early Church. The problem here, as in Paul’s day, is that some of these preachers presented a false form of the Gospel.

8. Harrington notes contrasting word-plays between vv. 2 and 3: ‘you could not tolerate (bastasai) the false apostles’ (v. 2), but ‘you have endured (ebastasas) patiently’ (v. 3); ‘I know your labor’ (kopos – v. 2) ‘but you have not grown weary’ (kekopiakes – v. 3).

9. Exo kata sou – I hold against you. In typical Pauline fashion, the letter begins with praise of the Ephesian Church. After the thanksgiving and praise, Paul would then take up the problems he wanted to address in the community. More than just following Paul’s format in letter writing, however, the phrase, ‘I hold against you…” the oracles of judgment common in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. In particular, the oracles against Israel many times take the form of what has been called the ‘Covenant Lawsuit.’ The prophet, speaking the words of God, lays a charge against the people of Israel for abandoning covenant fidelity. This laying of charges is then met with a statement of judgment/consequences to follow. In some instances there are exhortations to repent, to change in order to avoid the judgment; in other instances a further charge is laid against the people that they have ignored such exhortations already given. Still, the primary purpose of Israel’s prophetic literature was to engender reform and repentance, and we can expect that such an intent is carried in the letters to the Churches.

10. Agapen sou ten proten – your love, the first. Again we meet an ambiguous statement and it is possible that all possible meanings may be implied. In both Pauline and Johannine theology, love is the crucial virtue. In Johannine thought, God is identified with love. For Paul, love is what binds the Church and all its many gifts together. Is it possible that the phrase refers to a lessening of pure dedication to God, opting to give allegiance to worldly powers? Does the phrase, rather, refer to the love that animated the works of the Ephesian Church and suggest that the community is losing its original fervor? Harrington, in

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the context of the statement that the community, to its credit, has not tolerated the false apostles, suggests that the loss of love may indicate judgmental censorship that fails to reprove one’s brothers and try to win them back (see Mt 18:15-20 and Lk 17:3-4).45

11. The sequence of verbs in v. 5, remember... change (turn back, repent)... do is significant. It has been argued that the three verbs represent the three stages in the conversion process – being mindful of what should be, changing hearts and attitudes, and acting on the conversion experience. In Israel’s relationship with God, especially as it is expressed in covenant terms, the sequence repeats itself in Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomic History, and in the writings of Israel’s prophets. ‘Remember’ is a key term. It does not refer so much to calling something to mind, but to ‘making present again.’ This is the sense in which Jesus, at the Last Supper, commands his disciples to “Do this in remembrance of me.” He is, quite literally, telling them to make him present with them again. Metanoia in Greek is used to render the Hebrew word shub. Throughout the Old Testament, the people of Israel are called on to remember the actions of God on their behalf, especially the nation’s foundational experience, the freeing of the slaves in Egypt and the Covenant of Sinai, but also God’s calling of Abraham and his special relationship with all the Patriarchs. They are called on to make real an original state in their relationship with God. Having made God’s loving and saving actions present to them again, they are called to shub, to turn back/repent. Metanoia/shub is never simply ‘being sorry.’ It is an action, a change in self. And, finally, the proof is in the pudding. Called to experience the saving, freeing, loving actions of their God, Israel is called to conversion, to change, and living that change will issue forth in actions consonant with the conversion, consonant with the relationship with God that he intends for his people to maintain with him.

12. I will remove your lampstand. Crime and Punishment stories, in both the Old and New Testaments, always define consequences – the inevitable consequences of the people’s actions. These consequences can be mitigated by ‘turning back.’ This same type of pattern is seen in the oracles against Israel in the writing prophets and, especially, in the ‘prophetic lawsuits.’ In the dualistic outlook of the Book of Revelation, removing the lampstand from the heavenly sphere would result in the community of Ephesus no longer being part of the larger Church. The community would no longer be considered a light to the world.

What appears to be in mind here, is the danger of the Imperial Cult and especially participation in the rites of the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus. According to Hemer, it appears that some Christians in Ephesus were participating in the Artemis cult to be able to practice their trade. While holding to Christianity, they made accommodations with the prevailing culture for the sake of their livelihood. For the author of Revelation, such an accommodation was a betrayal of Jesus Christ.

13. Nicolaitans. This group of early Christian heretics is mentioned only in the Book of Revelation and little is known of the group and its teachings. They are mentioned explicitly in the messages to Ephesus and Pergamum, and most commentators believe that, though not named, they are represented in Thyatira in the false prophetess, Jezebel. The Ephesian Church is commended for combating the heretical group, while at Pergamum censure is due. It appears that the group allowed members to consume food offered to idols and a form of sexual immorality. This sexual immorality may refer to some type of temple prostitution practiced in fertility cults, but nothing can be said for certain.

14. He having an ear. This phrase is reminiscent of Jesus’ call for those hearing to heed his teaching, especially in the Synoptics and primarily in the context of parable discourses. What is significant, here, is that the one hearing is called on to heed what is being said to the Churches (plural). Though seven individual Churches are being addressed, the visionary material is addressed to all seven – the complete Church; moreover, this admonition is addressed to all who hear the words of the book as a call to heed each of the individual messages as part of a whole.

15. Pneuma – spirit. Harrington notes that Jesus Christ is identified as the ‘revealing spirit’ for the messages addressed to each of the Seven Churches. As such, throughout these messages, Jesus Christ and ‘spirit’ are equivalent. In Polzin’s terminology, v. 7 constitutes a frame break. The voice of the narrator intrudes.

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45 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
46 Colin J. Hemer, op. cit.
itself into the text to reinforce the sense of the text as scripture – the words of Jesus, mediated by ‘John,’ are now addressed to all subsequent generations through the reporting speech of the narrator of the whole book. The implication is that the words of the reporting narrator – the words of the whole book – are as important to us today as the words of ‘John,’ reporting the words of Jesus Christ, were to the Seven Churches of the province of Asia.  

16. *Nikao* – to overcome, conquer, be victorious. The text uses a substantive participle to refer to the ‘victor.’ This is a regular construction throughout the book. There is a subtle implication in choosing the substantive participle over the cognate noun – it focuses on action, continuing action, more than the status of being victorious carried by the noun. Harrington notes that to conquer is to prevail in battle, sport, or any contest; ‘conquering’ is a key word throughout the book. In Revelation, the battle is against ‘Satan,’ waged by God, the risen Lord, and the faithful. Victory is won by ‘endurance’ (hypomene) in the face of ‘tribulation’ (thlipsis – 1:9). The promise to the victor does not imply that the author of the book expected all Christians to suffer martyrdom; he did demand that all ‘endure.’

17. *Xylou tes zoes* – ‘Tree of Life.’ This phrase has obvious reference to the tree growing in the middle of the Garden of Eden. In the Genesis creation story, humanity was denied access to this tree. Harrington, and most other commentators, also note that the ‘Tree of Life’ may have (and probably did) suggest the Cross for the early Christian communities. In Ephesus, it is also likely that readers/hearers would have seen an allusion to a ‘tree of life’ around which the Temple of Artemis was built. As Hemer has pointed out, originally the tree, and later a defined area in proximity to the temple, was source of asylum – a problem in Ephesus as it became a place for criminals to escape justice. In contrast, the Cross was the place of refuge for the repentant sinner, as opposed to the asylum of Artemis that provided protection for unrepentant criminals. A significant feature of the imagery of deployed here is that the Cross is now situated in ‘paradise’ and through the saving action of Christ, repentant sinners have access to it. Paradise is a Persian word that can refer to a royal garden. The one occurs only here in Revelation. A clear implication is that, through Christ, the repentant sinner has access to the Kingdom of God and God’s royal garden, a garden whose tranquility was intended as the home of humanity from the dawn of creation.

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48 Robert Polzin, *op. cit.*
49 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
51 Colin J. Hemer, *op. cit.*
Commentary

After the introduction, the contents of Revelation are presented as a kind of circular letter to the Churches of the Province of Asia. Within this ‘circular letter,’ seven messages are included to the Seven Churches of Asia, representative of the whole Church. These messages are constructed on the model of ‘occasional letters.’ Each of the seven messages ends with an admonition: “Let him having an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.” That closing admonition breaks frame. In each letter, we hear ‘John’ reporting the words of Jesus Christ to a particular church. The closing admonitions, however, are not the words of Jesus, but of the one whose ‘reporting speech’ we hear. At first glance, it may seem that it is this ‘John’ who is issuing the admonition, but it is far more likely that it is the reporting voice of the narrator of the whole book who is speaking. He is the one who is reporting the speech of ‘John’ and his speech addresses the Seven Churches. The admonitions address whoever might hear the words of the book. The effect is to loosen the messages to the Seven Churches from their particular historical contexts and situations so that the praise and censure of the messages is addressed to all Christians in all times and places. What the hearer of these words is invited to do is precisely what ‘John’ did: take the words of Scripture and especially the words of this book and apply them to our present contexts. We are invited to evaluate the situation of our believing communities in our present world and to ask how well we measure up in the light of the radical Christianity proposed by the book.
Harrington has perceived a specific pattern to the messages to the Seven Churches. The letter to the church in Ephesus presents both praise and censure for that community. The second, fourth, and sixth letters, those to Smyrna, Thyatira, and Philadelphia offer praise to the communities addressed, with the final letter to Philadelphia having a marked tone of warmth. The third, fifth, and seventh letters, those addressed to Pergamum, Sardis, and Laodicea offer censure and in the last, the letter to Laodicea, the censure is severe. The pattern presented in the letter to the Ephesians repeats itself in a rising crescendo of praise and blame in the following letters. The contrasts fit well with the dualistic outlook of the book as a whole, given its apocalyptic nature.\(^\text{52}\)

The seven messages all follow a similar format:

1. They all begin with the command to write to a particular church: *To the angel of the church of ___, write.*
2. The message begins with the identification of the ultimate speaker, Jesus Christ: *These things says…* In identifying Jesus as the speaker, each message includes titles or attributes. These are uniformly drawn from the Inaugural Vision of 1:9-20.
3. What follows in the words of Christ are a listing of virtues and faults that are specifically tied to the situation of each of the Churches. These are followed by praise or blame as is appropriate. The message continues to a final recommendation, to continue to endure or to repent, depending of the situation of the community being addressed.
4. The messages all conclude with a promise: *“To the one being victorious (conquering, overcoming)...”*
5. In all cases, the letters include the admonition: *“Let him having an ear, hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.”* In the first three letters, this admonition precedes the promise to the victor, while in the last four it follows.

In considering the final shape of the Book of Revelation and how the time conditioned messages addressed to Seven Churches in the late first century Roman Province of Asia speak to us, Harrington writes:

> The messages are crucial to an understanding of Revelation. ‘John’ is not addressing an abstract ‘Church,’ he speaks directly to communities of men and women, communities good, bad, and indifferent. The messages peg Revelation firmly to our world. It is a word of hope addressed to people who need hope, people who may falter. The messages, like so much of the New Testament, bring us encouragement. There never has been a perfect Christian community. Christians have been faithful and heroic, and they have been frail and vacillating. It is not enough for us to find comfort in the word to Philadelphia; we must also hearken to the word to Laodicea.\(^\text{53}\)

The Textual Notes above have suggested that addressing the letter to an ‘angel’ most likely implies a continuity between the heavenly, other-worldly aspect of a ‘Church,’ and a community of believers as the place where we, bound to space and time, encounter the eternal. It has also been noted that, in the context of life in the Province of Asia, there was often great pride in being a citizen of, or at least living in a particular city. The culture and history of that city, as a social context, had an impact of individual’s self-awareness. Ephesus, in Roman times, was the greatest of the cities in Asia, populous, privileged and wealthy. The unusual word order that separates the definite article from the noun *ekklesia* – Church, (the in Ephesus Church) subordinates the idea of being an Ephesian to the idea of being a member of the Church. ‘John’ is addressing the words of Jesus Christ to members of the Church, apart from their

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\(^{52}\) Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

being Ephesians, or Pergamenes, or Sardinians, or Americans, or Russians, or New Yorkers, or Midwesterners or any other social, cultural, or historical grouping. Yet we cannot escape the fact that we live as a Church, as a community of believers within a cultural, social, and historical context.

_Tade legei_begins the message to each Church: “These things says...” This is an archaic expression in New Testament Greek, adding a tone of age-old solemnity to the letters. In ‘governmental’ communications, the archaic expression was used to introduce a Royal Edict. This sets up a contrast between the edicts of earthly kings and that of Jesus Christ, the builder of the Kingdom of God. Moreover, in the LXX (The Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Old Testament), the phrase is regularly used to render the phrase: “Thus says the Lord.” (koh ‘amar ‘hwh). That phrase is particularly prevalent in Israel’s prophetic literature, so there is an expectation that the content of the message to the Ephesians, and to the other Churches, will be prophetic in nature, will center on oracles, admonitions and warnings about living a relationship with God in complete fidelity.

The titles or attributes of Jesus in the letter to the Ephesian Church are ‘the one holding the seven stars,’ the and ‘the one walking among the lampstands.’ According to the Inaugural Vision, the seven stars are the angels of the Seven Churches and the seven lampstands are those Churches. While apocalyptic literature is dualistic, dealing with good and evil, light and darkness, heavenly realities and earthly realities, the Book of Revelation expresses a continuity between the earthly Church and its heavenly model. In particular, here, the idea of light dominates. Stars give light and cannot be hidden; the disciples of Jesus, members of the Church, are called to be the light of the world and should not be hidden. Jesus holds in his hand the spirit of what should be and walks among the lampstands, being present to his Churches. We can probably understand here at least a reference to liturgy – Eucharistic liturgy, which is the celebration of _agape_. This becomes more pointed when the community is chided for losing its first love (agopen proton).

The message of Jesus to the Ephesian Church begins, as do all the messages, with _oida_ — the perfect tense of the verb ‘to know.’ The perfect tense of the verb indicates a past action with implications in the present moment – ‘I have known... and as a result now...’ It suggests Jesus’ all-encompassing knowledge of the community that addresses them in their present moment in time. Jesus states, ‘I have known your works and your toil (labor) and your patient endurance.’ _Erga_ , ‘works,’ is an important term. In the Gospels, Jesus proclaims ‘By their works you will know them.” It is a simple concept: who we are, what we believe in, what matters to us will be evident in the things that we do. Paul’s preaching stressed that salvation was a gift that could not be earned. He argued against Pharisaic teaching that stressed absolute adherence to the Jewish law as necessary for redemption. Misunderstandings of Paul’s teaching led to one of the first ‘doctrinal’ controversies in the early Church, faith vs. works. The Letter of James was intended to combat the misunderstanding with his basic premise that faith without works is empty, that true faith will issue in living the faith in the things that we do. At the outset, then, the Ephesian community is praised for actions, deeds, works that are in accord with the faith they profess.

Harrington noted a certain bracketing between vv. 2 and 3. It seems more likely that the two verses display a contrastive chiastic (concentric) structure, in which the falsehood that the Ephesians could not endure was contrasted with their patience endurance in the name of Jesus Christ.

A   kopos (toil, labor)
    B   hypomene (patient endurance)
    C   bastasai (endure, tolerate)
The sense of the contrast, which focuses on the ‘labor’ of the Ephesian community is that they displayed patient endurance in not tolerating the evil, false prophets, but that their patient endurance enkindled their perseverance in holding to the name of Jesus (true teaching) without becoming weary – same root as ‘labor,’ ‘toil.’ That is to say, the energy they invested in resisting false teachers was equal to the energy they invested in adhering to the name of Jesus. All of this looks good and it is all what Jesus has known. The problem, here, however is that *erga* is left out of the equation.

In v. 4 the praise of the Ephesian community is counter-balanced by Christ’s prosecution of his lawsuit – “I hold against you.” The charge leveled against the community is that they have abandoned their first love. ‘First love’ is not to be understood as the former object of their affection, but as a former manner of loving. The word for ‘love’ is *agape*. In Greek *eros* is erotic, romantic love; *philadelphia* is friendship, brotherly love, companionship; *agape* is full commitment and care for other people. It is a love that is self-giving and seeks the good of others. The problem seems to be that in maintaining their orthodoxy – rejecting false teaching – they have lost love, the acts/works of caring for others, even when they are wrong in their teaching. This, Christ calls on them to change.

V. 5 is the admonition, the judgment rendered in the case. What is significant for the Ephesian community, and for us, is that the judgment is conditional. The admonition deploys three verbs, all in the imperative: *Remember, repent, do*. Consistently in the Bible, ‘remember’ never means simply ‘to call to mind.’ It means ‘to make present again.’ It is in this sense that Jesus, at the Last Supper, calls on his disciples to “do this in remembrance of me,” with the sense of ‘make me present to you again.’ The Ephesians are admonished to make present and active and real their former good works. *Metanoia*, repent, is also a significant Biblical term. It is the word used to render the Hebrew concept of *shub*. The word never means simply to ‘feel sorry for.’ It always carries the active sense of turning back, changing. In context, the Ephesian community is being called on to change – change from an orthodoxy that renders them incapable of love, acceptance of others, and forgiveness. Finally, if they make present again their former good works, if they change their approach to what it means to live Christianity, then they must act on it, the must *do* the works consistent with Christian discipleship.

The second half of the verse details the judgment, but a conditional judgment. ‘If not... I will remove your lampstand.’ The judgment carries with it hope, hope for the life of the believing community if they can turn back and live according to the demands of the faith they profess. If not, the consequences are severe. In the Inaugural Vision, Jesus was depicted as walking among the lampstands and the lampstands were interpreted as the Seven Churches. It is this presence of Jesus in and among the Churches that constitutes the meeting of the heavenly and earthly realms. In the present world, the Church meets the divine. Remove the Ephesian lampstand and the picture is now of Jesus walking among six lampstands, walking about in the presence of six Churches. What is at risk is the actual loss of the presence of Jesus Christ in and among the community.

V. 6 returns to a note of praise for the believing community, they hate the works of the Nicolaitans just as Christ does. But note the significant shift. Earlier it was said that the community ‘could not/would not tolerate the false apostles.’ Here it is said that they hate ‘the works’ of the Nicolaitans – as does
Christ, who was not said to be unable to tolerate the false apostles. The shift is subtle, but real. There is a shift from focusing rejection on persons to rejecting their unacceptable works. Christ shares only in the rejection of evil works; he has come to call sinners.

As far as who these Nicolaitans might have been, nothing is certain. They are only mentioned in the Book of Revelation and some few writings of the early Church Fathers. Nowhere is a complete picture of the group and its teaching available. The most that can be suggested is that they professed an antinomian teaching—a teaching that certain aspects of the ‘law’ did not apply. It has been suggested, in the context of the Ephesian letter and the background of the city during the Roman period, that they allowed for a form of accommodation with the Roman world, allowing members of the church to eat the meat sacrificed to idols and engage in sexual acts in conjunction with the Imperial Cult and the Cult of Artemis, the patron goddess of Ephesus. The idea of antinomian teaching was that a Christian could be a member of the community in good standing and still follow the practices of the larger world that would allow them to maintain their livelihood or avoid Roman punishment—even death—by participating in cultic practices in which they did not believe.

On a thematic, rather than verbal, level a chiastic or concentric structure can be observed in vv. 4-6, a structure that moves from praise to censure and back again.

A You have not tolerated (endured) the false apostles

B in your orthodoxy, you have lost your works of love

A’ You have hated the works of the Nicolaitans

This structure implies that, on the outside (the A and A’ elements) the community is living up to the demands of being disciples of Jesus Christ. In their hearts, however, is a rigid orthodoxy that keeps them from being fully loving as Jesus Christ was and as he demands of his followers. They have fallen short of the ideal and are at risk of becoming a Church community that does not have the spirit of Jesus Christ as its animating force.

V. 7 breaks frame. The voice of the narrator from the prologue, 1:1-3, breaks through to address anyone having an ear. This is a specific and poignant reminder to the hearer/reader of the book, in any age, that, if ‘John’ addressed the Seven Churches, the one making the original author’s words available to us is offering us the same teachings, warnings, and possibilities—we, too can change. Now, the words of Christ are addressed directly to us: ‘To the victorious one I will give to eat from the Tree of Life which is in the Paradise of God.’

This promise is symbolically loaded. The ‘victorious one,’ does not simply mean ‘martyr’ in its restricted sense of one who dies for the faith, but in the broadest sense of a ‘witness,’ a witness to the truth. An obvious referent for the ‘Tree of Life’ is the tree growing in the midst of the Garden of Eden in Genesis. At the dawn of creation, humanity over-reached its bounds, necessitating a saving action from God. It is also likely, in the Christian mind, that ‘Tree of Life’ would suggest the Cross of Jesus Christ. On the Cross, the definitive saving action of God took place, allowing humanity access to life, eternal life. This suggests that, theologically, the Cross, the true ‘Tree of Life,’ is located in Paradise. ‘Paradise’ is a Persian loan word meaning, primarily, ‘a royal Garden.’ This recalls Rev 1:6—‘And he made us a kingdom, priests for his God and Father.’

Taking into account the historical-social background of the letter to the Ephesians, the ‘Tree of Life,’ now associated with the Cross of Jesus Christ, stands against the earthly ‘Tree of Life’ that is the center of the Temple of Artemis. That tree offered a refuge and asylum to law-breakers, but the true ‘Tree of Life’ offers life to repentant sinners. That this true ‘Tree of Life’ is in Paradise suggests that, in contrast to
Imperial Rome, we have a place in God’s kingdom, not as dominated subjects, but as participants with Christ is building and spreading the love that is at the heart of God’s kingdom.

Like the Ephesians, we live in a world in which political power and economic realities can place us in compromising positions. The Book of Revelation urges us to stand firm and endure in the face of these realities. We cannot compromise our beliefs and values, but are called to be witnesses, to be a light to the world that shows people that there is another way of looking at things, another way of living our lives on the planet we share. One option for us is to resort to a rigid orthodoxy – we’re right, you’re wrong. Christ’s words, addressed to the Ephesian community, tell us that this is not an option. We are called, first of all, to be peacemakers, to be a light for the world. We are called to love those who hate us, do good to those who persecute us. We are called, no matter what the cost, to transform the world.
Smyrna 2:8-11

And to the angel (messenger) of the in Smyrna church (of the church in Smyrna), write: These things says the first and the last, who became dead and was alive. \(^8\)I have known your tribulation and poverty, but rich (full) are you; and (I have known) the slander from those saying themselves (to be) Jews and they are not, but a synagogue of Satan. \(^9\)Do not be afraid of that which you are about to suffer. Behold, he is about to cast (throw), the devil (= the devil is about to cast) (some) of you into prison so that you might be tested (tempted) and you will have tribulation of ten days. Show yourself to be faithful unto death and I will give to you the crown of life.

\(^{10}\)He having an ear, let him hear that which the spirit is saying to the churches. The victorious one (one who endures) surely not (double negative adverbs) would be harmed by the second death (unending punishment).”

The City of Smyrna\(^ {54}\)

Introduction
Smyrna was noted among the states of proconsular Asia as ‘a paradise of municipal vanity.’ In view of the evidently liberal policy of Smyrna in granting its citizenship, there is no reason to doubt that converts to Christianity included many citizens, or that they continued to share the characteristic attitude of a citizen to his polis.

The First and the Last
The titles of Christ in Rev 2:8 correspond closely to those in the words of the inaugural vision (Rev 1:17-18). ‘The first and the last’ is a divine title from Is 44:6 and 48:12. The Smyrna letter seems otherwise less indebted to the Old Testament than any other. Its central theme of life after death is not a prominent subject in the Old Testament, though it became increasingly an interest of the apocalyptists. In contrast with the temporary nature of suffering, Christ is the First and the Last, and the reality of his victory over death is the guarantee of the same victory for his followers.

The Background of the Church in Smyrna
The question of the racial and cultural background of this city is of particular significance in view of the problematic reference to Jewish opposition from the ‘synagogue of Satan.’ Smyrna was likely to have had a considerable Jewish population in New Testament times. There is also testimony of an unusually virulent bitterness of the local Jewish community against the Christians. It is possible that there were Jews who were citizens of Smyrna. Such a body was particularly unpopular in a Greek city, and the Jews in turn hated their pagan environment. Christianity may have first reached Smyrna through some Jew of Asia present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. We can be confident that a church became established in the city in the period around 52-55 AD, if not earlier. We may suppose that many Jews were converted, and that the resulting bitterness in the Jewish community was intensified if an influx of Jewish refugees arrived after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

In the letter, the writer of Revelation insists that the true people of God is a spiritual nation, not an ethnic group. The Christians were now the true Jews; those who maintained a racial separation had rejected the Christ, according to John, and were of Satan. Probably, in Smyrna, the unbelieving Jews had become active in instigating persecution of the church or denouncing to the authorities those Jews who were also Christians. The situation under Domitian will explain the peculiar power they had. It is understandable in this context that the letter to

\(^ {54}\) These notes are a summary of Colin J. Hemer’s The Letters to the Seven Churchs of Asia in Their Local Setting, ch. 4.
Smyrna is the least Jewish of the seven despite the presence of a considerable Jewish community in the city. It was difficult for an uncompromising Christian to make a living in a pagan city. Jewish hostility was at least likely to have been a factor: their rejection of the Christians placed the latter outside the protection and toleration which the Jews themselves enjoyed – due to their citizenship.

The Crown of Life
In Rev 2:10 the concepts of ‘faithfulness’ and the ‘crown’ are closely linked. Smyrna’s characteristic boast of ‘faithfulness’ originated before the advent of Roman power. At the coming of Rome, Smyrna already possessed a reputation for fidelity to allies. The word used for ‘crown’ in ‘crown of life’ is stephanos. It has been argued that this means a ‘royal crown,’ but ‘royal crown’ is typically conveyed by the word diadema. Stephanos is a garland or wreath of victory, festivity, honor or worship. Such a distinction is probably to be strictly applied in Revelation, where diadema is used of the kingship of the dragon, of the beast, and of Christ. Stephanos is used when other ideas are uppermost. In the gospels, the ‘crown of thorns’ is conveyed by stephanos. To the Roman soldiers it was a mocking sign of kingship, but to the evangelists it also implied victory. Stephanos in the New Testament frequently alludes to the prize of athletic victory and so to the eternal reward of the faithful, who in the words of Paul, have run the good race.

The theme of the imminent Parousia of Christ is explicitly mentioned in every letter of the seven except the letter to Smyrna. The Parousia was expected to terminate the church’s interim period of suffering. That would be the occasion when Christ would bestow the ‘crown of life.’

Conclusions
1. There is good reason to think that the present letter contains allusions to ideas which were current in contemporary thinking in the city of Smyrna.
2. The ancient mind found significance in the coincidence between the name of the city and the word smyrna. The symbolism of weeping, burial and resurrection attached to myrrh may have been reflected in the portrayal of a city of suffering.
3. The simile of the Phoenix is applied to Smyrna in ancient writings. That along with the idea of myrrh both facilitated the identification of the fortunes of the city with the death and resurrection of Christ. These ideas seem to reflect a history of destruction and rebuilding on the site and this may attach to the great earthquake of 60 AD that impacted all the cities addressed.
4. The separation of the Christian and Jewish communities may help to account for the comparative lack of Jewish allusion in this letter.
5. The ‘crown of life’ probably suggested the ‘coming’ of Christ, in implied contrast with the crown presented to a human potentate at his Parousia – a coming to visit the city.

Textual Notes
1. The letter begins in typical fashion with the command to write to the angel of the Church in Smyrna. Again, angel is likely a reference to the heavenly counterpart to the earthly community so that the letter is addressed to the ‘spirit’ of the community, to the ideal of bringing the earthly community into alignment with its heavenly counterpart.
2. The phrase *tes en Smyrna ekklesia* again subordinates the specific city of Smyrna to the idea that the words of Christ are addressed to the Church.

3. *Tade legei* – these things says… Again, in typical fashion the letter begins with the archaic expression that adds ‘eternal’ solemnity to what will be said and reflects a contrast with letters containing royal edicts that regularly use this phrase. In contrast to an earthly ruler, the source of this letter is Christ himself.

4. In the letter to the Smyrnans, the titles of Christ from the inaugural vision are ‘the first and the last’ and ‘the one who died and is alive’ (Rev 1:17-18). Hemer identifies the central theme of the letter as life after death and notes that Christ is the First and the Last, the reality of his victory over death being the guarantee of the same victory for his followers.\(^55\)

5. The specific words of Christ to the community begin in the typical fashion of all seven letters by his announcement of what he has known about the community – *oida*.

6. *Thlipsis* (tribulation, suffering) is a key word in Revelation, referring to present and future conditions. It is what can be expected of those who live the radical Christianity proposed by ‘John.’ In this case, the suffering is seen as a present condition and is correlated with the condition of poverty. *Ptoxeia* most often means extreme or abject poverty.\(^56\)

7. *Blasphemia* is here used as ‘slander,’ as a form of abuse and defamation. This contributes to the *thlipsis*, the tribulation of the Christians in Smyrna.

8. *Those saying themselves to be Jews and they are not* – In the early development of Christianity, Christians claimed to be the true Jews, the true sons of Abraham, the true Chosen People because of their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. This created a controversy with the ‘ethnic’ Jews who claimed membership in the Chosen People by reason of blood lines and adherence to the Jewish law. It seems that Paul addressed this early controversy in Rom 9. More particularly, this controversy provides the backdrop for Matthew’s Gospel. It was written for a community that had its roots in Judaism, but which had been expelled from synagogue fellowship after the fall of Jerusalem. Matthew’s is the only Gospel to use the word *ekklesia* (Church), and claims that the *ekklesia* has replaced the *qahal* – the Jewish assembly in which Israel is most the people of God, the covenant community. It seems that at the heart of the controversy was the fact that Christian groups, in the aftermath of the Jewish rebellion that led to the destruction of Jerusalem, dissociated themselves from the ‘ethnic’ Jews – they did it, not us – while continuing to proclaim themselves to be the true Jews, the true people of God. It is likely that ‘ethnic’ Jews fled Jerusalem and its environs after the fall of Jerusalem and a likely destination was Smyrna where ‘ethnic’ Jews enjoyed citizenship, toleration, and privilege and protection from Roman authorities. By barring Christian membership in the Jewish community, especially for the ‘ethnic’ Jews who had converted to Christianity, the Jews in Smyrna excluded the Christian community from citizenship and the special privileges that Jews enjoyed.

9. *Synogoge tou Satana.* As Harrington notes, the phrase *synagogue of Satan* is a clear example of polemics, strong refutation of another’s position.\(^57\) In Hebrew, *satan* means ‘the adversary.’ This is the character who, in the beginning of the Book of Job, debates with God the righteousness of Job. In later Jewish tradition *ha satan* became personalized as that adversary who stood against God and his will, a personification of all that is evil. What is generally seen in the use of the phrase is the likelihood that in Smyrna, and other cities in Asia, in reaction to the Christian claim to be the new Chosen People, denounced Christians to Roman authorities. Again Harrington suggests that the earthly conflict of Christians with both synagogue and empire reflects a deeper conflict between good and evil played out on the heavenly plane.\(^58\)

10. *Diabolos* – the devil is generally used synonymously with Satan. The sense of ‘devil’ is carried in the English word ‘diabolical.’ It connotes a conniving evil, an intentional plotting to do evil to others. The suggestion, here, is that the source of suffering for the Christian community is the force of evil arrayed against them, the faithful and the good.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*

\(^{57}\) Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

\(^{58}\) Ibid.
11. *Phylake* – prison. In the ancient world, prisons were not used as the means of punishment, but as a place of detention for those awaiting trial or sentencing. The sentence would either be one of death or banishment.

12. *Peirasthete* – you might be tested, tried. It is a common notion in the Old Testament that God’s chosen ones are tried or tested to prove their faithfulness. In context, this testing is not arbitrary or spiteful, but associated with the trials and tribulations of life in the world through which, by their faithfulness, the chosen ones demonstrate their fidelity to God and his will. Harrington notes that, even though it is the devil who casts them into prison, the ordeal is divinely ordained to ‘test’ their faithfulness.

13. *Hemeron deka* – ten days. As in Dan 1:12, this indicates a limited period for the trial, testing and tribulation. The mention of death suggests how serious this test is and how crucial the response.

14. *Stephanos tes zoes* – crown of life. Both Harrington and Rogers and Rogers note the distinction between *stephanos* and *diadema*. *Diadema* is the royal crown, the symbol of rule and authority. *Stephanos*, more properly, is a wreath or garland, the crown of victory or of festivity. There seems to be evidence that in Smyrna, a city that took pride in its loyalty and faithfulness to allies and overlords, the coming (Parousia) of the ruler was greeted by people wearing such wreaths. This suggests a contrast to the Parousia of Christ, his second coming to establish the Kingdom of God. Those who will meet Christ at his coming are the victors – as in war or an athletic contest – those who have endured and overcome the trials and tribulations. That is the sense of ‘crown of life,’ as opposed to some earthly triumph.

15. *Thanatou tou deuterou* – second death. This phrase occurs here and in 20:6, 14 and 21:8. In Revelation it becomes associated with the ‘lake of fire,’ annihilation. It refers to the final fate of the wicked as opposed to ‘the crown of life’ for the victorious. In this there is again a contrast between heaven and earth, or what is below earth – life and death for the good and evil.

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59 Ibid.

60 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
The letter to the Smyrnians is totally positive, beginning the alteration between three positive and three negative letters to the remaining six Churches. The letter begins in typical fashion with the command to write to the angel of the Church, the heavenly counterpart of the community in Smyrna. It can again be noted that the idea of it being a Smyrnian Church is subordinated to the fact that it addressed to the Church, implying the universal outlook of the Book of Revelation. The titles or attributes assigned to Christ in this letter refer back to ‘first-born of the dead’ in the Inaugural Vision. At the outset, then, there is a suggestion that the concern of this letter is with eternal life.

In this letter, what Christ has known about the community of Smyrna is its tribulation, its poverty. Given the background of the letter in which there is contention between the Christians and Jews of Smyrna, a controversy that allows the privileged, citizen Jews to denounce Christians to Roman authorities, it is likely that the ability of Christians in the city to make a living in an otherwise prosperous environment is seriously impacted. Yet, where they are poor and deprived in things of this world, their faithfulness is praised, making them rich in heavenly things. Moreover, from ancient times, the religion of the Jews was allowed in Smyrna. By denouncing Christians, the Jewish population was placing Christians outside the umbrella of Jewish tolerance and privilege and pitting the Christian community, with its unauthorized religion and worship, in direct opposition to Rome. Life and livelihood both were at stake.

From the earliest Christian times, the Christian community identified itself as heirs to the promises made to Abraham. They proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah in the line of David. And they had admitted Gentiles into their fellowship without first imposing on them circumcision and adherence to the Laws of Moses.
This provoked controversy between Jews and the earliest Christian communities, and even within the Christian communities themselves. In the aftermath of the Jewish Rebellion of 66 AD, and with the destruction of Jerusalem four years later, a council of leading Pharisees met in Jamnia. With the temple destroyed, the sacrificial system of Judaism was gone. At Jamnia, these Pharisees set the groundwork for Judaism today. The Jews became the people of the Book and synagogue service, until the destruction of Jerusalem a complement to temple sacrifice, became the focus of Jewish worship. It was at this council that the leading Pharisees declared that anyone accepting Jesus as the Messiah was denied fellowship in the Jewish community. This struck a blow to the very self-identity of the earliest Jewish Christians. This is the root of the Jewish/Christian controversy that festered in the Churches of Asia in the late first century.

It is in this light that we are to understand what is meant by ‘those claiming to be Jews and they are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.’ It is noted that this ‘synagogue of Satan’ slanders the Christian community. The word for ‘slander’ is blasphemia. In Greek, this can simply mean ‘slander,’ ‘speak ill against.’ However, in the Septuagint, this word is used to translate the Hebrew concept of cursing or defaming God himself – our usual meaning of ‘blasphemy.’ The implication is that in speaking against the Christian community in Smyrna, the members of the local synagogue are actually speaking against God. In the other-worldly realm, Satan opposes God and his designs; the community of believers in Smyrna is addressed by Christ and hears a word of approval, so the Church is of God; but, if that is true and the synagogue opposes the Church, then the synagogue is of Satan.

The polemical tone expressed in the letter is suitable to the situation of the Christian community, even as it risks the ‘lack/loss of life’ for which the Ephesian Church was censured. Members of the community can look at what’s happening to them, to their impoverished situation, and state with all confidence, “This is wrong. This is evil.” This is what the letter is expressing.

V. 10 begins with the exhortation, “Do not be afraid.” This exhortation recalls the command to ‘John’ to ‘fear not’ in the Inaugural Vision. There, overpowered by what he had seen, just as the disciples had been in the Transfiguration scene in the Gospels, ‘John’ is exhorted to ‘fear not’ but to respond to his call to write to the Seven Churches. In this case, however, the community of Smyrna is encouraged not to fear in the face of inevitable hardships to come. It has the sense of Jesus encouragement to his disciples in Mt 10:28: Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. This is precisely the meaning of ‘second death’ in v. 11, the last words of this letter.

The rest of v. 10 specifies the ‘tribulation’ that is about to occur. Imminent tribulation and suffering is a characteristic theme in apocalyptic writings; it is the necessary precondition that precedes the final transformation. The devil, identified with Satan, and referring to the ‘false Jews,’ is about to cast some of the community into prison where they will be tried or tested for ten days. What is referred to here is the specific social-historical situation in Smyrna in the late first century Roman period. It is likely that the synagogue community claimed a privileged exemption from the obligation to participate in the Imperial Cult and that the charges leveled against Christian community by the Jews of the synagogue placed them outside such an exemption making their refusal to eat meat sacrificed to idols or engage in sexual rites associated with pagan worship a violation of Roman law. Prison is not to be understood as a place of punishment for those convicted of crimes, but a place where the accused awaited trial and the

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61 NRSV translation
convicted awaited the fulfillment of their sentences – either death or banishment. The idea that they would be tried or tested for ten days is a measure of hope; the tribulation will be short-lived.

Harrington points out that, while ‘the devil’ is the instrument of the Christian community’s tribulation, it is ultimately God who carries out a divine ‘test’ of the faithfulness of his people. The theme of God testing his people is prevalent in the Bible (Zech 13:9, Is 48:10, Mal 3:3, Job 23:10, Prv 17:3, Ps 66:10, Wis 3:4-6, and in the New Testament I Pt 1:7). While, at face value, the notion of God ‘testing’ the faithfulness of his people can seem cruel and arbitrary, the ideas of ‘testing’ and ‘refining’ express the conviction on the part of the believing community that human suffering has value. Such suffering is an evil, but an evil played out on the earthly plane, a suffering that impinges on the eternal.

The final exhortation of the verse calls on the community to endure, to be perseverant. For the Christians of Smyrna, the promise and goal of enduring the hardship of their social-historical situation is the ‘crown of life.’ As pointed out in the textual notes above, the word translated as ‘crown’ is stephanos. This was not a royal crown, but the crown of the victorious – in war, athletic contests and the like. It was also the wreath worn in special festive occasions, as in the case of the visit of an overlord to the city. In the Gospel stories, it is also the word used for the ‘crown of thorns.’ What the Roman soldiers place on the head of Jesus to mock him as a ‘false king,’ in the end turned out to be his emblem of victory, for through his suffering he won for us redemption and eternal life. Adorned in the stephanos earned through patient endurance, the Christian community is promised that it will be ready to meet the real King and Lord of Life at his coming – Parousia.

In v. 11 we encounter the frame break that loosens the address to the Smyrnians from its specific social-historical context and addresses the message to all Christians of all times and places. It begins with the call to hear, as does the ending of each of the seven messages, and it concludes with a promise: The victorious one surely would not be harmed by the second death. The ‘victor,’ the one who overcomes thlipsis, the trials and sufferings of living life as a Christian are promised that their lives matter, that what they endure has value – a value leading to the ‘crown of life.’

In our world, some members of the Church face outright oppression and persecution at the hands of earthly governments, and even at the hands of other communities of faith. This can include oppressive and totalitarian governments and acts of violence in the name of religion and faith. Some Christians face ridicule and ostracization for standing against the ‘world’ and witnessing to another way of living, another way of relating to the world around us. But, for every Christian, there comes the moment of decision: Will I stand up against the forces of evil in my world? Will I risk hardship, ridicule, exclusion, and suffering to be true to Jesus Christ and the values he taught, the love he commanded? Will I endure, or will I buckle under, compromise, and follow a way of life that allows me to be safe and comfortable while proclaiming myself to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, committed to loving and serving others as he did – even if, for me, it means loss?

The message to the Church in Smyrna is polemical, provocative, aggressive. There is evil in the world and Christians have an obligation to identify it, name it, stand against it, and work for change. But now, in the light of the message to the Church in Ephesus, we are faced with another possibility. Will we adhere to an orthodoxy of Christian teaching to such an extent that, we too, lose our first love? Will we confuse intolerance of evil actions for intolerance and hatred of those we see as evil? Will we confuse being a

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62 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
‘victor’ over the trials of this life with being a ‘victor’ over other people, over our fellow humans, over our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ? Will we respond to a call to heal the world, or will we polarize it?
Pergamum 2:12-17

12 And to the angel (messenger) of the church in Pergamum (lit = of the in Pergamum church), write: These things says he holding the sword, the two-edged one, the sharp one (holding the sharp, two-edged sword),

13 "I have known where you are dwelling, where the throne of Satan is, and you are holding fast to my name and not have you denied my faith (faith in me), even in the days of Antipas, my witness, my faithful one who was put to death in your midst, where Satan dwells. 14 But I hold against you a few things that you have there those holding to the teaching of Balaam who taught (was teaching) Balak to cast a trap (enticement) in the way of the sons of Israel to eat that which is offered to idols and engage in immoral sexual activity. 15 Thus you have (them) and (you have) those holding fast to the teaching of the Nicolaitans, likewise (similarly). 16 Change (turn about, repent), there; if however not, I am coming to you in haste and I will wage war against them with the sword of my mouth.

17 The one having an ear, let him hear that which the Spirit is saying to the churches: To the one enduring I will give to him (some of) the manna having been hidden and I will give to him a white stone and upon the stone (will be) a new name having been written which no one has known except him (the one) receiving (it)."

The City of Pergamum

Introduction

In the second half of the 3rd century BC, during the Greek period, Pergamum was successfully able to break away from dependence on Greek rulers and extend the city. In the 2nd century BC, Attalus I was the first ruler in Asia to refuse tribute to the plundering Gauls. He defeated them in a great battle and assumed the titles 'king' and 'savior' in commemoration of the victory. The occasion provided the impulse for the development of a new school of sculpture first represented in Pergamum's great monuments, notably the great altar of Zeus Soter (savior). It also doubtless helped to establish the cult of the divine ruler. Later members of the ruling family realized that they had no means of fulfilling their ambitions of supremacy in Asia Minor without intervention of some external power strong enough to undermine both Macedon and Syria. Such a power was Rome, but it was not then apparent that Pergamum itself would eventually succumb to its ally. The last act of Attalus III was the logical conclusion of the development of events: he bequeathed the city to the Romans as his heirs.

The wealthy inner territory of the Attalid realm was organized as the province of Asia, an acquisition later regarded as the occasion of the corruption of Rome by greed and luxury. Many years of subsequent oppression explain the provincials' enthusiastic reception of a certain Mithridates VI as theos and soter, and their savage execution of his command for the massacre of Romans.

The city was also a great religious center, partly because religion became a major instrument of policy. The principal cults from Attalid times were those of Zeus and Athena, the protectors of the city. Apart from this careful exploitation of existing cults, the kings fostered an explicit ruler-cult. In the later Roman period, whatever the

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63 These notes are a summary of Colin J. Hemer's The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting, ch. 5.
subsequent civil status of Pergamum, it evidently continued to be the religious capital of the province of Asia. To the later strata of Eastern and Greek religion and of a ruler cult was added the worship of the Roman emperor.

*The Throne of Satan*

The use of the term ‘the throne of Satan’ appears to attach itself to Pergamum’s position of supremacy as the center for the imperial cult. Pergamum’s primacy in the imperial cult is important. The early emperors had been slow to sanction a personal cult. Temples to Rome had existed since that at Smyrna in 195 BC. Augustus, in 29 BC, permitted the erection of temples to Rome and himself at Pergamum and Nicomedia. The cult of the living emperor was, at this time, for non-Romans, but it spread rapidly. The institution, once established, could be made into a test of political loyalty, whose machinery could easily be activated by an emperor. It appears that there were exemptions, however, for long-standing groups of citizens traditionally exempt, and it is likely that Jews may have fallen into this category.

*The Reference of Rev 2:13*

The cult of Asklepios was prominent in Pergamum. This god was designated ‘soter’ and was closely identified with a serpent. His cult offered a special of personal ‘salvation’ which might be set in pointed contrast with that of Christ. Most commentators see the principal background in the position of Pergamum as the center of emperor worship. This was the present threat to the church, and the reminder that Christ has the ‘sharp, two-edged sword’ is then set against the proconsul’s right to require emperor worship. It was on this ground that the Christian faced the actual threat of Roman execution.

This letter is unique in its special emphasis. In every other case Christ knows the ‘works’ of the church, here primarily he knows its situation.

*Religious Background and Polemical Parallelism*

The peril of the church is to be related to the pressure of the imperial cult. The case of Antipas showed the way things were going. The whole religious history of Pergamum is instructive because it shows how the background of divine kingship made the place so apt a setting for the development of the forms of emperor worship. It is well known that Domitian required to be addressed as dominus et deus, a title corresponding to that applied to Jesus in Thomas’s confession.

With this background, we can conclude that the expression ‘throne of Satan’ refers primarily to the emperor cult as enforced from Pergamum at a time of critical confrontation for the church. The growth of a polemical parallelism between Christ and Caesar indicate that for John, the claims of Caesar are viewed as a Satanic parody of those of Christ.

*Balaam and the Nicolaitans*

The mention of Balaam in the letter to Pergamum is somewhat difficult to understand. In Numbers, it is implied that Balaam was responsible for contriving the sin of Israel with the daughters of Moab. The incident was already elaborated in midrashic tradition by the first century AD. It is important at least to realize the importance attached to Balaam in Jewish tradition and the possibility that John expected his readers to recognize the allusion to it here. There is also evidence, however, for the use of ‘Balaam’ in Jewish controversy as a type of false teacher. The claim to be the true successors of Abraham is a commonplace of Jewish-Christian controversy from New Testament times. This controversy occupies much of Matthew’s presentation of Jesus in his gospel and in his understanding of the church, the qahal, the assembly of the true Israel. Jewish writings, roughly contemporaneous with Revelation, single out Balaam for special detestation and seem to make him a type of Jesus. On the other side, the New Testament references and the Christian use of Balaam’s prophecy in Nm 24:17 as a Messianic proof-text, also point to an early Jewish-Christian controversy involving the name of Jesus.

Balaam in our text is clearly to be applied in a different way. Christians who recognized the moral claims of the Gospel might naturally refuse the opprobrious term for themselves and apply it to the kind of perversion of their faith to which the underlying criticism seemed truly applicable.

Nicolaitanism is presented wholly as a practical error. Balaam taught Balak to cause Israel to stumble by eating things sacrificed to idols and by committing fornication. The association of these sins goes back to Nm 25:1-2. In the New Testament they are connected in Acts 15:20 and 29, in the account of the Council of Jerusalem that
ratified Paul’s mission to the Gentiles. Abstinence from these sins is made a fundamental condition of a modus vivendi for Gentile converts in mixed communities. The Pergamene church faced direct pressure to conform to the idolatrous worship of the emperor. In Thyatira, Christians felt the same type of pressure, but there in the context being forced to belong to organizations (guilds) with their attendant immorality for the sake of maintaining their livelihood. In the face of this, Nicolaitanism represented an antinomian movement like that which Paul had faced in Corinth. “Freedom from the law” was taken to mean that Christians could compromise themselves, breaking prescripts of the law as external actions in the belief that this merely allowed them to do what was needed to continue to practice Christianity. That is, Christians in Asia faced a dilemma in which their safety was assured only by accommodation either to pagan society or to Judaism, and the root of Nicolaitanism, a misrepresentation of the Pauline doctrine of freedom, was used to justify such accommodation. That is, Nicolaitanism was an antinomian movement whose antecedents can be traced to the misrepresentation of Pauline liberty, and whose incidence may be connected with the special pressures of emperor worship and pagan society.

Conclusions

1. The religious policy of its kings fostered ruler-worship and the city’s importance as the first center of the imperial cult may be seen against this background.
2. The explanation of the ‘throne of Satan’ as referring to the city’s primacy in the imperial cult and of the sword as referring to the proconsular authority to execute those who did not conform to emperor worship are to be accepted.
3. The sword may have been associated with the authority of the spoken word, in particular the sentence of the judge. Antipas may have been remembered as a first victim or test case in a persecution. There may be implied a contrast with the sword, the spoken word, and the sword coming from the mouth of Jesus, again a symbol of the word of God.
4. Throughout proconsular Asia there are many instances of a polemic sharply contrasting Christ and Caesar through the use of similar symbolism.
5. It is surprising to find allusion to Jewish tradition in a city where the evidence for Jewish settlement is so slight. Balaam’s name or a play upon it may already have been current in Christian-Jewish controversy. Christians rejected the application of this reproachful name to themselves, but might use it of an antinomian perversion of their Gospel.
6. Nicolaitanism may be the antinomian perversion of the Gospel, but not much can be said of it other than it represented an accommodation with pagan society and the imperial cult.

Textual Notes

1. Romphaia – sword. The title or attribute of Jesus drawn from the Inaugural Vision is “he holding the sharp, two-edged sword.” In the Inaugural Vision, the sword was seen coming from the mouth of Jesus. This suggests the metaphor of the word as a sword, cutting to the heart of things, and in this case, a sword that cuts both ways. In the textual notes on the Inaugural Vision, biblical allusions were cited for this association of word and sword, notably Heb 4:12. As in the case of the letters to Ephesus and Smyrna, this ‘title’ hints at the concern expressed in the letter to Pergamum. It will center on ‘word.’
2. *I know where you dwell.* Harrington points out that this phrase sets the letter to Pergamum apart from the rest. In all others, Jesus Christ knows their works, their actions. Here, he knows their situation, the cultural climate of the city in which they live.\(^{64}\) It is possible to suggest, here, especially in the light of the alteration Harrington sees between letters of praise and those of censure, that Christ can find no good in the community. This judgment may be mitigated by their circumstances, they live in a renowned center of emperor worship, but they still fall short.

3. *Thrōnos tou Satana.* While some commentators see ‘throne of Satan’ as a reference to the altar of Zeus prominent in Pergamum, it would seem more likely, especially in comparison with the ‘synagogue of Satan’ mentioned in the letter to Smyrna, to look to the social-historical background of the city as the context to which the phrase applies. As Hemer noted,\(^{65}\) Pergamum had a long history of ruler worship and was the first city in the province to inaugurate emperor worship during the Roman period. What began in the provinces was later adopted in Rome itself and the imperial cult was imposed on all subjects of Roman rule. Pergamum was the pre- eminent city in Asia in terms of the imperial cult. As such, the author of Revelation could look on Pergamum as the ‘throne of Satan,’ a clear contrast to the ‘throne’ in the heavens that will feature prominently in the visions of the book. ‘Satan,’ both here and in the letter to Smyrna, functions as a source of evil, as a symbol of all that opposes God and his rule, and as the combatant in the heavenly struggle between good and evil that mirrors the struggle played out on earth.

4. *Krateris to onoma mou* – ‘you hold fast (cling to) to my name.’ It is known that the Emperor Domitian adopted the name/title *dominus et deus* – ‘Lord and god.’ *Kyrios* – ‘Lord’ – was an early title applied to Jesus, regularly used in Paul’s writings and in the Gospels. The question is, “Who is the real Lord of the earth, Jesus Christ or Caesar?”\(^{66}\) It is likely, then, that the Christian community in Pergamum finds itself in a situation in which they are called on to honor Domitian as lord and god; this, they refuse to do, reserving such divine and authoritative titles to the Lord, Jesus. They are true to his name.

5. *Ouk ernesot ten pistin mou* – you did not deny my faith (faith in me). The Greek reads, literally, ‘the faith of me.’ In this case the genitive, *mou,* is an objective genitive. In their situation in the pre- eminent center of imperial worship in Asia, the Pergamenes have held to the faith in Jesus Christ.

6. *Antipas ho martys mou* – ‘Antipas, my witness.’ Antipas is mentioned only here in the Bible and nothing is known of him other than that he was put to death by Roman authorities. *Martyrs* has its primary meaning of ‘witness,’ ‘one who gives testimony,’ even though, in this instance, his ‘witness’ was unto death. Nor can it be concluded that the death of Antipas was part of a larger persecution of Christians in either Pergamum or throughout the province. It is an isolated incident, but one that portends the possibility of violence against those who stand up to imperial Rome. What is significant in this situation is that Antipas was put to death, executed. This implies that he was arrested and interrogated by the Roman Provincial Governor. His execution would have been carried out by reason of *ius gladii* – ‘the law of the sword.’ The purpose of mentioning Antipas, then, appears to be to set up a contrast between the *ius gladii* – the sword of Roman authority, and the sword that comes from the mouth of Christ, the sword he wields in his title as the one speaking this letter to the Pergamenes, the sword that represents the Word of God, the sword/word that cuts both ways.

7. *Hopou ho Satanas katoikei* – ‘where Satan dwells.’ *Where Satan dwells* is a designation for Pergamum, the center of the imperial cult in Asia. This designation of the city indicates that evil is everywhere in it, that as the seat of Roman authority, and especially of a false cult to the Roman Emperor, the city, its customs and culture, its way of life is diametrically opposed to the ways of God. The Christian community is surrounded by, engulfed in a climate of evil. I would suggest that this situation is crucial for understanding the condemnation of the Christian community for holding to the teaching of Balaam.

8. *Echeis ekei kratontas ten didachem Balaam* – ‘you have, there, those holding fast to the teaching of Balaam.’ This, traditionally, has been a somewhat difficult phrase to interpret and understand. The story of Balak, the king of Moab, and Balaam, the renowned Seer he summoned to curse the Sons of Israel is narrated in Num 22-24. In itself, the story doesn’t give any indication of why Balaam should be censured. Israel is making its way from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land and needs to pass through the land of Moab.

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\(^{64}\) Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

\(^{65}\) Colin J. Hemer, *op. cit.*
Balak fears the great number of people in the Israelite camp and calls Balaam to come and curse Israel. Every time Balaam attempts to curse the Israelites, God intervenes and he offers a blessing instead. Exasperated, Balak finally sends Balaam away. On Israel’s part, the sin of the people during their stay in the region is narrated after Balaam has departed the scene: “While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and the Lord’s anger was kindled against Israel. (Nm 25:1-3)” Later Jewish tradition consistently represented Balaam as the one who enticed Israel. It can be suggested that Balaam entrapped the sons of Israel by means of his blessing. This made it possible for Israel to live in the midst of a foreign culture, a culture they did not resist. Having sexual relations with the women of Moab is probably to be understood in terms of the fertility cult of Baal in which human sexual relations were intended to mimic the god’s planting his seed in the earth to bring forth a fertile crop. It was a form of imitative magic to assure a good harvest. Part of the cultic ceremony would have included sharing in the feast – the produce of the harvest shared between humans and the god. This image likely appealed to ‘John’ because sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols fit exactly the cultural situation of Pergamum and its imperial cult.

9. *Porneuein* normally means ‘to fornicate.’ It can imply any kind of sexual immorality. In the context, it can refer to the fertility cult of Baal, as described in Numbers, but in Revelation it is uniformly used as a symbol of idolatry.

10. *Nicolaitans*. Again, not much is known of the Nicolaitans, but they do seem to appear consistently in the Book of Revelation as a type of antinomian teachers, as those who hold to a freedom from the law that would allow Christians to make accommodations with their surrounding culture. The mention of the Nicolaitans here seems to imply that the fault of the Pergamenes is that they have in their midst those who make such accommodations with Roman culture, holding to the teachings of Balaam, and those who teach this type of behavior, the Nicolaitans. In contrast to the Ephesians, who hated the works of the Nicolaitans, the Pergamenes appear to tolerate and even to embrace what they teach.

11. *Metanoeson*. The imperative of the verb ‘to change,’ ‘to turn back,’ ‘to repent’ issues a strong call at the beginning of the letter’s closing exhortation. It is a plural form of the imperative, so that the exhortation is addressed to each, individual member of the Christian community. The implication is that the actions of each individual impacts the good of the whole; the ‘culture’ of the community is built on the actions and attitudes of its individual members.

12. *Rhomphaia tou stomatos mou* – ‘the sword of my mouth.’ The exhortation ends with a word of warning. The one speaking will come quickly to wage war against ‘them,’ the members of the community holding to the teachings of Balaam and tolerating the Nicolaitans, with the sword of his mouth. This, again, recalls the Inaugural Vision and the identification of the ‘sword’ with the ‘Word of God.’ The Word of God in judgment cuts both ways – against the ‘throne of Satan’ and against those who make accommodations with it.

13. *Manna kekroummenou* – ‘hidden manna.” Harrington points out that this is an idea common in Jewish apocalyptic tradition (I Baruch 29:8). Such manna would appear as food for the dawning Messianic Kingdom (II Macc 2:4-8).

14. *White stone*. Again, Harrington notes that the precise significance of the white stone is unclear. Obviously, it represents some token given to the ‘victor.’ He suggests that it could possible refer to an ‘admission ticket’ to the heavenly banquet.

15. In biblical tradition, the giving of a new name always indicates a new destiny, a new vocation or responsibility, a new place or function in God’s plan. (Note the changes in the names of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah, of Simon to Peter, of Saul to Paul as but a few examples).

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66 NRSV translation
67 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
While the letter to the Smyrnians was largely positive, the letter to Pergamum is roundly negative. The letter begins with the typical introduction. The one receiving the vision is commanded to write to the angel of the Church. This, as is typical, refers to the ‘spirit’ of the Church, the heavenly counterpart of the Church’s earthly expression. Once again, the city of Pergamum, the cultural and social context in which the Church exists, is, by the word order – the in Pergamum Church, subordinated to Church. And, again as usual, the Church is addressed by Jesus Christ himself, this time presented as the one wielding the sharp, two-edged sword. This attribute of Jesus Christ is drawn from the Inaugural Vision where the sword coming from the mouth of Christ suggests God’s word, a word that cuts both ways, calling into account his own people and the whole world. The introduction to the letter, then, suggests that we can expect the letter to deal with a contrasts between words of teaching, words of power.

The content of the letter begins, as do all seven letters, with what Christ knows about the Church in Pergamum. While the other six letters relate what Jesus knows about the individual Churches, their works, their actions, here he basically says, “I know where you live.” Specifically, they live where the throne of Satan is located. In the letter to the Smyrnians, it was noted that the community had to deal with the synagogue of Satan, implying that the trouble stirred up by the Jews against the Christians in that city had its source in ultimate evil, Satan. Pergamum was the first city in the Province to begin a cult of the Roman Emperor, a cult of the ruler god, and in the Roman Province of Asia in the late first century, Pergamum occupied a privileged position as the center of the Imperial Cult in Asia. In this regard, Satan is to be seen as a symbol of Rome, of Roman authority, of a worldly power that is opposed to the will and word of God.

But Christ also knows that, in the hostile environment of Pergamum, the members of the Church have held fast to his name and have not denied the faith. Initially, this sounds like a positive comment about
the community of believers. They have held fast, even when Antipas, an otherwise unknown member of their community was executed by Roman authority. Here, we are not to understand ‘martyr’ as that class of Christians who die for their faith. This is what the word will later come to connote. What is suggested by the text is that Antipas gave witness, testimony to Jesus Christ, an action that pitted him against the power of Rome. His execution would have been an enforcement of the *ius gladii*, the law of the sword, a power granted to Roman Provincial Governors to put to death anyone who upset the *Pax Romana*. The incident is narrated to draw out a contrast between Roman authority, *ius gladii*, and the word and authority of Christ, the sword seen coming from his mouth in the Inaugural Vision, the sword he wields as the one addressing the Church in Pergamum. And, herein lies the problem in the Church addressed by the letter. Antipas held fast to the faith, in an active way, even when it cost him his life. The Church, on a whole, is not so single-minded; it takes the road of accommodation with Rome.

V. 14 takes up the charges that Christ levels against the Pergamene Church. The charges against the community center on two issues: 1) Some members of the community hold to the teaching of Balaam and 2) as opposed to the situation in Ephesus, Nicolaitans are tolerated in Pergamum and some hold to their teachings.

The mention of Balaam can appear confusing. The story of Balaam and Balak, a noted seer and the King of Moab, is narrated in Nm 22-24. As the Israelites make their way from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land, they seek safe passage through the land of Moab. Balak fears the Israelites due to their great numbers and summons the noted seer to curse them. Balaam answers the call, but impelled by God, he blesses the sons of Israel instead of cursing them. Nm 25:1-3 continues the story, depicting Israel still encamped in Moab and falling into idolatrous practices, fornicating with women who entice them, a possible reference to the fertility cult of Baal in which copulation was seen as a kind of imitative magic, mirroring the god’s planting of his seed in the ground. The practice was thought to insure a good harvest. Included in the fertility rites was a shared feast in which humans ate of the food sacrificed to the god. Humans and the god sharing in the bounty of fertility.

What appears to be at issue is that Israel, having been blessed, is dwelling at peace with the Moabites. In this context, they succumb to the practices of the Moabites in opposition to God’s will. This is exactly the situation that ‘John’ is addressing in the Pergamene Church – people remaining true to the name of Christ and professing the true faith within the Christian community, but acting contrary to those beliefs in the context of their larger world.

As pointed out in the commentary on the letter to the Church in Ephesus, not much is known about the Nicolaitans. Whenever they are mentioned in Revelation, it appears that they are a type of antinomian teachers, encouraging accommodation with Rome and Roman practices, a compromise justified by the fact that, for the sake of fitting in and avoiding conflict with the powers that be, Christians can engage in practices in which they really don’t believe. ‘John,’ seemingly a firm believer in ‘actions speak louder than words,’ will countenance no such compromise.

V. 16 issues Christ’s call to change, to repent. The consequence for not changing, for persisting in accommodation with Rome, will be to place those members of the community who hold fast to the teaching of Balaam and tolerate the Nicolaitans squarely on the side of Rome. Though they do not reject the name of Jesus and profess faith in him, they will face the same condemnation by God’s word, by the sword issuing from the mouth of Jesus Christ.
The frame break of v. 17 again allows the reader to hear the voice of the narrator presenting the entire content of the book and, again, loosens the message to the Church in Pergamum from its particular social-historical context to address all Christians of all times. To the victor, to the one overcoming situations in Christian life similar to that of Pergamum, hidden manna will be given. It is generally agreed that ‘hidden manna’ refers to the ‘banquet’ of the Messianic age. In Johannine thought, however, the true manna is Jesus Christ, the Break of Life. So, it is possible to read a Eucharistic reference into this verse. The implication would be that a place at the Eucharistic table belongs to the one who overcomes, who endures. The same can be said of the white stone and the new name written on it. In the Bible, giving a new name indicates a new way of life, a new mission or vocation, a new part to play in God’s plan (e.g., renaming Abram and Sarai as Abraham and Sarah; renaming Jacob as Israel; changing Simon’s name to Peter; and changing Saul’s name to Paul.) In this light, it is also possible to see that places at the Eucharistic table are restricted to the victors, to those who overcome and endure. All others are excluded.

From the perspective of the radical Christianity proposed in the Book of Revelation, the failure of the Church in Pergamum was that its members lived a nominal Christianity. They held to the name of Jesus and professed to be believers, but, unlike Antipas, did not live the faith. How many of us believe that we have lived our Christian faith by attending Mass ‘religiously’ every Sunday, but who also think nothing of manipulating or back-stabbing to get ahead in the work place? How many of us profess to follow the Gospel values taught by Jesus, but ignore the plight of the vulnerable, the poor, the oppressed – the refugee and stranger in our midst? How many of us buy goods made in sweatshops because they are cheaper and that is an advantage for us? How many of us follow the crowd, everybody does it, and refuse to stand up for what is right, what builds the common good and not personal advantage? How many of us avoid talking about beliefs because we might be ridiculed or because ‘religion’ is a controversial topic? How many people can look at us and see committed disciples of Jesus, those willing to do what he did, no matter the cost?
Thyatira 2:18-29

18And to the angel (messenger) of the in Thyatira church (the church in Thyatira) write: These things says the son of God, he having the eyes of him like a flame of fire and his feed similar to fine bronze

19"I have known your works and love and faith and service (ministrations) and your patient endurance (perseverance) and your last works (the works of you, the last) (are) greater than the first.

20But I have against you that you allow (tolerate) the woman, Jezebel, the one calling herself a prophetess and teaches and deceives (leads astray) my servants (slaves, those bound to me) to commit sexual immorality and to eat that which is offered to idols. 21And I have given to her time so that she might change (turn back, repent) and not does she want to change (turn back, repent) from her sexual immorality. 22Behold, I am casting her on a (sick) bed and those committing adultery with her into great tribulation unless they should change (turn back, repent) from her works (deeds) 23and her children I will put to death with death and they will know, all the churches, that I am the one searching the kidneys (emotions) and hearts (will) and I will give (do) to you, to each according to your works.

24To you, however, I am saying (speaking) to the rest, the ones in Thyatira who do not hold to this teaching, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they (the others) are saying, not am I hurling (casting) upon you another burden 25but hold to that which you have (lit what you have hold to) until when surely I might come. 27And the one persevering (overcoming) and keeping (observing, guarding) until the end my works, to him I will give authority over the nations 28and he will shepherd them with an iron staff; like earthenware vessels he breaks (crushes), 28just as even I have received from my father and I will give to him the morning star.

29He having an ear, let him hear that which the Spirit is saying to the churches.

The City of Thyatira68

Introduction
The longest and most difficult of the seven letters is addressed to the least known, least important and least remarkable of the cities. The letter, in itself, is concerned with matters of everyday life.

All of the other six cities are visibly remarkable. Thyatira alone lies on almost level ground in the center of a broad valley bordered by gently rising hills. Most of the scattered literary references to its early fortunes represent it as the victim of a conquering army. It is only with the coming of the stable conditions of the Pax Romana that a situation obtained that favored the city’s growth. The words of Rev 2:19, then, were addressed to a growing church in a growing city.

68These notes are a summary of Colin J. Hemer’s The Letters to the Seven Churchs of Asia in Their Local Setting, ch. 6.
The city’s most obvious peculiarity was its unusually large number of influential trade-guilds. Three notable features of these guilds were: 1) their religious basis, 2) their apparent localization, and 3) their persistence. It is likely that Jews came as resident aliens when the Roman peace made the city an increasingly important commercial center. If they lacked the organized status and privileges they sometimes enjoyed elsewhere, they had to come to terms with a mixed pagan society in which they had no part. Apart from the question of Judaism, the city seems to have been racially very mixed, and the syncretism of its religion may be traced to this factor (a blend of aspects from differing religious backgrounds united into an expression of the newly formed ‘culture’). Syncretism in religion was the natural ancient way of uniting disparate elements. Civic harmony was the ideal.

**Chalkolibanos**

Thyatira was a garrison city and was naturally, also, an arsenal organized for military preparedness. Its political masters evidently adapted the indigenous guild-structure to their purposes.

An alloy of copper with metallic zinc was made in Thyatira, the zinc being obtained by distillation. This was a finer and purer brass than the rough and variable coinage alloy. The product was known as *chalkolibanos*. If the context is of local industry, it seems likely that the local patron-god, Apollo, was in John’s mind. There are coins where he is depicted grasping the emperor’s hand and this suggests that the picture of Christ that was put forward in the letter was in deliberate opposition to this combination of local and imperial religion. The pretensions of the imperial cult were seen as a Satanic parody of the realities in Christ. The Thyatiran Christians were subject to organized paganism, but the realities of the case were those of Ps 2, where the Lord was master of the oppressive earthly powers. In the ‘son of God,’ the church had her true champion irresistibly arrayed in armor flashing like the refined metal from the furnaces of the city. He was the true patron of their work. His keen eyes discerned the good from the bad. He rejected the badness of Jezebel’s teaching.

**Jezebel**

After warmly commending the loving service and expanding works of the Thyatiran church, Christ condemns their undiscerning toleration of a false prophetess. There is no ground for a definitive identification of ‘Jezebel.’ The probable explanation is simply that she was an unknown woman who had undue influence in the local church and met the problem of Christian membership in the trade-guilds with permissive antinomian or Gnostic teaching. It may be that the writer’s point was that the original Jezebel was a heathen whose ways had been accepted and who had corrupted the chosen people. It is quite conceivable that in this racially mixed city the church was threatened by some monstrous syncretism of Christian, Jewish and pagan elements through a priestess who combined ‘magical Judaism’ or Gnostic views with a professed adherence to Christianity.

The choice of the name ‘Jezebel’ in 2:20 is likely to be as pointedly apt, as that of ‘Balaam.’ The ground of condemnation of the original Jezebel was that she had brought idolatry into Israel. The same is true of the Thyatiran Jezebel: she taught her followers to eat things sacrificed to idols. The syncretism seems to have been centered on the guild-feasts, as the occasions when the Christian may have been particularly pressed by the need to conform to his environment. The teaching of Jezebel was not necessarily the same in emphasis as that of the Nicolaitans. Here, what the church tolerated was primarily immorality, whether literal or as a figure for apostasy, and that license for it was the primary object of the prophetess.

Jezebel’s teaching was Nicolaitanism, but in rather a different setting. At Pergamum the Christian’s life was directly threatened by the pervasiveness of the imperial cult, here his livelihood by the issues involved in membership of the guilds. The teaching of a women in the church provided him with an answer to his pressing problems. It met what were easily represented as the plain necessities of commercial life. It may have been a shock to hear this popular teacher equated with Jezebel. The church may well have denounced and shunned the grosser forms of syncretized paganism in the city while harboring teaching which, in John’s view, imperiled those whom it led into the very same evils. Presumably Jezebel argued that a Christian might join a guild and participate in its feast without thereby compromising his faith. He was initiated into a superior wisdom. He knew the idol was nothing and he could not be defiled by that which did not exist.

The local situation favored the accommodation of incompatible beliefs and practices: the letter insists on individual devotion to a Lord who searches the hearts of men and demands a consistency of life. The love and faith commended in the church might easily be corrupted by compromise with pagan society: the guilds themselves were devoted to good works.
The End of the Letter

The concluding promise of this letter is probably the most difficult of the seven. In context, the victory consisted in keeping to the end the works of Christ rather than those of Jezebel. The promise is of power over those to whom the Thyatiran church is now in helpless subjection. The ‘rod of iron’ corresponds to the ‘sword’ at Pergamum as an emblem of authority. The symbol has an explicit precedent in Ps 2:9. Allusion to the familiar picture of the potter smashing the rejected vessel is also taken from Ps 2:9. This idea is developed in Jeremiah (18:1-11). Its use here is apt in view of the known existence of a guild of potters in Thyatira.

The second promise, that of the ‘morning star,’ has never been satisfactorily explained.

Textual Notes

1. Huios tou theou – ‘the son of God.’ Harrington observed that this phrase is used only here in the Book of Revelation, though in 1:6, 2:27, 3:5, 3:21 and 14:1, God is spoken of as the Father of Christ. 69
2. Flaming eyes is likely a symbol for keen, penetrating vision, vision into the very heart of the matter that burns away all deceit and subterfuge.
3. Chalkolibanos – fine bronze, burnished bronze. Hemer has noted that Thyatira produced a unique and particularly fine quality of an alloy of copper and zinc. It is likely that Apollo was the patron God of the trade-guild that made this alloy and Apollo is depicted on Thyatiran coins holding the hand of the Roman Emperor. It is likely that the use of this term in describing the image of Christ is intended to pit the power of Christ against the power of the Emperor. 70
4. Agape. While Ephesus was chided for losing its ‘first love,’ The works of Thyatira are roundly praised, its works specified first of all as agape (love), followed by faith, service, and patient endurance.
5. Diakonia – service. Harrington suggests that the particular ‘Christian service’ envisioned here involved meeting the needs of the poor and providing for the needs of the community of believers – the holy ones. (Rom 15:25, 31; I Cor 16:15; II Cor 8:4, 9:1; and Heb 6:10). 71
6. Jezebel. Among Scripture scholars, it is generally agreed that ‘Jezebel’ was a ‘prophetess’ within the community of Thyatira who is otherwise unknown. As the term ‘prophet’ is used in the early church, she was a teacher of the ways of Christian life. In her case, she is to be condemned as a false prophet. Because of this she was a ‘Jezebel’ – who would name their daughter Jezebel?

In the Second Book of Kings, Jezebel is the Sidonian princess who married Ahab, one of the most successful kings of the northern kingdom of Israel. In the ancient world, marriages arranged between the royal families of two kingdoms were intended to seal an alliance between the kingdoms. The purpose of such alliances was usually for the sake of mutual defense. As the story goes, on her marriage to Ahab, Jezebel brought with her 450 prophets of Baal, the Sidonian god. The outcome was, as to be expected, a syncretistic corruption of pure Yahwism with elements of the Baal cult. In the mind of the Deuteronomic historian, the situation was a breach of the covenant relationship with God on two counts: 1) Israel was to trust solely in its God for protection; political alliances with other nations represented a lack of faith and a possible danger to absolute faithfulness to God. And 2) the intermingling of Yahwistic and Baalistic cultic elements occasioned by the intermingling of Israel with other peoples was a direct violation of Israel’s call to fidelity to one God alone.

The situation in northern Israel squarely pitted Jezebel and the 450 prophets of Baal against Elijah, God’s chosen prophet. It would seem that, in just the same way, the false teachings of a prophetess in Thyatira was leading the Christian community away from pure faithfulness to Jesus Christ and pitted the prophetess against ‘John,’ who countered her accommodating and syncretistic Christianity with a radical Christianity that allowed for no compromise. In all of this, it appears that “Jezebel’s” false teaching mirrors that of the Nicolaitans.

69 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
70 Colin J. Hemer, op. cit.
71 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
7. *Planan* – deceives. Harrington has observed that this verb, used to depict the action of ‘Jezebel,’ elsewhere in the book is reserved for Satan and his imperial minions.  

8. *Porneuein* – to fornicate. As has been noted, the verb has the general sense of ‘fornication,’ and by extension, refers to any ‘sexual immorality.’ In the Book of Revelation, the word is used symbolically as ‘idolatry.’ In the Old Testament, a typical expression for the act of idolatry is ‘to whore after other gods.’ In II Kings 9:22, Jehu speaks of the ‘harlotries and sorceries’ of Jezebel, referring to the idolatrous practices she introduces into Israel.

9. *Edoke aute chronon hina matanoese* – ‘I have given her time that she might repent (change).’ There is an implied contrast here with the situation in the Ephesian Church. There, the community of believers would not tolerate/hated the false prophets and this was held against them as a departure from love. In this case, Christ tells the community that he has given ‘Jezebel’ every opportunity to change, get back on track, repent, but to no avail. The judgment to follow is harsh, but it is a divine judgment. Considering the situations in both Ephesus and Thyatira, it would appear that Revelation is stressing once again that judgment belongs to God, not us, but also subtly suggesting the responsibility of Christians to try to win back wayward brothers and sisters.

10. *Kline* – bed. Harrington observes a clear double-meaning here. Ostensibly, it can refer to a ‘sick bed,’ implying that she will suffer a debilitating ailment, but figuratively, bed suggests her ‘fornication,’ her idolatrous actions and teachings. The punishment will befall not only ‘Jezebel,’ but those who have followed her, unless they change. (Recall the fate of the children of Ahab, II Kgs 10:7). Still, note the implied mercy. Those who committed fornication with her, engaged in her idolatrous practices, followed her false teachings, are to receive the same judgment unless they repent and turn aside from her works. They are given the same chance that she was given – the choice is theirs.

11. *Thlipsis.* The tribulation referred to here is the particular hardship of the judgment of God on ‘Jezebel’ and her followers. It does not have the religious sense it has elsewhere in Revelation where it refers to the hardships endured by Christians for the sake of keeping true to their faith.

12. *Thanatos.* In Greek, *thanatos,* can mean either ‘death’ or ‘pestilence.’ The phrase *apokteno en thanato* can mean, “I will put to death (kill) with death,” as an emphatic statement: I will kill her dead! Or it can imply the means of death: I will kill her with pestilence. Either way, it won’t go well for her.

13. *Gnosontai pasai hai ekklesiai* – ‘all the Churches will know.’ Harrington concludes that this phrase indicates that the teaching of ‘Jezebel’ has spread beyond Thyatira. Alternately, in the first three letters, the frame break, which intrudes the narrator’s voice, ‘He having an ear, let him hear that which the Spirit is saying to the Churches,’ is followed by a promise directed to ‘the one overcoming, enduring, being victorious.’ In the final four letters, the promise is included in the body of the letter and the frame break is simply the exhortation to listen to the voice of the Spirit. It can at least be suggested that in the seven letters (seven being a number of completion, perfection) a pattern of 3 + 4 emerges. Typically, in the Bible, three indicates complete time, completed action, of a short duration (40 indicating a long duration). The letter to the Ephesians contained both praise and censure; the letter to Smyrna focused primarily on praise; and the letter to Pergamum focused primarily on censure. The pattern is complete. The remaining four letters alternate praise and censure, simply carrying out the pattern. With the phrase, ‘all the Churches will know,’ the letter to Thyatira broadens the perspective of the particular letter to a message to the whole Church – at least in first century Asia. From here on, the blessing offered to the ‘one overcoming’ can be considered to be a general statement, again at least for the Churches of first century Asia. It is a general blessing pronounced on anyone who hears the words of praise and is faithful to the actions that merit that praise, or heeds the words of warning and rejects the actions that lead to censure. The final frame break in the last four letters, then, holds up the exhortations offered to all the Churches in Asia in the first century, as exhortations to be heeded by all Christians of all times.

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72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
14. **Nephrous kai kardias** – ‘kidneys and hearts.’ In the ancient world, the kidneys were considered to be the seat of emotions and hearts the seat of will, affection – in the sense of to what or whom a person will attach himself. This is not a ‘feeling of attraction’ but a conscious decision.

15. ‘I will give to each of you according to your works.’ This phrase is repeated with a slight variation in 22:12 (My reward is with me to give to each according to his work). This bracketing function of the two verses suggests that the whole of the book concerns the actions of Christians, actions that will identify a Christian as belonging to Jesus or not. Such is the sense of “John’s” radical Christianity.

16. **Loipois** – ‘to the rest.’ In v. 24, for the first time in any of the letters, a distinction is made between ‘some’ who hold to false teaching and ‘the rest’ who do not. In Ancient Israel, there was a sense of ‘corporate personality’ and ‘corporate responsibility.’ A similar notion was prevalent in Christian teaching. Together we celebrate Eucharist, together we are/become the Body of Christ. God’s gifts and promises are not made to an individual but to the community as a whole, to the people of God. Christ is with us as a whole community.

A common conception in the ancient world centered on the wrath of the gods, visiting retribution for transgressions for unlimited generations to come. In the Israelite mindset, however, this just retribution was limited – to three or four generations. This idea expressed the conviction that sin has a social dimension, that the consequences of sin impact others for a time to come. Still, as early as Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic History, religious thinkers in Israel focused on the value of **shub**, turning back, changing, repenting. In large part, this call to change was addressed to the whole community, to the whole nation. It was during the Babylonian Exile, in the writings of Ezekiel, that the idea of individual responsibility came to the fore. In the eyes of God, we are not trapped within the iniquities of the society in which we live; we each bear responsibility for our own actions – no matter how true it is to say that all sin – and all acts of goodness – have a social dimension.

In the early Church, it was common to look at a community of believers according to the person from whom they had received the message of the Gospel. (I belong to Apollos, I belong to Paul…). In that case, the community was judged to be fully Christian or not depending on the orthodoxy of its teachings. Still, Paul fought this idea by stressing that we are one in Christ, not in whomever evangelized us. Still, there were problems in the early communities, especially when new preachers came on the scene, putting forward an alternate Gospel. That created the situation of ‘some’ and the ‘rest.’ In the view of ‘John,’ the Church is true to itself and true to Christ if individuals perform the works of faith, if individuals live their faith in action, and if they do so, even if it puts them at odds with their surrounding culture and power structure. In the imagery of John’s Gospel, Jesus is the vine and we are the branches; any branch not bearing fruit will be cut off and thrown into the fire; any branch bearing fruit will be pruned and tended so that it continues to produce.

17. **Bathea** – deep things. Harrington suggests that ‘depths of Satan’ is either an ironic response to those claiming a special, esoteric knowledge or a contemptuous response to having a deep knowledge from God as to the circumstances of the End Times. As such, the phrase can represent a refutation of an incipient Gnosticism, or merely contrast the teaching of Jezebel with the radical Christianity of ‘John.’

18. **Hexo** – ‘I might come, be present, appear.’ Throughout the book, there is the repeated idea attached both to God and to his Christ of the one who is and was and is coming. In this context, the coming of Christ, suggesting the Parousia, his second coming, involves a discriminating judgment, a separation of the good from the evil.

19. Vv 26-28 record the promise that, in the previous three letters, followed the frame break: ‘He having an ear, let him hear that which the Spirit is saying to the Churches.’ The promise always begins with the words, ‘To him overcoming, persevering, being victorious...’ Commentators generally agree that the images for the promise in the letter to the Thyatirans is drawn from Ps 2, a Psalm that is classed as a ‘Messianic Psalm’ and is one of the most quoted psalms, either directly or indirectly, in the New Testament. In particular, these verses drawn on Ps 2:8-9, ‘Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash...’

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75 ibid.
them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.’ What is implied in the promise to the victor is a share in Christ’s reign. This was suggested in the Inaugural Vision in Rev 1:6 in which it was stated that Christ ‘has made us a kingdom (royal house.)’

20. Poimainein – ‘to shepherd.’ There is some confusion in translating v. 27. The word, poimainein, literally means ‘to shepherd’ and, by implication ‘to lead,’ ‘to govern.’ A common Old Testament image applied to the Davidic line was ‘shepherd king.’ Harrington argues that, in the LXX poimainein is sometimes used to render a Hebrew word of ‘smash,’ ‘break.’ To bolster his argument, he notes the potter image in Jer 18:1-11, and the potter image in the second half of Ps 2:9. However the word might be used in the LXX, the primary meaning of the word is ‘to shepherd,’ and that does conjure the image of Israel’s shepherd kings. The use of the word in Rev 2:27 appears to create a mixed metaphor – even an oxymoron – and this fits with the author’s intention. ‘To shepherd them with an iron rod,’ can carry the sense of ‘Kill them with kindness,’ ‘rule them with tough love.’ This fits “John’s” radical Christianity and his image of Jesus, who calls for the Churches to love, but to love in a way that makes no compromise with the inherent evils of earthly power.

21. Astera ton proinon – ‘the morning star.’ There is no certainty as to what the ‘morning star’ refers. The situation is complicated by the fact that the phrase, in the Bible, refers both to Jesus and to Satan. In some circles, ‘morning star’ is identified with Venus, whose appearance in the sky precedes the rising of the sun. In Isaiah 14:12, ‘Day Star’ is an image of Babylon, having fallen from the sky. In Revelation, Babylon is a symbol for Rome. A suggestion can be made that, biblically, the ‘sun,’ which rises in the east, is often used as a symbol of ‘wisdom.’ Babylon, to the east, is a supposed seat of wisdom, a wisdom confounded by God’s word. Such associations with the east, the sun, and the star/planet heralding the coming of the sun, may suggest, in the context of the contents of the letter to Thyatira, that the one who overcomes, who is victorious, will be given a wisdom, a knowledge of the depths of God, as opposed to the depths of Satan, a wisdom no earthly power can refute. This, however, remains merely a suggestion.

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76 NRSV translation.
77 Harrington, op. cit.
The Letter to Thyatira is the longest of the seven letters, addressed to the Church in the least known and least important of the seven cities. It is known as a trade center, for its trade-guilds, and for a particular bronze alloy produced in the city. The letter begins with the standard command to write to the ‘angel’ of the city and the attributes of Jesus in the introduction to the letter are matched specifically to the situation of Thyatira. As noted previously, the ‘angel’ of the Church likely refers to the heavenly counterpart to the earthly expression of the Thyatiran Church. The word order ‘the in Thyatira Church’ once again suggests a subordination of the particular context of this Church to the fact that the Church, the community of believers, is being addressed. This subordination opens the way for the message of the letter to be loosed from its particular context and allowed to address all Christians of all times and places.

The attributes of Christ, drawn from the Inaugural Vision, 1:14-15, portray him with flaming red eyes and feet of chalkolibanos – the fine bronze alloy produced in the city. The ‘eyes of fire’ suggest, on the one hand, the fire needed to produce the metal alloy, but more particularly the burning, penetrating vision of Christ that can burn away ‘impurities,’ false teachings and deceits, and penetrate the hearts of men. As Hemer noted, the coinage of the city depicted Apollo holding the hand of the Roman emperor. The coins were cast with the fine bronze produced in Thyatira.78 This suggests a deliberate contrast between Christ and the Roman Emperor, a contrast that suggests that Christ, with feet of chalkolibanos, is superior to, can ‘walk all over’ the emperor.

The content of the message, as is typical, begins with what Christ knows of the community. What he knows of the community becomes much more expansive than in other letters. He knows the ‘works’ of

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78 Colin J. Hemer, op. cit.
the community and those works are specified as its love, service and patient endurance. The notion of Christian service (diakonia) in the New Testament regularly includes care of the poor and vulnerable and contributing to the needs of the Church. What Christ also knows is that the initial works of the community have continued to expand and grow. This sets up an immediate contrast with the Church in Ephesus, a community that had fallen away from its first love. The criticism of the Ephesian Church was that it had become a community that professed its faith in words, but had fallen away from the actions that should flow from such faith. Christ knows that this is not the case in Thyatira.

In v. 20, Christ states his case against the Thyatiran community. They have allowed the presence of, tolerated the teachings and deceits of a certain prophetess characterized as ‘Jezebel.’ This ‘prophetess,’ someone teaching the ways of Christian life, is otherwise unknown and unnamed. The significance of ‘Jezebel’ is apropos to the situation of the Thyatiran Church.

In the Second Book of Kings, Ahab is depicted as one of the most prosperous and powerful kings of the northern kingdom of Israel. Jezebel, his wife, was a princess from Sidon. In the ancient world, marriages between the royal families of two kingdoms were meant to secure alliances between the kingdoms, usually alliances of mutual support and defense. Such alliances were roundly condemned in the Deuteronomic History (Joshua – II Kings), as acts of infidelity, trusting more in human political structures than in the God of Israel. They were also viewed as occasions for Israel to fall into apostasy through syncretistic practices. The story of Ahab and Jezebel is a clear illustration of the danger of such syncretism.

When Jezebel came from Sidon to marry Ahab, she brought with her 450 prophets of the Sidonian god, Baal. This is the same god whom the Moabites honored in the Balaam and Balak story, a particularly Canaanite deity. In considering the letter to Pergamum, it was noted that Baal was honored by a type of imitative magic involving cultic prostitution and the sharing of the goods of the harvest in a feast in which what was sacrificed to the god was also eaten by the worshippers. In the Second Book of Kings, God’s prophet, Elijah, was pitted against Jezebel and her prophets because Israel had fallen into the syncretistic practice of carrying out the cultic rites of Yahweh and, at the same time, practicing the rites of Baal – basically hedging their bets. ‘If Yahweh won’t help us, maybe Baal will.’

That Thyatira’s Jezebel teaches and deceives is significant. Deception is an attribute regularly attributed to Satan in the guise of the dragon or the beast. Her teaching addresses the situation of the trade-guilds in the city. They all had a ‘religious’ aspect, adopting a patron god or goddess. That she promotes porneuein, ‘to practice sexual immorality,’ ‘to fornicate,’ is a direct recollection of the Baal cult of ancient times, however, in Revelation the word is used in its symbolic, metaphorical sense to indicate practicing idolatry. Such idolatry took the form of eating meat sacrificed to idols. This practice would have been in place in the ‘religious’ ceremonies of the trade-guilds and participation would have been mandatory for anyone wanting to practice a particular trade. It was the livelihood of the Thyatiran Christians that was at stake.

In the letter to the Church in Ephesus, the community was berated for its loss of love. That loss of love centered on an ‘orthodoxy’ that condemned those holding and teaching error. The problem in the community, apparently, was equating the ‘evil’ taught with the people teaching it. There was no attempt to win back wayward brothers. In the letter to Thyatira, v. 21 models the proper attitude of Christians in God’s action. He gave ‘Jezebel’ time to change, to repent. God’s ultimate word to his people, even his wayward people, is one of mercy, a call to change, a call to live well. (“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous, but
Unfortunately, ‘Jezebel’ didn’t want to change. This implies a kind of smug satisfaction with her brand of Christianity, a satisfaction based not on what God might ask of her, but on what she was content to do – to live a form of Christianity that made accommodations with the larger world, a form of Christianity that allowed her, and those who followed her teachings to live comfortably. What she does not want to let go of is characterized as ‘sexual immorality,’ which, in Revelation, stands for idolatry. ‘Idolatry’ is basically giving our devotion, our attention and our commitment to something in place of God – wealth, power, comfort, livelihood, leisure, reputation.

Vv. 22-23 now function as an oracle of judgment. Christ will cast her on a bed in tribulation. ‘Bed’ suggests both a sickbed, a bed of suffering, but also the place of ‘fornication,’ ‘idolatry.’ It is a clear case of ‘let the punishment fit the crime.’ Throughout the Bible, the theme that sin is its own punishment, that sin traps us in its own consequences, is prominent. That certainly seems to be the sense suggested here. In many places, the Bible also deals with the truth that all sin has a social dimension, that it impacts others. This idea is carried in the expansion of the oracle of judgment to include those who have followed the false teachings of ‘Jezebel.’ But, like ‘Jezebel’ herself, these members of the Thyatiran Church have an option; the punishment of ‘Jezebel’ can be avoided if they change, turn back, repent. For those who don’t, her ‘children,’ their fate is sealed. The image here recalls the fate of Jezebel and her children, narrated in the Second Book of Kings. Her death, with the dogs licking her blood, was a sign of dishonor, of being seen for what she truly was.

The oracle of judgment ends with a note of warning for ‘all the Churches.’ This broadening of perspective has not appeared in the body of any of the previous letters, only in the frame breaks at the end. Here, for the first time, what is said to an individual Church is explicitly identified as a message for the whole Church. And the message is this: God, in Christ, probes the affections and emotions (kidneys) of people; he examines their hearts (will, intention). In this regard, Hemer makes an appropriate observation: The Church in Thyatira was praised for its good works, works of service that expressed their love; but the trade-guilds also performed good works in the city. For the author of the Book of Revelation, external actions alone do not constitute authentic Christianity. It is the internal dispositions that are searched by God, the reasons for showing acts of love. Here, then, we can recall the words of Jesus in Matthew: ‘For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?’ (Mt 5:46-47)

79 NRSV Translation
80 Colin J. Hemer, op. cit.
81 NRSV translation.
The oracle of judgment takes the meaning of the image of ‘Jezebel’ one step further. The image offered a critique of Christianity in name only, while the actions that should flow from faith in and faithfulness to Jesus Christ are somehow missing. In the oracle, the whole Church and all its members are asked to examine their motives for engaging in actions that, externally, look to be Christian actions. What is at the heart of these actions? Do I engage is social causes and charitable activities in the workplace because such actions are consistent with my faith in Jesus Christ, or to appear to be a leader and further my own career? Do I speak out for the disadvantaged and oppressed to maintain acceptance in my social group, or am I willing, as a follower of Jesus Christ, to stand against my social group when it ridicules or belittles others, when it adopts political and social positions that benefit us at the expense of others who are hurting? What is at the heart of how I choose to live my Christianity?

V. 24 introduces another new element in the letters, an element not encountered in the previous three. Christ, here, addresses ‘the rest,’ the element of the Christian community that has not followed the teaching of ‘Jezebel,’ those whose motives are pure. The notion of ‘the rest’ appears to be a reference to the Old Testament image of ‘the faithful remnant,’ especially as it is presented in Mal 3:16-18, Jer 23:3, Ezra 9:8, Is 10:20, Rom 11:5. The ‘faithful remnant,’ generally is understood to be the faithful Israelites who experienced the calamity of the Babylonian exile, the just punishment for lack of fidelity to God, the faithful members of the community whom God will lead back to Jerusalem and with whom he will re-construct his Chosen People. Within the Book of Revelation, it is likely, in the context of the messages to the Seven Churches, where fidelity is praised and evil is censured, to see a ‘faithful remnant’ in those whose names are written in the Book of Life. These will be the members of the eternal, heavenly kingdom.

Still, the notion of the remnant, ‘the rest,’ is saddening. For Christ to address ‘the rest’ means that there are ‘some’ who fall outside the promise, whose motives are examined and they fall short. This indicates an explicit division in the Church of Thyatira, and by implication in the whole Church. Christ will not put an additional burden on ‘the rest,’ a clear recollection of Acts 15:28. The ‘rest’ are encouraged to continue living their Christianity as they now are, with the right attitude and motives for whatever they do as followers of Jesus Christ. They are encouraged to ‘endure,’ ‘persevere,’ ‘to hold fast.’ In Revelation, this is the characteristic of a Christian, a radical Christian, in the face of the problems encountered in the larger world.

Vv. 24-28 record the promise that, up to this point, have followed the frame break with which all the letters end. Even here, another new element is encountered – there are two aspects to this promise. Christ will share his authority with the remnant, ‘the rest.’ Recalling the words of the Inaugural Vision, ‘he has made us a kingdom,’ they are given authority over ‘the nations,’ the Old Testament for the Gentiles. While so much of the Book of Revelation contrasts the Church with the Roman Empire, the promise to ‘the rest’ in Thyatira – and in the whole Church – recalls what it means to be God’s chosen ones, as expressed in the promises to the fathers: In you all the nations of the earth will find blessing.

The authority promised involves ‘shepherding.’ This was a primary image in the Old Testament to characterize the role of the Davidic monarchy, the Davidic line from whom the Messiah came. There is a mixed metaphor here, however, in the idea of ‘shepherding with an iron rod.’ It appears that this phrase recalls the situation in Ephesus. The Ephesian community was praised for its orthodoxy, an adherence to Christian teacher that allowed for no compromise, but censured for rigidity in their orthodoxy that lacked love. Against those who want to follow the LXX use of ‘shepherding’ to render ‘crushing,’ ‘smashing,’ ‘dictatorial/authoritarian rule,’ I choose to follow the primary meaning of the word and its associations with the ideal for Israel’s kings. The radical Christianity of ‘John’ allows for no
accommodations with worldly power structures, no compromises for the sake of fitting in. But the ‘iron rod’ of radical Christianity is to be exercised through ‘shepherding,’ through compassionate care.

The next image is drawn from Jeremiah, the image of the potter. In the image, God is the potter and we are the clay. He molds us into his people. However, inferior pieces are shattered. Taken together, the images call for an adherence to pure, radical Christianity with no compromises. To form the Church in this way, however, requires shepherding, patient leadership and care. Sadly, some – like ‘Jezebel’ – will not want to be so formed, will be inferior pieces of pottery, unsuitable for use in the Church, vessels that cannot hold the spirit of Christ. These are shattered. Even adopting the stance of radical Christianity proposed by ‘John,’ this loss of brothers and sisters is sad, regrettable, and all too human.

The second part of the promise, the ‘morning star,’ has long puzzled commentators. Whether the ‘morning star’ represents Venus whose appearance in the sky heralds that the sun is soon to rise, or the sun itself, we can’t escape the fact that stars give light, a typical image of Christ; nor can we ignore the seven stars, representing the angels/spirits of the Seven Churches that Christ holds in his hand in the Inaugural Vision. The sun rises in the East, and traditionally, in Biblical imagery, the east is understood as the seat of wisdom. With all this in mind, it can at least be suggested, especially considering Solomon’s prayer (I Kgs 3:6-9), in which asks for wisdom and discernment to rule God’s people well, that the ‘morning star’ is Christ’s gift to the Church to rule, to shepherd will and with wisdom. With this, the frame break comes in v 29, loosening the letter from its particular context and addressing its content to all Christians of all ages.

In the end, we are left with the image of a Church divided, divided along lines of interior intentions and motivations. And we are left with a promise and a commission to overcome those differences, to correct wayward brothers and sisters, and bring the truth and promise of ‘radical’ Christianity to all the nations the world. And as daunting as this might be, we are promised a wisdom by Christ to do this well, to do what he asks with his spirit and light. What divisions exist in our local community? What divisions exist within the whole Church? What can we do about these situations? How can we, by enduring, overcoming, be shepherds for the wayward and lost? How can we do this without compromise? How do we know if we belong to ‘some’ or ‘the rest?’
3:1 And to the angel of the church in Sardis (of the church in Sardis) write: These things says the one holding the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

"I have known of your works, that you have a reputation (name), that you are alive and (yet) dead are you. 2 Become watchful and strengthen those remaining which (who) are about to die, for not have I found your works to be fulfilled in the sight of my God (up to God’s standards). 3 Remember, therefore, in what way you have received and you heard and keep watch and turn back (repent); if, therefore, you should not keep watch, (then) I will come (appear) as a thief and surely not would you know (at) what hour I will come upon you. 4 But you have some names (people of repute) in Sardis who have not soiled their garments and they will walk about with me in white because worthy are they. 5 He being victorious thus will clothe himself in white garments and surely not will I wipe out his name from the book of life and I will confess (acknowledge) his name before my Father and before his angels (messengers).

6 He having an ear, let him that which the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

The City of Sardis

Introduction
Sardis was a city strangely dominated by its illustrious and proverbial past. The heart of the Roman city occupied a terrace north of the Acropolis, and here may be seen the complex which includes the gymnasium and the recently excavated synagogue. The wealth of early Sardis is abundantly recorded. Like neighboring Philadelphia, Sardis suffered a catastrophic earthquake in 17 AD. It is likely that some of the imagery of Revelation may be related to local memory of this catastrophe (see 6:14-16, 8:8, 11:13, and 16:18-20). Only ten years after the disaster, Sardis competed with ten other Asian cities for the honor of obtaining an imperial temple.

Jews and Pagans in Sardis
Sardis was a principal, and perhaps very early, center of the Jewish Diaspora. Commercial expansion may have induced some voluntary dispersion of Jews even before the kings of Assyria and Babylonia initiated compulsory transplantation of populations. It seems inherently probably that the character of Sardis as a western metropolis and a great center of trade made it exceptionally attractive to Jewish settlement.

Numerous details tend to confirm and illustrate an impression that Jews and Christians in this city had long sought a modus vivendi by accommodation to their pagan surroundings. We cannot tell how far the earliest Christians of Sardis were converts from Judaism, but we infer from Rev 3:4 that the majority had ‘soiled their garments,’ apparently by some accommodation to their environment.

The Text of the Letter
It is remarkable that the stern warnings of this letter are almost unique in Rev 2-3 in being parallel with words ascribed to Jesus in the Gospel tradition. There may be a significant connection with the prophecy of Obadiah against Edom, whose capital was, like Sardis, a rock city of supposed impregnability.

A significant phrase in the letter is, “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain...; for I have not found your works perfect before God” (Rev 3:2). The implication is that the works of the Christian community might pass

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82 These notes are a summary of Colin J. Hemer’s The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting, ch. 7.
human scrutiny, but not God’s. Almost all commentators have recognized local allusion in this and the following
verse to the two famous occasions when the citadel of Sardis had fallen through lack of vigilance. A call to
repentance is included in all the letters except those to Smyrna and Philadelphia: only, however, at Ephesus and
Sardis is it consequent upon a call to remembrance. In the case of Sardis, there is no hint of outward persecution
or inner heresy. The distinctive character of the church’s faith had rather been so far lost in accommodation to
society that it aroused no opposition. Spiritual poverty and complacency were leading the church into moral error.
Belief in the imminent Parousia of Christ had evidently also waned.

Conclusions

1. Sardis was a city whose history and legend had become proverbial. The reasonableness of discerning
   allusion to it in the letter may be illustrated from innumerable ancient literary parallels. Possible
   reflections of it are also contained in Jewish tradition. (Sardis, a wealthy, fortified city that fell from lack
   of vigilance).
2. It was a classic story of pride before a fall, of misplaced trust in riches and of lack of vigilance.
3. The earthquake of 17 AD was a disaster of almost unparalleled magnitude. Several passages in
   Revelation, which are otherwise suggestive of the background of Sardis, may also reflect local memory of
   these seismic phenomena.
4. In the New Testament times, the political and military importance of Sardis had disappeared, but it
   recovered from disaster, competed for the honor of an imperial temple, and continued to have some
   commercial prominence.
5. There are indications that a strong Jewish presence was established there unusually early. The Jews may
   have strengthened their position through a long-standing accommodation to surrounding pagan culture.
   There is no evidence known of specifically anti-Semitic tensions, as in other cities.
6. The literary relationships of the present letter are peculiar. The Old Testament background is less
   prominent, but there are remarkable references to words attributed to Jesus in the Synoptic tradition.
   There are striking parallels with the Ephesian letter and situational links with the later chapters of
   Revelation.

Textual Notes

1. The beginning of the letter to Sardis seems to create an equivalence between the seven spirits (1:4) that
   are before the throne of God and the seven stars (1:16) that Christ holds in his hand. This reinforces the
   identification of the ‘angels’ of the Churches with their ‘spirits,’ their heavenly counterparts. For the first
   time in the letters, there is a repetition of an attribute of Christ in the introduction to a latter, but this is a
   repetition with an expansion. Because of the repetition, the letter is linked to the first, 2:1, and to the
   fourth, 2:28, affirming an intentional unity among the letters.
2. Erga – works. Five of the seven letters begin with the statement that Christ knows the ‘works’ of the
   Church being addressed. In the letter to the Smyrnians, he knows their condition, their tribulation and
   poverty; and in the letter to Pergamum he knows their situation, where they dwell. In letters where
   Christ knows the works of the Church, only here and in the
   letter to Laodicea are the works of the
   community found to be lacking.
3. Onoma – name. The word is used in the sense of ‘to make a name for oneself.’ The implication is that the
   Church has a ‘reputation,’ is well regarded, but on what level?
4. Zes kai necros el – ‘being alive yet dead are you.’ Note the contrasts with 1:18 of the Inaugural Vision,
   where Christ identifies himself as the one who died and is alive for all ages, and with the introduction to
   the letter to Smyrna, 2:8. The implication is that the works of the Church in Sardis, no matter how well
   they are regarded in the earthly realm, are taking them in the wrong direction – not to life, but to death.
5. Gregoron – imperative: ‘be watchful,’ ‘observant.’ Hemer suggests that the social-historical background
   of Sardis looms large in this command. In the Province of Asia, Sardis had a stellar reputation, especially
   in the Greek period. This, despite the fact that a highly defensible city, high on a hill, was defeated twice
   by surprise attacks. It was defeated through lack of vigilance, by Cyrus in 596 B.C., and by Antiochus the
Great in 218 B.C. 83 Harrington has observed, with Hemer, that a long-established Jewish community in Sardis had apparently formed a pattern of accommodation with the surrounding culture, an accommodation that was, apparently practiced by Christians. As such there was little conflict among the various groups in the city. He concludes that this accounts for the paucity of Jewish/Old Testament allusions in this letter and the preponderance of allusions to sayings of Jesus Christ in the Synoptic tradition. 84 Such allusions begin with the opening command to vigilance (Mk 13:33, 35; Mt 24:42, 25:13; Lk 21:36).

6. Sterison ta loipa – ‘strengthen that which is left, remains’ The imperatives, ‘be vigilant’ and ‘strengthen’ indicate the urgency of the call of Christ for this community to change how they are living. Loipos, in the letter to Thyatira, referred to a ‘faithful remnant,’ a segment of the community that was living Christianity well. In stark contrast, loipa here refers to the segment of the works of the community that remain in conformity with the Christian principles put forward by ‘John.’ The call is to make these firm before all is lost. Behind this idea is the Gospel observation that ‘by their fruits – by their works, you shall know them.’ (Mt 7:15-20). Harrington points out that a number of New Testament references suggest the idea expressed here that the ‘death’ of good works, the ‘death’ of the community is a metaphor for the loss of ‘spiritual life’ by sin. He cites a number of references: Lk 15:24; Jn 5:25; Rom 6:13, 13:11; I Thess 5:6; and Eph 5:14. 85

7. Heureka – ‘I have found.’ Recall 3:23 in the letter to Thyatira. It is God who searches the inner dispositions of man. That function is here taken on by Christ who finds that the works of the community of Sardis ‘are not fulfilled, complete, perfect in the eyes of God.’ Rogers and Rogers suggest that the phrase indicates that the works of the Church do not measure up to God’s standards. 86 This is, according to Harrington, a sweeping indictment of the state of the Church in Sardis. 87

8. Mnemoneu… terei… metanoeson… - The urgency of the letter is heightened by three rapid imperatives in v. 3: ‘remember… keep, observe… change, turn back, repent.’ As has been noted, the general biblical sense of ‘remember’ is ‘to make present, real, active.’ The Sardians (sardines?) are enjoined to make real and active what they have received and heard. This is not what they have done or earned, but what they have received. In this light, in considering the ‘works’ of the Church, Mt 10:8 appears pertinent: ‘You received without payment, give without payment.’ 88 Terei is the letter’s second call to vigilance. The call to observance, vigilance recalls again the twin defeats of Sardis due to lack of vigilance. In the light of the later phrase, ean oun me gregoreses hexo hos kleptes – ‘therefore if you do not keep watch, I will come as a thief,’ a comparison is being made between the situation of Sardis and the warnings issued by Jesus in the Synoptic tradition about the sudden and unknown coming of the Son of Man. (see Mt 24:32-44; I Thess 5:2; II Pt 3:10; Rev 16:15). In a similar way, the idea expressed here recalls the titles or attributes of Jesus used throughout the book: he who is and who was and is coming. And yet, there is hope, hope that the community can turn things around, can repent, can be vigilant and ready for the coming of the Lord – metanoeson.

It is also significant that the imperatives are expressed in the singular. These are not commands issued to a select group of unfaithful Christians within the Church, but to the collective body of the Church – everyone, the whole Church.

9. Onomata – names. The use of the word picks up on its use in v. 1. Harrington suggests that a ‘list of names’ could have existed in Sardis to record those with citizenship. This contrasts with those whose names are written in the Book of Life (3:5). 89 While loipos was used in the letter to Thyatira to contrast ‘some’ who followed the teaching of ‘Jezebel’ and ‘the rest,’ possibly the majority, who did not, the word was used in this letter to suggest that ‘the rest’ of the good works of the Church were in danger of dying...
out, and the implication was that ‘the rest’ was a definite minority of the works. The adjective oliga, ‘few,’ removes all ambiguity. There are but a few within the community who live their Christianity and act in ways that are ‘up to God’s standards, pleasing in his eyes.’ These are those who have a name, a good reputation, not in the eyes of the surrounding culture, but in the eyes of God.

10. Ouk emalynan ta himatia auton – ‘they have not soiled their garments.’ Rogers and Rogers note that the phrase recalls an inscription found in the area announcing that soiled garments disqualified the worshiper and dishonored the god. It is also often noted that since the manufacture and dying of woolen goods was a principle trade in Sardis, an allusion to defiled garments would be immediately recognized. By contrast, the image here suggests not that those with unsoiled garments are fit to enter the temples of the gods and participate in pagan rites, but that they will walk with Christ, recalling the image of the heavenly realms with Christ walking among the seven lampstands. The image also serves to anticipate later references to the saints/holy ones who are characteristically clothed in white robes as they offer worship around the throne of God. In another anticipatory move, the few of good repute in the Church of Sardis are counted as ‘worthy’ (axioi). This associates them intimately with Christ who will be described as the Lamb worthy of opening the seals on the scrolls.

90 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
Commentary

The letter to Sardis begins in the usual fashion, with the command to write to the ‘angel’ of the Church of Sardis. As usual, by word order, the idea of the particular place as we have seen, ‘angel’ refers to the spirit of the Church, the heavenly counterpart of the earthly community. As is common, the content of the letter is announced with the somewhat archaic formula "tade legei," a phrase that is regularly used to translate ‘thus says the Lord’ in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. The titles or attributes of Christ are specified as ‘the one holding the seven spirits of God (1:4) and the seven stars (1:16).’ For the first time, an attribute of Christ is repeated, ‘holding the seven stars,’ (2:1) This, however, is repetition with expansion, further suggesting the identification of the ‘angels’ of the Churches, symbolized by the stars, and the ‘spirits,’ the heavenly counterpart of the Churches who are before the throne of God.

There is, then, a linking of this letter with all that has gone before, recalling the Letter to Ephesus in which the attribute of Christ as ‘the one holding the seven stars’ was first used, and the promise of the ‘morning star’ to be given to the faithful ‘rest’ in Thyatira (2:28). These resonances within the text make it clear to the reader that all the letters are inter-related, that they all address the whole Church, then and now.

At this point, the familiar pattern of the letters breaks down. In all the letters, Christ begins to address the particular Church with, “I know...” In five of the letters, the object of Christ’s knowledge is the ‘works’ of the Church. In the letter to Smyrna is knows the condition of the Church, its tribulation and poverty. In the letter to Pergamum, he knows where they live, in the city where the Imperial Cult is particularly dominant. Here, however, for the first time, what Christ knows of the Church is not singled out for praise or, at least, understanding of its difficulties. In the letter to Sardis, and again in the letter to Laodicea, the works of the Church are found to be lacking.
Christ knows the works of Sardis, and that they have a reputation (name.) This phrase may provide one of the few allusions to the Old Testament in the letter. In the story of the Tower of Babel, many people gathered, built a city and constructed a tower to reach the heavens. Their purpose was ‘to make a name for themselves,’ to achieve self-sufficiency. Their puny effort was, to say the least, pretentious. ‘Pretentious’ is a fitting description for the cultural climate in Sardis. It was a notable city in Asia Minor, praised for its commerce, its wealth and its beauty. And yet, for all its pretentions, it was twice conquered for lack of vigilance and ravaged by an earthquake in 17 AD. As opposed to other cities in the Province, there was no sharp distinction among the various elements of the population — Gentiles, Jews, and Christians. There was a climate of blending and accommodation that created a false sense of value that led to a ‘civil’ reputation at the expense of faithfulness to God — a situation that ‘John,’ with his radical form of Christianity, could not tolerate. It was a city, much like Babel, that believed, falsely, in its own self-sufficiency.

In the first four letters, after an initial statement of the good that Christ has observed in the community, even in those communities where the general tenor of the message is one of censure, there comes the statement, ‘But I hold against you…’ This associates the letters with the ‘prophetic lawsuit’ common in Israelite prophecy. In a typical fashion, the ‘indictment’ is followed by oracles of judgment and then oracles of salvation. Throughout the letters, however, the ‘judgment’ is mitigated and made conditional — ‘unless you change/repent.’

With the letter to Sardis, the ‘indictment’ disappears. What Christ has observed is, in itself the ‘indictment.’ The community of Sardis is alive, yet it is dead. This is a damning condemnation. In the Inaugural Vision (1:18), Christ identifies himself as the one who was dead and is now alive; this is the attribute of Christ cited in the letter to the Smyrnians (2:8). What is established, in no uncertain terms, is a contrast between the community of Sardis and Christ. The Church of Sardis is NOT of Christ. Its form of Christianity is lifeless.

In each letter, ‘John’ is commanded to write to ‘the in (name the city) church.’ The argument developed in this study of Revelation holds that this, somewhat unusual, word order serves to subordinate the city, subordinate citizenship or life in the city, to the primary identity of Christians as members of the Church. What Christ observes about the community in Sardis, combined with what is known of the city’s social-historical-cultural situation, indicates that in Sardis, this is not the case. Accommodation with the surrounding culture has taken hold so strongly that there is nothing distinctive about being a Christian within the city. In our day, we might be tempted to look at ‘Sunday Catholics,’ those who religiously attend Sunday Mass, but never live their faith in service of the Church and wider community on the model of Jesus Christ. It is easy to point a finger and judge them to be lifeless Christians. The problem with this approach is that we let ourselves off the hook. Christ, in this letter, is not condemning some in the community who are Catholic/Christian in name only, but the lifeless state of the whole local Church. Such a Church, in the present state of the world, would jump on the band wagon to support popular causes, but would not allow that the Church has anything to say about other, ‘political’ issues — the death penalty, acceptance and care for refugees, prison reform, racial discrimination and division. The letter to Sardis asks us to look at our parishes and dioceses and ask: Are we a force in our surrounding culture? Do we, as followers of Jesus Christ, bring his good news to others? Do we offer his love and compassion and forgiveness, his openness and understanding to others, inviting them to share what is distinct about Catholicism/Christianity? Or are we a community comfortable unto ourselves, accommodating ourselves to the ‘realities’ of our world and making our Christianity a ‘private matter’? Do we ‘have a good reputation’ in the context of our cultural reality at the expense of not making waves, not challenging ourselves and others to live the model of Jesus Christ, even when it’s uncomfortable?
There is a pronounced sense of urgency expressed in the letter to Sardis. This urgency is carried by five imperatives in succession: be vigilant... strengthen... remember... keep/observe... change/repent. The string of five imperatives appears to be another allusion to Genesis.

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion... (Gn 1:27-28)\(^{91}\)

In Genesis, humanity is created in the image of God, but the Church in Sardis appears as the exact opposite of the image of Christ. Humanity was commanded to be fruitful – produce good works, produce life – but the works of this community are lifeless. In the Resurrection appearances in the Gospels, Jesus’ disciples are commanded to announce the good news to all the earth, just as humanity is commanded to fill the earth, but the Church in Sardis is complacent, self-satisfied, offering nothing distinctive to their local community or to the broader world. At the dawn of creation, humanity is commanded to subdue the world and have dominion over it. In the letter to Thyatira, the victorious, the remnant, is promised authority over the nations, to shepherd them with an iron rod – to subdue them, but to shepherd them, care for them, lead them along. In Sardis, it appears that there are no victors; there is no challenge to the prevailing culture.

The first imperative, be vigilant, situates the Church in the context of its cultural environment in order to establish a contrast. Sardis, for all its pretensions to being a great city, was twice conquered due to lack of vigilance. Even now it is a city under Roman domination. But the call to vigilance is also reminiscent of the Gospel commands of Jesus to his followers (note Mk 13:33, 35; Mt 24:42, 25:13; Lk 21:36). Among the earliest Christians, the command to vigilance reflects a belief in the imminent Parousia, the second Coming of Christ. By the late first century, it is likely that the Church had come to see that the Parousia was not imminent, but still unknown. The call to vigilance was coming to be seen as a ‘wake up’ call, a call to be attentive to the opportunities Christians have to witness to Christ. The sense of urgency is still there in the realization that there are a limited number of opportunities, opportunities that, once missed, are gone forever.

The command to vigilance is the same today as it was for the Church of Sardis. What opportunities do we have, as individuals and as a Church community, to witness to Jesus Christ, to live as Christ did, calling the world around him to a better way of life, a Godly way of life? What opportunities have we missed? At what cost?

In the radical Christianity of the Book of Revelation, faith and works are intimately connected. This echoes the words of the Letter of James:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace: keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (Jas 2:14-17)\(^{92}\)

Both the Letter of James and the Book of Revelation attempt to counteract a misrepresentation of the Pauline doctrine of freedom from the law. Paul, himself does not hold that a profession of faith, by

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\(^{91}\) NRSV translation

\(^{92}\) NRSV translation
itself, is sufficient for Christian life. Rather, he always notes that real faith conforms us to God and leads to actions in line with God’s will for all people. (see Rom 12).

The second imperative, strengthen, refers to the works of the community. The adjective, loipa – ‘the rest,’ was used in the letter to Thyatira to indicate a ‘faithful remnant,’ perhaps the majority of the Church who are contrasted with ‘some’ who follow false teachings. Here, Christ offers the observation that the works of the community do not measure up to God’s standards, so ‘the rest’ implies some few good words of the Church. The Church in Sardis is in danger of losing these; they are dying out, they are being absorbed into the patterns of the surrounding culture. The pattern of accommodation is almost complete.

The next three imperatives, if followed, offer a remedy for the lifeless nature of the Church: Remember... keep/observe... change/repent. ‘Remember’ always means ‘make present/real/active again.’ The community is called to remember the foundation of their faith, their Christian life – what they received and heard. They are being called to return to their first fervor in much the same way that the Ephesian Church was admonished to return to its ‘first love.’ More particularly, they are called to remember the manner in which they received and heard, indicating a way of life to which their current lifestyle fails to comply.

‘Keep/observe’ can have the sense of ‘be watchful;’ but more to the point it carries the idea of ‘to hold fast to,’ ‘to practice.’ It is a command to bring their actions into line with what the community professes that it believes. Even more, it is a command to bring their faith and the actions that flow from it into accord with the Gospel that they had first heard and received. The Church is commanded to be distinctive within its cultural environment, to be a voice and a force for Jesus Christ and what he demands of his followers.

The final command, change/turn back/repent, carries the sense of ‘Be converted and live.’ This is the regular meaning of the Hebrew shub, common in the Deuteronomic history and in the writings of Israel’s prophets, and this sense is mirrored in the way the New Testament uses metanoia. It is the very life of the Church community in Sardis that is at stake. The Church in Sardis may be a community, even a closely knit community, but has nearly lost it’s identity as a Christian community.

The image of the Church in Sardis has been presented as the polar opposite of the image of Christ – alive, but dead. Christ has offered a remedy for the lifelessness of the community, but it is up to the Church to apply that remedy, to be watchful... to strengthen their works... to remember – make real and active again their first fervor... to hold fast to the Gospel they have received and heard... to be converted and live. It is significant that the imperatives are all singular; Christ is not addressing individuals with a warning, but the collective body of the Church. The problems dealt with in this letter are systemic, all permeating. In words recalling Mt 24:43-44, Christ announces that, if the Church does not change, he will come in judgment like a thief in the night, at an hour least expected. Once again, the Church is situated in its historical-social milieu and reminded that the glorious, prosperous, wealthy city has fallen twice because of lack of vigilance, was defeated by stealth and the unexpected. Will the Church, a community priding itself on its reputation and the reputation of its city fare any better? Will lack of vigilance catch the Church unawares and exclude its ‘citizens’ from membership in Christ?

In the typical fashion of Israel’s writing prophets, what Christ says to the Church in Sardis in vv. 1b-3 has the function of an oracle of judgment. As is typical in prophetic literature, the oracles of judgment are followed by oracles of salvation – judgment is for the purpose of correcting wrongs, getting things back
to the way they should be for God’s people. Vv. 4-5 function as a kind of oracle of salvation. In the letter to Thyatira a distinction was made between ‘some’ and ‘the rest.’ It can even be suggested that ‘the rest’ is the majority of the community, a ‘faithful remnant.’ In the letter to Sardis, the whole community, under Christ’s scrutiny, has fallen short of authentic Christianity. Still, there are a ‘few’ individuals who continue to hold to a ‘lively’ faith – *oliga onomata*, ‘a few names.’

There is a broad, chiastic (concentric) structure deployed in the letter:

A  I have known your works and that you have a reputation/name – *onoma*  
B  Be vigilant – *gregoron*  
B’ unless you are vigilant – *gregoreses*  
A’ you have some names (people of good repute) – *onomata*

The structure clearly contrasts the Church community with a few of its members. It is to be supposed that Sardis would maintain a list of its citizens, the ‘names’ of those in good standing in the city. But this is contrasted with the ‘few names’ that are written in the Book of Life. These are the members of the community who ‘have not soiled their garments.’ It can be noted that, in the pagan temples of Sardis, and the other cities of Asia, those with soiled garments were excluded from participation in temple rites. But it can also be noted that Sardis was a center of textile production and the reference implies that those who have a ‘name,’ those in good standing in the eyes of God are the ones who have not immersed themselves in the cultural and social life of the city, those who retain the true spirit of Christ.

Harrington notes that for the first time, people are singled out for blessedness who are not identified as ‘the victors.’ The significance of this appears to be that these few are identified as particular people, in a particular time and place. The promises to the victorious, to those who overcome, have generally been the means by which the messages to the Seven Churches have been loosened from their particular contexts and made to address all Christians. Such a statement will follow in v. 5. The implication of the promise in v. 4, that those who have not succumbed to the general failure of their Church will walk about with Christ (recall the Inaugural Vision with Christ walking among the lampstands that represent the Seven Churches, 1:13), is that there is hope for individuals in any community, even if that community is spiritually lifeless. If the entire community fails to meet the image of Christ (alive, but dead), these few are ‘worthy,’ a particular attribute of Christ, the Lamb, in the visions of Revelation (e.g., ‘Worthy is the lamb having been slaughtered to receive the power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.’ – Rev 5:12). Note, too, the similarity of what is being expressed here about good individuals with Ezek 18:21-24.

But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall die.

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93 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
94 NRSV translation
As was the case in the letter to Thyatira, the promise to the victorious comes before the frame break, which intrudes the narrator’s voice with a call to hear and heed this message to Sardis. The significance of this shift is that the promise that is read in a generalized way is now clearly situated in the Words of Jesus Christ, not those if the narrator of the book. The ‘victor’ is now understood to be, like the few in Sardis, those who can stand against a lifeless Church, overcome it’s lifelessness and its accommodation with its social/cultural context, those who are readily identifiable as followers of Jesus Christ. These will be clothed in white garments, a symbol of holiness (the agios, the holy ones, saints, are so dressed), whose names will not be removed from the Book of Life – a danger for those who are not vigilant, who do not overcome.

The third element of the promise, ‘I will confess his name before my father and before his angels,’ is a clear allusion to the Gospel saying of Jesus, ‘Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.’ (Mt 10:32-33, see also Lk 12:8)

The letter closes with the narrator’s call to hear and heed.

The letter to the Church in Sardis asks followers of Jesus Christ to examine their communities, their parishes and dioceses, and to ask, “Are there elements of lifelessness here? Does my community make Jesus Christ available to the world? Does my community obscure the presence of Christ in its midst by over emphasizing the values of the world – its politics, its social and cultural structures? Do I contribute to a lifeless spirit in my Church? If I see myself as one of the ‘few,’ is this arrogance? Am I witnessing to Christ, or creating a name for myself? Am I furthering division and contributing to lifelessness.

The letter to Sardis, as brief as it is, presents a challenging message. What is at the heart of my Christian life? At the heart of the life of my community? Will we measure up to God’s standards?

95 NRSV translation
Philadelphia 3:7-13

7 And to the messenger (angel) of the in Philadelphia church (the church in Philadelphia) write: These things says the holy one, the true one, he having the key of David, he opening and no one will shut and shutting and no one will open.

8 I have known your works. Behold, I have placed before you a door having been opened which no one is able to shut it, for little power do you have, but (and yet) you observed my word and did not deny my name. 9 Behold I am placing (giving) outside (out of) the synagogue of Satan those (or partitive gen = some of those) saying (declaring) themselves to be Jews and they are not, but they lie. Behold I will make them (cause them) so that they will appear (be present) and worship before your feet so that they should know that I loved you. 10 Because you have kept the word of patient endurance of me (my word of patient endurance), I also will keep (guard) you from the hour of trial being about to happen upon the whole inhabited world to try (test) those dwelling upon the world (earth). 11 I am coming quickly. Hold fast to what you have so that no one might take your crown. 12 The one being victorious (overcoming), I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God and surely not will he go forth outside anymore and I will write upon him the name of my God and the name of the new city of my God, Jerusalem, that coming down out of the heaven from my God, and my new name.

13 He having an ear, let him hear that which the Spirit is saying to the churches.

The City of Philadelphia

Introduction
Philadelphia was the most recently established of the seven cities. It has been called a ‘Missionary City.’ The purpose of its foundation was an attempt to educate the peoples of the newly annexed Lydia and Phrygia in Greek culture and loyalty to a Hellenized monarchy, while also guarding an important travel route. A significant feature of the city was the remarkable fertility of its territory, its volcanic soil being particularly suitable for vines.

First Century Philadelphia
The great earthquake of 17 AD evidently had so profound an effect upon Philadelphia that the context of the apocalyptic letter must be closely related to it. In the aftermath, the city assumed an imperial name and honored Germanicus with a posthumous cult. It takes the name ‘Neocaesarea’ and one of its magistrates was described as a priest of Germanicus. The concept of Philadelphia as a new city with a new name to honor the divine emperor whose patronage had restored its fortunes has been related to Rev 3:12.

In 92 AD, Domitian issued an edict requiring at least half the vineyards in the provinces to be cut down and no new ones planted, an act bitterly unpopular in Asia and not rigorously enforced everywhere. The edict is regarded as a drastic means of attempting to encourage corn production at the expense of the vines in response to famine conditions and a shortage of corn in the province of Asia at that time. Against this background, the character of Christ stands in implied contrast with that of the imperial god. He will never betray a church which has continued.

96 These notes are a summary of Colin J. Hemer’s The Letters to the Seven Churchs of Asia in Their Local Setting, ch. 8.
to confess his name when it is weak and rejected. His name will permanently characterize them and be a pledge of their relationship with God.

The presence of Judaistic influence, attested by the reference to the ‘synagogue of Satan’ (Rev 3:9), is likely to reflect a similarity of background parallel to the situation in Smyrna.

The Text of the Letter

The clearest examples of direct reference to the Old Testament in the letter are at 3:7, taken from Isa 22:22, and in 3:9, taken from Isa 60:14. The writer was meditating closely upon the contexts of at least two of the passages he cites (Isa 60:10-12 and Ez 48:30-35, and perhaps also Isa 22:22-25). In the first case there are points of contact both with Rev 3:7-13 and with Rev 21:22-26. The writer is apparently applying Isa 60 creatively to the situation of the church in Philadelphia. The faithfulness to Christ may be set against the suggested background of disillusion with imperial patronage.

3:8 presents an evaluation of the church’s condition. It had only little strength: this is surely the implication of mikran. The church was rejected and vulnerable even within a weak and impoverished community. The commendation, ‘And yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name,’ it is suggested, refers to the contemporary problem of the church, and the context suggests that the trial was brought upon by its Jewish enemies.

Some phrases of the letter were locally applied and were influential on the subsequent history of the Philadelphian church. In v. 11, the language derives point from the precariousness of life in a community so liable to ruin from natural disaster or economic change. So too enemies of the Christians might seek to disqualify them, but the victory was theirs by right if they only maintained their witness and were not now tempted to turn aside from the rigors of their appointed course.

Conclusions

1. The proverbial ‘brotherly love’ of Eumenes and Attalus was a formative feature of local tradition of a city which prided itself on a corresponding loyalty. As such, in Roman times, Philadelphia prided itself on loyalty to Rome and to the imperial cult.
2. There is no early record of the presence of a community of Jews in Philadelphia. The phrase ‘synagogue of Satan,’ as at Smyrna, is taken to refer to such a body of ethnic Jews who rejected the claim of Christians to be the spiritual Israel.
Textual Notes

1. Agios – ‘the holy one.’ Typically in Revelation, this term refers to the faithful followers of Christ, the ‘saints.’ Harrington states that it is likely here that the title has Is 40:25 in mind (‘To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal?’ says the Holy One.)97 He sees in it, explicitly, a title for God.98 Note, here, the recurring theme in Leviticus: “Be holy, for the Lord, your God, is Holy.”

2. Alithinos – ‘true,’ ‘genuine’ (It’s the real thing!). Harrington notes that the Hebrew equivalent in the Old Testament has the sense of ‘trustworthy.’99 We can also note the regular occurrence of the phrase hesed we ’emet throughout the Old Testament. Hesed is rendered ‘loving kindness,’ ‘faithfulness/fidelity,’ ‘covenant love.’ ’Emet means ‘truth.’ Individually and in combination hesed and ’emet are Old Testament attributes of God. When combined, the phrase is often considered a hendiadys and rendered ‘unflinching faithfulness,’ ‘trustworthy commitment in love.’ Elsewhere, in Israel’s Wisdom Tradition, ‘truth’ and ‘falsehood’ are contrasted with ‘wise’ and ‘foolish,’ ‘righteous’ and ‘dastardly,’ and ultimately ‘Godly’ and ‘ungodly.’ The Wisdom allusion is particularly apropos to the thought patterns of Revelation since both Wisdom and apocalyptic examine reality from a dualistic perspective.

3. Klein dauid – key of David. Rogers and Rogers state that the phrase is a metaphor indicating complete control over the royal household.100 Harrington holds that Christ holding the ‘Key of David’ is particularly relevant to the relationship of the Church in Philadelphia with the local Jewish community. In Is 22:22, the key entrusted to the steward Eliakim signified his control of the royal household. Here it symbolizes the authority of the risen Christ, set over the house of God (Eph 1:22, Heb 3:6), exercising all authority in heaven and on earth (Mt 28:18) and over death and Hades (Rev 1:18). The title lends force to the promise of v. 8.101 Hemer notes that the promise of v. 8 would have been profoundly relevant to Christians faced with expulsion from the synagogue.102

4. Idou – ‘behold.’ This expression is used three times in vv. 8-9. It carries the sense of surprise, of a promise completely at odds with what can be expected in the life and situation of the Philadelphian Church.

5. Anoigo… kleio… The image of the Christ as the one who opens and no one can lock, who locks and no one can open draws on an ancient symbol of authority.103 Harrington states that the image of an open door would have been meaningful for Christians faced with expulsion from the synagogue; their present, unjust rejection would be redressed in the ‘future kingdom.’104 The image can also be compared to its Pauline use – an opportunity for living the faith, especially in missionary/evangelization efforts (I Cor 16:9, II Cor 2:12, Col 4:3). Note how this use of the image speaks to what Hemer identifies as the purpose for the founding of the City of Philadelphia – to indoctrinate people in the ways of the Hellenized world and foster loyalty to Greek kings.105

6. Hoti mikran exeis dynamin – ‘because you have little power.’ Note, here, Paul’s statement that God chooses the weak to confound the strong (I Cor 1:27). Note also the use of the ‘Suffering Servant’ image of Isaiah and its use in the Synoptic Gospels to elucidate an understanding of Jesus and who he is for us. Finally, the Cross of Christ, apparently a sign of defeat and degradation, is consistently portrayed as the means of victory for the followers of Christ. In Revelation, the Cross is the decisive moment that establishes God Kingdom and wins redemption for the faithful.

7. Synagogue tou Satana – ‘synagogue of Satan.’ As in the letter to the Church in Smyrna (2:9), the phrase is indicative of hostilities between Jews and Christians in the city. While it is possible that the conflict may

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97 NRSV translation.
98 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
99 Ibid.
100 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
101 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
102 Colin J. Hemer, op. cit.
103 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
104 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
105 Colin J. Hemer, op. cit.
turn on Jewish Christians being expelled from the synagogue in Philadelphia, it seems more likely that such separation had already happened with the Council of Jamnia in 70 AD. It is far more likely that the conflict centered on the Jewish rejection of the Christian claim to be the true ‘Israel,’ the true people of God. While ‘doctrinal,’ the conflict was most likely centered on the political and economic status of the rival groups.

8. *Proskynesousin* – bend the knee, bow/fall before, worship. The primary meaning of the word is ‘to bend the knee.’ It describes an action of respect, honor, even submission. ‘To bend the knee’ before God implies worship, absolute submission. What is likely envisioned here and in the mind of the author, is the reversal of fortunes rehearsed in Second Isaiah, Isaiah of the Babylonian exile. Is 45:14; 49:23; and 60:14 all imagine ‘foreign powers,’ oppressors, coming and bowing down before the people of Israel. When that happens, then they will know that the God of Israel is the only God and the he loves his people. In this context, the Christians will be vindicated over the Jews. Still, it is significant that the image is drawn from Isaiah, a product of a distinctly Jerusalem theology, a theology that said that God’s promises were forever, that, even by sin, Israel could never lose God’s love. But more to the point, this Jerusalem theology did not merely celebrate God’s love for his people – in this case, the followers of Jesus Christ, it demanded that this people, so loved, would become a means of blessing for all others, for inviting all the nations of the earth to ‘Come to God’s mountain,’ to experience and share the love of our God. It is possible to read this promise eschatologically – this reversal of fortunes is an End Time hope; it is also possible to see it as something present Christians can work towards – by living the radical Christianity promoted by ‘John.’

9. *Hoti eteresas ton logon tes hypomones mou* – ‘because you have kept/observed the word of my patient endurance... Harrington notes that it is significant that *mou* (‘of me,’ ‘my’) modifies *hypomones* ‘patient endurance.’ *Logos* literally means ‘word,’ but by extension it means what is spoken, what has been handed on. In this case, what has been handed on is the example of the ‘patient endurance’ of Jesus Christ. While ‘patient endurance’ is certainly intended to call to mind the Passion and death of the Messiah, it also recalls the whole Gospel tradition, the controversies with Jewish authorities, the lack of understanding on the part of his disciples, his arduous journeys, his fast of forty days. What is suggested is that what the Philadelphians endure has value and purpose, just as the sufferings of Jesus Christ did.

10. *Tereso* – ‘I will keep.’ Harrington finds a play on words with the two uses of the verb. For the Church in Philadelphia, it means ‘to observe,’ to follow’ as in ‘to keep the statutes of the law.’ They have followed the example of Christ’s patient suffering. For Christ, the word means ‘to keep from,’ ‘to hold back,’ ‘to protect.’ There is a correspondence between the action of Christ and that of his followers.

11. *Hora tou peirasmou* – ‘the hour of trial.’ Harrington has pointed out that *peirasmos* (trial) is to be distinguished from *thlipsis* (tribulation.) While *thlipsis* can refer to the final tribulations or woes ushering in the End Time, it is also used to describe the present condition of suffering of Christians, firmly rooted in the social and cultural climates in which they live. He explicitly states that *peirasmos* is used here with an eschatological meaning. It is the only reference to a world-wide time of trial in any of the Seven Letters. It is that final ‘hour of trial’ which is the theme of the rest of the book. Because of their fidelity and patient endurance in their present situation, Christ will protect them from the final trial.

12. *Kataiountas epi tes ges* – ‘those dwelling upon the earth.’ From this point on, this phrase becomes a recurring reference to the unbelieving world in contrast to the *hagioi* – the holy ones. (6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:8)

13. *Erxomai taxu* – ‘I am coming quickly.’ This statement was made in 2:16, in the letter to Pergamum. There it was a promise of judgment on the Nicolaitans. In this case, the promise to come soon implies protection and reward. There is some difficulty in Revelation in distinguishing between the presence of Christ with the Churches in the present moment and his final coming to initiate the End Time. While apocalyptic writings generally envision a great upheaval in which God acts to raise up the lowly and bring down their oppressors, given that the basic premise of the Book of Revelation is that the definitive event that changes everything has already happened in the Cross of Jesus Christ, it is possible also to see the promise of Christ, ‘I am coming quickly,’ as a promise of his presence to the faithful in the Church – in the

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106 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
107 Ibid.
here and now. No matter which reading is adopted, it seems clear that what is at issue is the value of the present moment, its eternal significance. How we live now matters, makes a difference.

14. *Stephanos* – ‘crown,’ ‘wreath.’ As we have seen before, *stephanos*, does not refer to a royal crown, to kingly authority, but to victory – in battle or in athletics – and to garlands worn on festive occasions.

15. *Medeis labe* – ‘no one might take.’ This is the only admonitory note in a glowing characterization of the Church in Philadelphia – the admonition to ‘hold on,’ ‘hold fast’ lest they lose the crown of their merit, the crown of the victor.

16. *Stylon en to nao* – ‘a pillar in the temple.’ Some commentators have found a contradiction, or at least an inconsistency with the use of this phrase in the light of 21:22 in which it is announced that is no temple in the ‘New Jerusalem.’ Harrington states that the phrase is metaphorical and Rogers and Rogers offer an explanation of the metaphor. They state that the ‘being a pillar in a temple’ is current in most languages and conveys the idea of stability and permanence. The background may be that of the coronation of a king, which connects the believer with the symbol of royal stability. Beyond this, it appears that the situation of the Christian community in Philadelphia was one of conflict with the synagogue community, a conflict in which they were either excluded from synagogue fellowship or ostracized as making false claims to being members of God’s people. In either case, that they are made ‘pillars in the temple’ suggests permanence, belonging, a place inside, beyond the door that no one can lock. That they won’t go outside anymore is particularly significant in a city plagued by earthquakes, a city where a large part of its population lives outside its walls because of the threat of destruction.

17. *Theou mou* – of my God. If the city of Sardis is censured because its works do not measure up to God’s standards, because their works are not of God, the four-fold repetition of *theou mou* in this verse emphasizes the certainty of Christ’s promise – and the faithfulness, Godliness of the Philadelphian Church.

18. *Onoma* – ‘name.’ Three names are to be written on the ‘victor,’ symbolized by the pillar: the name of God, the name of the new Jerusalem, and the new name of Christ. Harrington notes that these three names mark the victor as the ‘property’ of God and of Christ and as a citizen of the heavenly city. The mention of the ‘new Jerusalem’ anticipates the final vision of the book, chs. 21-22. He further suggests that the emphasis on ‘name’ and ‘new name’ may be an allusion to the name Neocaesarea given to Philadelphia.

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108 Ibid.
109 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
Patterns are beginning to shift. For the first time, the introduction to the letter to Philadelphia does not include titles or attributes of Christ drawn from the Inaugural Vision. Instead, they have particular reference to the situation of the Church in Philadelphia. Philadelphia was a city established to enculturate people of the area in the ways of the Hellenistic world. It was established to teach loyalty to the Greek kings. A particular point of pride for the city was its characteristic loyalty, embodied in the loyalty of two brothers, former rulers, who did not vie with each other for positions of power. Because of its professed loyalty to Rome, in the Imperial age, the city was given a new name, Neocaesarea. But Philadelphia was also a city faced with hardships. It was devastated by the earthquake in 17 AD to such an extent that much of its population took up residence outside the city itself, just to find safety. By the late first century, it faced economic hardships when Domitian ordered the destruction of half the vines throughout the province to encourage the planting of corn to ease famine conditions. Wine production, apparently, was a staple of Philadelphia’s economic life.

In contrast to the city of Sardis, where accommodations to the surrounding culture threatened the very life of the Church, in Philadelphia, a city particularly dedicated to enculturating diverse people into the prevailing social structure, the community was resolute in its profession of faith. In this context, the five titles of Jesus in the letter’s introduction are ‘new names,’ suggesting a contrast between the Christ and Roman authority, Christ and the social and cultural atmosphere of Philadelphia/Neocaesarea.

The five titles or attributes of Christ are the holy one, the true one, the one holding the key of David, the one opening, and the one locking/shutting. ‘Holy one’ is a divine title suggested by Isaiah 40:25. This title also anticipates the characterization of the faithful followers of Jesus Christ as ἅγιοι – the holy ones, the saints. The holy ones on earth have their heavenly counterparts in later visions, the holy ones...
before the throne of God. As the ‘holy one,’ Christ is also ‘true,’ ‘genuine,’ ‘real.’ In contrast to the Roman emperor, he has true authority. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, ‘true’ is often linked to hesed – hesed w’ etem. Hesed means ‘faithfulness,’ ‘fidelity,’ ‘loyalty,’ ‘covenant love.’ It is a word suggesting commitment, mutual commitment. It is not uncommon in the Old Testament for one term to suggest the other in dealing with the attributes of God. If that is the case here, then ‘the true one’ implies the true and firm commitment of Christ to his faithful people. The mutuality of this commitment, Christ holding to and protecting his Church and his Church holding to, keeping to, the teachings of Jesus Christ, will be developed later in the letter. Isaiah 22:22 supplies the background for ‘the one holding the key of David.’ It suggests one having authority over the royal household. As the Messiah in the line of David, Jesus’ authority extends over the Kingdom of God, heaven and earth, all of creation. The last two attributes, ‘the one opening and no one can lock/shut,’ ‘the one shutting/locking and no one can open,’ speak directly to the situation of the Church in Philadelphia and its relationship with the Jewish community. Basically, the community of believers in the city find themselves in a powerless position, exacerbated by the hostility and opposition from the local Jewish synagogue. This situation appears to mirror that of Smyrna, both letters refer to the ‘synagogue of Satan.’ The opposition from the Jewish community appears to be centered on the Christians’ claim to be the true people of God. Jewish opposition may or may not have included exclusion or expulsion from synagogue fellowship, but it definitely challenged, on a scriptural basis, the Christian claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God and his followers are the ‘true’ Chosen People.

In the letter to Sardis, it was suggested that the five imperatives addressed to the community there mirrored the five commands at the dawn of creation. There are multiple examples of patterns of five throughout the bible, including the five-fold characterization of the Israelites at the beginning of Exodus (‘But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.’ – Ex 1:7. But note that dominion and sovereignty from the original command are missing.) and the five great discourses of Matthew’s Gospel. These patterns of five always suggest the five books of Moses, the Torah, and the pattern of five either confirms that God’s will is in effect or challenges a situation opposed to his will. The five commands issued to the Church in Sardis are an attempt to bring the community into conformity with God’s will; the five titles/attributes of Christ in this letter work to the praise of the community which adheres to God’s will and the word of Christ.

The content of the letter begins with the typical phrase: ‘I have seen your works.’ The works of this Church are uniformly singled out for praise. There is no ‘but I hold against you...’ statement in the letter and no one but the opponents of the Church receive a word of censure. What the Christ has observed about the works of this community is introduced by idou – Behold! This word always draws attention to what follows. It indicates, in this case, surprise, a change from what is expected, from what the reader has encountered in all of the letters so far. What is expected is some characterization of the works of the Church, but instead there is an action of Jesus Christ – ‘I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.’ The phrase recalls the attributes of Jesus Christ as the one addressing the Church and demonstrates the truth of those attributes in the action of Jesus on behalf of the community. His action specifically addresses the situation of the Church, opposition over who belongs to God’s people. In this case, then, the action of Jesus opens the door for the Church, proclaims that the Church belongs and no one, no matter what they say or do, can shut them out. Only now, after the action of Christ, is there a characterization of the Church and its works. Within the social-cultural milieu of the community, the Church has little power, yet it has not made accommodations with the surrounding culture, but has kept the word of Christ and has not denied his name. Eteresas – ‘you have kept/observed’ is a key word in

110 NRSV Translation.
this letter, as well as *onoma* – ‘name.’ In the letter to Sardis, the Church is chastised for its accommodation with the surrounding culture and for seeking to ‘make a name for itself.’ In contrast, the Church in Philadelphia has not tried to better its worldly situation by making such accommodations and has held fast to the ‘name’ of Christ – a ‘new name’ that contrasts with the powers that be.

The open door image also suggests opportunities for Christian living. This is the sense in which Paul uses the image in I Cor 16:9; II Cor 2:12; and also Col 4:3). The implication is that, even in the face of hardships, the door is open for Christians to speak the truth, to stand against the values of the world, to evangelize.

The Christian Church today faces the same issues that confronted the Church in Philadelphia. Values of the world, of the prevalent socio-economic and political structures can oppose the Gospel values taught by Jesus and promoted by the Church. In systems where working together for the common good is demeaned in favor of making sure ‘my side’ wins, those holding minority positions are excluded, left out, denied a voice, yet there is a door open to modern Christians to be a voice for Jesus Christ, to be a counter-cultural voice for the values he taught, a system of values that puts others first, that upholds the dignity of life, that continues to try to build a world according to God’s design.

V. 9 functions as a kind of oracle of judgment, judgment against the opponents of the people of God. This is a typical feature in Israel’s prophetic literature. *Idou* – ‘Behold!’ is used twice in this verse. In the first instance, Christ promises to shut the door on the false Jews, those claiming to members of God’s Chosen People by birth, but whose actions speak otherwise. This, again, is the significance of the ‘synagogue of Satan.’ Satan functions as the symbol of evil, of the cause of all evil. This characterization of the Jewish Community in Philadelphia affirms that they are not of God, not in conformity with God’s will and plan. For the Christian community, this is perhaps not a surprise, but an unexpected message of hope for them in their bleak and weak situation. The second statement in the verse, following the second instance of ‘Behold,’ is surprising – at least for the Jews. They will come and fall at the feet of the Christian community so that they will know that God’s love in Christ is for his Church. This image draws on Isaiah, especially Second Isaiah, the Isaiah of the Babylonian Exile. Throughout the prophecy, God promises to come to his people, to make them a beacon to the world so that all the Gentile nations will stream to ‘Jerusalem’ and come to know the power and love of God. Isaiah’s prophecy stems from a ‘Jerusalem’ theology that emphasizes God’s eternal promises to his people and their responsibility to share the good things of God with all the nations of the earth. In a surprising move, that role is taken away from the synagogue of Philadelphia and given to the Church. The ‘false’ Jews are equated with the Gentiles and the mission of bringing them into the fold resides with the Church. In this there is an echo of Jesus’ Gospel command, “Do good to those who persecute you.”

The role given to the Church in Philadelphia, is the role of the Church for all ages. In this time of polarization, how can our Church, our parish/diocese/national alliance of Churches, be that beacon, call all others to Christ? In the face of polarization, how do we avoid the “We’re right, you’re wrong” attitude? How did Jesus Christ deal with his opponents?

In Israel’s prophetic tradition, the oracles of judgments against the nations are followed by oracles of salvation for God’s people, for those who have endured the trial, the chastening of God. This is the function of vv. 10-11.
The key word, *eteras* – ‘you have kept,’ occurs again in v. 10. What is found here is what Robert Alter defines as repetition with variation. This variation gives specification to what was stated in v. 8 – ‘you have kept my word.’ In this case, Christ notes that the Church in Philadelphia ‘has kept the word of my endurance.’ *Hypomenes* – ‘patient endurance’ is the special term used throughout the Book of Revelation for a particularly Christian way of life. The ‘patient endurance’ of Christ most properly refers to his passion and death; but it can also include his patient endurance of the hostile attitude of the Scribes and Pharisees during his life, as well as the obstinacy and lack of understanding of his disciples. So the Church is praised for their imitation of Christ’s own patient endurance in the trials, controversies and disputes that are a daily part of their lives as well as the very real possibility that their patient endurance, like his, could lead to deadly consequences. They display and live the radical Christianity that ‘John’ demands. Because of their holding fast to, keeping, their steadfast manner of life on the model of Christ himself, Christ responds in kind. *Tereso* – ‘I will keep/protect you…’ The mutuality carried in the repetition of the key word substantiates the title of Christ, the true one. He genuinely takes up the cause of those who are faithful to him, who live the model he set.

Most commentators see in Christ’s promise to keep/protect the Church from the hour of trial/testing that is about to happen as a reference to the eschatological End Time, the final testing of all people before the definitive establishment of God’s Kingdom. How strong the expectation of an imminent Parousia was at the end of the first century is unclear; such an expected overturning of the present world order certainly fits the pattern of apocalyptic writing. On the other hand, the promise of Christ to protect his faithful Church from the final trials is another clear indication of the conviction that the present moment matters, that right NOW is the moment of salvation. The idea that how we live now matters was introduced in the promise to the ‘few’ faithful in Sardis. Here, it is the whole Church that Christ addresses and the fruit of their good works, their patient endurance means nothing short of eternal life.

Whether the End Time is imminent or distant, in the end, turns out to be immaterial. What is known is that there will be a great reckoning of all creation. ‘Those dwelling on the earth’ regularly refers to people apart from God, the world order, the power structures, the socio-economic conditions that prevail. Still, that reckoning does not have to be one of damnation. And it won’t be if the Church is faithful, is a voice for the will of God and the teachings of Jesus Christ; There is an open door through which the faithful church can invite all the nations of the earth to come, to see, to hear – and to believe. There is another possibility for living in this world that is not dictated by power for its own sake, for the glory of Rome or whatever nation is currently at the top of the heap. There is a possibility of shepherding people – firmly, but with love and care. These are the possibilities the Book of Revelation lays open before us. These are the possibilities for ‘keeping the word of Christ’s patient endurance’ that inspired the Church of Philadelphia, that animated their faith and their faithfulness, that enabled them to endure.

V. 11 ends the particular address to the Church in Philadelphia with a command and a word of encouragement. ‘Hold fast to what you have.’ The key word is not repeated here, but rather *krateo*. *Krateo* is the word generally used for ‘keeping the commandments.’ In the Emmaus Story (Lk 24:13-35), Jesus consoles two disciples distraught at the apparent absence of Jesus after the crucifixion. He opens the Scriptures for them and breaks the bread. In that, they recognize him. To a Church in troubled times, in times when the presence and power of Jesus Christ can be in doubt, the story says that we have all that we need; we have God’s Word and we have the Eucharist. In telling the Church in

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111 Robert Alter, op. cit.
Philadelphia to ‘hold fast to what they have,’ Christ is basically telling them the same thing: ‘You have the Word of God; you have the example of my patient endurance; you have me with you in the breaking of the bread. Hang on to these things. Be true to these things, and you will endure.’ Though they are not called the ‘victors,’ a title apparently reserved for later generations who hear and heed the words of this book, they have a crown – stephanos. This is the crown of the victor, of the one who overcomes in battle or on the athletic field. If they use what they have, if they endure, no one can take that crown from them.

V. 12, a final, general promise proclaimed by Christ, loosens the letter to Philadelphia from its immediate context and addresses the whole Church for all ages. Though it is more generalized, the promise flows from the particular situation of the Church in Philadelphia, especially its relationship with the local Jewish community, as well as the general social and economic conditions of the city. Christ promises to make the victors, those who overcome, pillars in the temple of his God and Father. While some find a contradiction here with the 21:22, where it is stated that there will be no temple in the new Jerusalem, the statement is metaphorical. It represents permanence, belonging. In the context of the situation in Philadelphia, in which the ‘false Jews’ reject the claim of Christians to be God’s people, the image suggests a permanent place in God’s temple for the Church. This calls to mind the Jewish temple, now destroyed, in which there were levels of holiness in the arrangement of its construction. The ‘Court of the Israelites’ surrounded the most holy areas, the altar of sacrifice and the Holy of Holies, the areas where God met with his people.

Beyond this, the phrase, ‘surely he will not go outside anymore,’ gives continued assurance to the Church that its place within the people of God is permanent. But this phrase also suggests a contrast with the basic structure of city life in Philadelphia. Because of the dangers of collapsing buildings due to earthquakes common in the area, and the lasting effects of the great earthquake of 17 AD, many people had established residences outside the city. All the power of Rome and its authority could not protect them. With Christ, there is protection and permanence.

It can also be suggested that ‘pillars in the temple of my God’ builds on ideas expressed by Paul:

Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple. (I Cor 3:16-17)$^{112}$

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price: Therefore glorify God in your body. (I Cor 6:19-20)$^{113}$

Note also, the statement in the First Letter of Peter:

Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (I Pt 2:5)$^{114}$

Finally, the promise Christ makes to the ‘victors’ is that he will claim them for himself and for his God. He will inscribe on them, the name of his God, the name of God’s new city, Jerusalem, and his own new name. Faithfulness to Christ means that the faithful belong to God – this is what constitutes membership in God’s holy people. This is the promise to the faithful for all ages.

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$^{112}$ NRSV translation.
$^{113}$ NRSV translation.
$^{114}$ NRSV translation.
The letter to the Church in Philadelphia celebrates faithfulness, patient endurance and the belonging to God that this faithfulness and endurance engenders. It speaks to the Church of today a message of hope, of encouragement to endure, hang on, hold fast. It speaks to the Church of today a promise of belonging and of protection. And it speaks a caution – ‘Don’t let anyone take your crown from you.’ What is it that the Church must endure today? How is it possible to endure it patiently? What gives us hope? Where can our true allegiance and loyalty really to be found? With God in Jesus Christ? Or in the culture and systems of our world?
Laodicea 3:14-22

14 And to the messenger (angel) of the in Laodicea church (of the church in Laodicea) write: These things says the Amen, the witness, the faithful one and truthful, the beginning of the creation of God.

15 I have known your works that neither cold nor hot are you. Would that cold were you or hot. 16 Thus, because lukewarm are you and neither hot nor cold, I am about to vomit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say that “I am rich and I have become rich (by my own efforts) and I have need of nothing” and not have you known that you are wretched (unfortunate) and miserable and destitute and blind and naked. 18 I advise you to buy from me gold having been refined by fire so that you might become rich, and white garments so that you might clothe yourself and not should be made manifest (revealed) the shame of your nakedness, and salve to anoint your eyes so that you might see. 19 Whosoever if I might love (them), rebuke and discipline (train as a child). Be zealous, therefore, and change (turn back, repent). 20 Behold, I have stood at the door and I am knocking. If anyone should hear my voice and should open the door, then (and) I will come in to him and dine with him and he with me. 21 The one being victorious (overcoming), I will give to him (allow him) to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat with my Father on his throne.

22 He having an ear, let him hear that which the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

The City of Laodicea

The City of Laodicea

Introduction
The Lycus valley has always been important as offering the easiest route from the Aegean coast to the Anatolian plateau. The character of Laodicea, which became the greatest city of this valley, is to be seen against the character and history of the district as a whole.

In early times the principal city of the whole district was apparently Colossae. Laodicea, a Seleucid foundation, was probably established by Antiochus II (261-246 BC) and named after his first wife Laodice. Such colonies were intended to strengthen the Seleucid hold on the land and were peopled with those likely to be loyal. The original population may have been largely Syrian, but a body of Jewish citizens was probably included. The city became the crossroads where the route from Ephesus to the East crossed that from Pergamum and Sardis to the south coast. The beginnings of Christianity in the district are fairly clear in outline, probably as an offshoot of the ministry of Paul.

The Jewish Background
As the wealth of the area grew, the Jews may be presumed to have increased correspondingly in numbers and affluence.

The letter stands comparatively apart from other parts of Revelation itself. It is unique in that the introductory words of Christ are not drawn from the Patmos vision. The situation in Laodicea makes it evident that this was a

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115 These notes are a summary of Colin J. Hemer’s The Letters to the Seven Churchs of Asia in Their Local Setting, ch. 9.
district where an influential Judaism had demonstrably accommodated itself to the standards of surrounding society.

*The Laodicean Lukewarness (Rev 3:15-16)*

The water supply of Laodicea was warm and a contrast is implied between it and the hot medicinal waters of Hierapolis and the cold, pure waters of Colossae. So the church was judged for its ineffectiveness rather than its half-heartedness, for the barrenness of its works rather than its spiritual temperature.

The site of Laodicea was chosen for its position at an important road-junction. It lacked a natural water supply. The remains of a remarkable aqueduct of stone pipes indicate that the people derived water from a source south of the city. Authorities emphasize both the abundance of water in the district and its bad quality.

The church in Laodicea may have seemed notably successful to the outside observer, and was itself blind to its own spiritual ineffectiveness. The point was brought home forcibly through an illustration taken from local life: the affluent society was far from the sources of its life-giving water, and when by its own resources it had sought to remedy the deficiency, the resulting supply was bad, both tepid and emetic. The effect of their conduct upon Christ was like the effect of their own water: no other church was condemned in terms so strong. The hot and cold waters of the city's neighbors were each acceptable in their place. Judgment is passed on the 'works' of the Laodiceans, not on their lack of enthusiasm.

*Propris Opibus Rev (3:17)*

The opening words of v 17 echo the Masoretic text of Hos 12:8. The whole following passage is rich in local allusion. The church was evidently influenced by the material self-sufficiency which characterized the city, and this was reflected in their spiritual complacency. When v 17 is taken closely with v 18, it is seen that the sequence of adjectives 'poor and blind and naked' in the diagnoses anticipates a series of corresponding remedies: 'gold,' 'white garments' and 'eye salve.'

The events which followed the earthquake during Nero's reign provided a memorable occasion for local pride and ostentation, and were still topical at the date of the writing of Revelation. There is evidence that Laodicea had appealed to Rome and received help in reconstruction after earthquake damage on one or more occasions under Augustus. It was normal practice to expect to and to receive such relief. Tiberius had given generous help to many of the greatest cities of Asia after the terrible earthquake of 17 AD. In this case, however, the city made no such appeal. The affluent citizenry undertook rebuilding their city themselves. The proud generosity of citizens to their community is not at all a Laodicean peculiarity. The feature of Laodicea is the scale and ostentation of the donations, and the point which they derive from their relation to the reconstruction. There is good reason for seeing Rev 3:17 against the background of the boasted affluence of Laodicea, notoriously exemplified in her refusal of Roman aid and her carrying through a great program of reconstruction in a spirit of proud independence and ostentatious individual benefaction. The flourishing church was exposed as partaking of the standards of the society in which it lived. It was spiritually self-sufficient and saw no need of Christ's aid.

*Poor and Blind and Naked*

The point here is that Christ is the source of true remedy, and those who want spiritual goods of true quality must transact their business with him.

Laodicea was a banking center. There is emphasis on the purity of the refined gold that Christ offers, a fiery trial by which the dross must be removed from the church (see Ps 66:10). The idea of cleansing through suffering appears in 3:19.

We have explicit evidence for the connection of Laodicea with a leading figure of first-century ophthalmology, one Alexander. He was the product of a school which presumably continued the specialized interest of its master, Herophilus. Alexander may have lived under Nero. His influence, and that of the Laodicene school, may have been paramount at the date of Revelation. The position and commercial character of Laodicea would readily foster the marketing of his specialized knowledge. That is, the city probably marketed extensively and profitably an ointment developed locally from available materials, whose exact composition may have been kept secret from commercial rivals. The church in Laodicea, the city where they claimed to treat physical myopia, was blind to its own spiritual blindness. The diagnosis was that they needed what only Christ could supply. The emphasis is on Christ as the true source of spiritual vision.
The country around Laodicea produces sheep remarkable not only for the softness of their wool, but also for its raven-black color. And they got a splendid revenue from it. In considering the background of Rev 3:17f, we must note that the two associated cities, Hierapolis and Colossae, were also celebrated for their woolen industries. These cities were known for their fine, dyed wool. Laodicea dispensed with the costs of dyeing for the luxury market by promoting a fashion in black glossy fabrics from the natural fleeces of an animal developed by its own breeders.

A local pagan evaluation of the symbolism of black and white is found in ancient writings. From dreams white garments presage death for the sick and black for recovery, for the dead are dressed in white while the survivors mourn in black. The evidence gives insight into popular superstition on a point where out text stands in sharp contrast. The use of ‘white raiment’ in Rev 3:18 must be related to Dan 7:9. The primary meaning conveyed by the symbol here and elsewhere in the book seems to be righteousness: Hence, it was the garb of the heavenly kingdom. There may be also the thought of the festal garments provided for the coming of a prince in triumph, an aspect more prominent in the slightly different context of Sardis (Rev 3:4-5). Revelation speaks of white garments as given and as made white through washing in the blood of the Lamb. The looms of their city could not weave cloth to cover their sins; righteousness was the white raiment which God demanded, and this they must get from Christ.

So we conclude that in the whole passage local facts are used to present Christ as the source of the remedy for the church’s hidden needs of spiritual wealth, vision, and holiness.

The Door and the Throne

Even after Julian Law, Roman officials long retained the power to requisition lodging, and that such imposition fell upon the richest cities and individuals. The interpretation of Rev 3:20 must consider this background and the contrast with Christ’s refusal to force an entry. His coming is not a threat, but a precious promise for the individuals who will invite him, and the deipnon (supper, banquet) of which he speaks is not extorted with insult, but the symbol of an enduring friendship.

Laodicea was set four-square on one of the most important road junctions in Asia Minor, and each of the four city gates opened on to a busy trade rout. The inhabitants must have been very familiar with the belated traveler who stood at the door and knocked for admission.

There is a possible connection in background between Rev 3:20 and 3:21. In 40 BC, Parthicus invaded Asia and no city closed its gates until he reached Laodicea. The city held out against him and the result of this resolute action was that Polemo received a throne because of his benefaction to his native city. This began a dynasty of kings.

The general appropriateness of Rev 3:21 to the church in a city which had provided a dynasty of kings is apparent, especially as we have reason to think that its character was much influenced by the founding family. Polemo treated other kings as his inferiors. The Laodicean branch appropriated imperial and royal names. Perhaps the ultimate status symbol at Laodicea was to boast a connection with royalty. Such a boast had no real content. The ‘god’ who granted a client-king his realm would as readily deprive him of it. Polemo’s elevation had been in a sense, the prize of a victory: this was no longer true of his successors. And they were not likely to share their actual power with any aspiring commoner, even a kinsman from Laodicea. But the throne of Christ will not be his exclusive possession.

The emphasis in v 20a is upon the individual and his voluntary act: the promise of v 20b seems meaningful within the setting of his contemporary life. He needed the fellowship of Christ in the present as the antidote to the self-sufficiency of a Christless church. Christ would not abuse and exploit his hospitality as Roman Potentates did. Only with the personal presence of Christ would he conquer. It is an easy transition to the promise of the conqueror’s future hope in terms which in Laodicea would surely recall the distinctions conferred on the Zenonids (Polemo’s father) as the prize of victory.

Conclusions

1. The reference to the ‘Amen,’ the most Jewish phrase in the letter, has close parallels to Colossians. The Colossian heresy was compounded of a nonconformist Judaism and an incipient Gnosticism. Such a
philosophical syncretism accommodating Christianity to current thought forms probably centered and persisted in Laodicea.

2. The lukewarmness of Laodicea is to be related to the local water supply. The term denotes the ineffectiveness rather than half-heartedness of Christians.

3. It is also accepted that the words “I am rich…” (v 17) allude to the aftermath of the great earthquake of 60 AD. It is further suggested that this ostentatious self-sufficiency reached a climax when the reconstruction was completed by the erection of great public buildings at the expense of individual citizens in the years immediately preceding the Domitianic date of Revelation. The monumental triple gate donated may have been in mind in the writing of Rev 3:20.

4. It can be shown that the local medical school produced influential specialists in ophthalmology, and there are tentative reasons for identifying the ‘Phrygian stone’ or ‘Phrygian powder’ with a substance found locally.

5. The contrast between ‘white raiment’ (v 18) and the clothing made from the wool of the local breed of black sheep is accepted.

6. Vv 19-22 are to be seen as an integral part of the letter and are related to the local situation.

7. The ‘door’ (v 20) was a significant symbol. The exploitation of local wealth by corrupt Roman officials and the enforced hospitality for their staff fell heavily and persistently on Laodicea as an affluent city. Christ, in contrast, pleads for a willing hospitality of the individual heart.

8. This letter makes little contribution to the wider understanding of the problems of the church in Asia. It offers no light on persecution or on racial and religious tensions. The reason may perhaps be found in the easy integration of the church here with its surroundings. The trials and conflicts were only acute when Christians stood apart from Judaism without compromising with pagan standards. Here they were evidently open to sectarian Judaism and syncretistic influences.
Textual Notes

1. **Amen.** Harrington points out that only here, in the New Testament, is *amen* used as an attribute of Christ. The Hebrew word connotes an acknowledgment of truth, an assent — ‘this is so.’ He cites a reference to Third Isaiah, Is 65:16, as a likely source for this ‘title,’ – ‘He who blesses himself in the land shall bless himself by the God of truth (literally the God of amen).’\(^{116}\) Irwin Arkin, of St. Louis University, considers the ‘Amen, amen...’ sayings of John’s Gospel to an hendiadys used as a self-adopted title by Jesus: ‘I, the great Amen, ...’ The implication would be ‘I, the truthful one,’ ‘I, the genuine one.’ Unfortunately, Professor Arkin never published his assertions, so what he says has never been evaluated, critiqued or debated in scholarly circles.

2. **Martys** – ‘witness.’ It is likely that the title of ‘witness’ for Christ is influenced by Jn 18:37: Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”\(^{117}\) As was the case in John’s Gospel, so too dualistic thinking characterizes the Book of Revelation. The contrasts between truth and falsehood, good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness – all come down to the same thing, a contrast between what is of God and what isn’t.

3. **Ho pistos kai ho alethinos** – ‘the faithful one and the true one.’ Harrington states that this phrase spells out the meaning of Jesus’ witness, his testimony, the meaning of the title, Amen.\(^ {118}\) It can also be noted that ‘faithful and true’ supplies a Greek rendering of the Hebrew hesed we’emet. In this case, an attribute/title for God common in the Old Testament is applied to Christ. (see Note #2, p. 83).

4. **He arche tes ktsises tou theou** – ‘the beginning of God’s creation.’ To explain this verse, Harrington turns to several verses in the letter to the Colossians, supposing that the letter to the nearby city of Colossae would have been familiar in Laodicea: ‘He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation’ (Col 1:15); ‘He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead.’ (Col 1:18).\(^ {119}\) He contends that the Church in Laodicea would have known the letter because Col 4:16 explicitly states that it is to be shared with that Church.\(^ {120}\) It can also be suggested that ‘John’ had in mind the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel:

   In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.\(^ {121}\)

   It can also be noted that arche, ‘beginning,’ is also applied to Christ in both the letter to Smyrna, Rev 2:8, and the concluding liturgical dialogue of the book, Rev 22:13.

5. **Oute psychros ei oute zestos** – ‘neither cold are you nor hot.’ Against a somewhat widespread popular understanding of the image as referring to half-hearted, lackadaisical Christianity, Hemer has argued convincingly that the image refers to the utter uselessness of the works of the Laodicean Church. The image is to be explained by the water source of Laodicea in comparison with the water supplies of the nearby cities of Colossae and Hierapolis. The water of Colossae was cold and refreshing; the water of Hieropolis was hot and therapeutic. By contrast, the water supply of Laodicea was lukewarm and, when drunk, induced vomiting.\(^ {122}\)

6. **Mello se emesai ek tou stomatos mou** – ‘I am about to vomit you out of my mouth.’ Harrington offers an interesting observation at this point. *Mello* means ‘to be about to,’ but it has not yet happened. He finds in this phrase a warning, not an absolute condemnation. For him this indicates that there is still time for

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\(^ {116}\) Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

\(^ {117}\) NRSV translation.

\(^ {118}\) Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

\(^ {119}\) NRSV translation.

\(^ {120}\) Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

\(^ {121}\) NRSV translation.

\(^ {122}\) Colin J. Hemer, *op. cit.*
the Church to repent, to change.\textsuperscript{123}

Now, this is a rather large stretch, but the mention of ‘vomiting’ is rare in biblical literature. The most well-known instance involves Jonah and the large fish. Throughout the story, Jonah’s actions are at odds with God’s will and commands. Yet, in spite of this, God’s will is accomplished; the Assyrians of Nineveh repent, though Jonah ends up in a big funk. Is there an implication in the image that there is an assurance that God’s plan for creation will work itself out, whether or not Jonah responds as God demands, whether or not the Church in Laodicea responds or not.

7. \textit{Plousios eimi} – ‘rich am I.’ The dangers of wealth is a common theme in the Bible. (see https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/Riches,-Dangers-Of for a listing of 54 citations dealing with the danger of riches). At issue is not the enjoyment of the good things of creation, but of the sense of self-sufficiency that riches can engender. Hemer again argues that the socio-economic climate of Laodicea informs the meaning of the text at this point. Laodicea was a commercial city known for its wealth and prosperity. Early on, it had attracted a significant Jewish population that, to share in the prosperity of the city, had allowed itself to be absorbed into the city’s culture, politics and economics. The process of absorption and enculturation also impacted the Christian Church of the city. The extent of the city’s arrogance and sense of self-sufficiency is seen in its refusal of aid from Rome to rebuild after the devastation of an earthquake. Local citizens financed it all.\textsuperscript{124} From the attitude of ‘Why do we need Rome?’ it is but a small step to ‘Why do we need God?’ It is likely that this sense of self-sufficiency also stands behind the condemnation of the works of the Church. Their works are directed to amassing wealth, taking care of themselves, sharing a sense of pride in their city and the life-style they enjoy without a real concern for God or for a Christian commitment to the poor and vulnerable.

8. \textit{Talaiporos... eleinos... ptochos... typhlos... gymnos...} - ‘wretched... miserable... destitute... blind... naked.’ It has been argued that patterns of five throughout the Bible serve to recall God’s commands to humanity at the dawn of creation. Each use of the pattern, typically, points up some contrast to the pattern of commands, some way in which humanity has fallen short of God’s commands or are in a situation which inhibits their fulfillment. That appears to be the case here, where five adjectives are applied to the Church in such a way that the condition of the Church is presented as a non-fulfillment of God’s original will and also as refutation of the city’s own claim to be rich, prosperous and self-sufficient. Laodicea, not unlike Babel, is pretentious and its pretentions are ungrounded. Rm 7:24 is the only other instance in the New Testament where \textit{talaiporos} occurs. The word is the opposite of \textit{makarios} – ‘blessed, favored, fortunate.’ \textit{Makarios} is the word used in the beatitudes, found in both Matthew and Luke. The claim, ‘I am rich; I have need of nothing,’ would seem to be a ‘blessing,’ but, as Rm 7:24 makes clear, there is a ‘wretchedness’ about humanity that cannot save itself without God.\textsuperscript{125}

Rogers and Rogers indicate that \textit{eleinos} indicates one set apart as an object of extreme pity.\textsuperscript{126} This would appear to counteract the claim, ‘I have become rich [by my own efforts].’ Ostensibly, this would be a reason for setting someone apart for praise and emulation; but the misguided value of amassing wealth leave one pitiable instead.

Hemer has understood the last three adjectives as direct references to the socio-economic conditions of Laodicea during the reign of Domitian. The city was so prosperous that it could decline aid from the Roman emperor to rebuild after an earthquake; it was known for producing and marketing an eye ointment; it’s textile industry produced a ‘trend setting’ soft black wool. But in reality, the Christians of Laodicea, in terms of living a Christian life, are destitute, blind and naked.\textsuperscript{127} V. 18, against the claims of the Laodiceans and the negative characterization of their actual state and status, shows Christ to be the

\textsuperscript{123} Wilfrid Harrington, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{124} Colin J. Hemer, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{126} Rogers and Rogers, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{127} Colin J. Hemer, \textit{op. cit.}
source of true wealth, the white garments of righteousness, and the remedy for spiritual blindness so that the Church can come to see the truth, to see where true value lies.

9. **Chrysion... imatia leuka... kollourion...** - ‘gold... white garments... eye ointment...’ The wealth of Laodicea rested on its banking business, its textile industry, producing fine black wool, and on the production and sale of an effective ointment for the eyes. Jesus’ advice that the Church in Laodicea buy gold, white garments and eye ointment from him is a direct challenge to the basis of life in the city of Laodicea.

a. In Jewish practice, gold is used for the precious vessels of the temple. In the Inaugural Vision, the seven lampstands representing the Churches are made of gold. In contrast to the banking business of the city, Jesus is basically advising the community to trade in heavenly, spiritual commodities: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Mt 6:19-21)

b. Hemer discusses the particular pagan practice in which the dead are clothed in white, while the mourners wear black. ‘White’ represents death, but ‘black’ represents life. The textile industry of Laodicea was unique. Other cities engaged in the production of wool, dyed their products. The quality of the wool of the black sheep bred in Laodicea, however, was such that it yielded a fine, black cloth without dye. This black cloth was a source of their livelihood – it was ‘life-giving.’ By contrast, Jesus notes that they are left naked. The ‘white garments’ he of which he speaks clothe those who wear them in righteousness. In 3:5, Christ has said that the one who is victorious (overcomes) will clothe himself in white; in the Song of Victory in 7:9-17, those clothed in white before the throne of God are identified as people of every nation who have endured the tribulation and washed their clothes white in the blood of the Lamb. By implication, those who have not endured are naked and vulnerable.

c. The ointment produced in Laodicea is a remedy for physical eye ailments. Against this, there is a prevalent theme in biblical literature of physical blindness being opposed to spiritual blindness. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus speaks in parables so that those who ‘see,’ may be confounded – those who profess to understand may be challenged to look at things through God’s vision; the final journey of Jesus to Jerusalem begins and ends with the healing of a blind man and, in the first case, the healing takes place in stages. There is an implication that the journey the disciples make with Jesus is a journey of faith, a journey of ‘coming to see,’ in ch 9 of John’s Gospel, Jesus cures the man born blind to demonstrate how much worse spiritual blindness is than physical blindness. This is precisely the point of the eye ointment offered by Jesus; it cures the blindness of those who think they can see, those who believe that they are self-sufficient, those who are self-satisfied and have need of nothing beyond their own efforts and what their efforts produce – on an earthly plane.

10. **Ego hosous eu philo elencho kai paideuo** – ‘Whomever I love, then, I rebuke (correct) and discipline (train as a child).’ In Greek, the pronominal subject of the verb is usually expressed simply by the form of the verb – philo is the present, indicative, active form of the verb in the first person, singular. It means “I love.” When the subject pronoun (ego) is used in the text, it implies intensification, focusing on the subject: ‘I, I love...’ “I myself love...” By context, the use of the subject pronoun can suggest contrast – ‘you say... but I declare...’ That is the case here, when the affluent and successful – self-sufficient – lifestyle of the Church is contrasted with what Jesus sees (observes) about the Church and what he recommends to remedy the death-like situation.

Harrington notes the similarity of the content of v. 19 and Prv 3:12-13 – ‘For the Lord reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.’ This is a common theme in Israel’s Wisdom tradition. The mark of love is not license or permissiveness, but discipline and training, equipping the child/young man with the tools needed to live well in the world. Israel’s Wisdom, while dealing with many

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128 NRSV translation.
129 Colin J. Hemer, *op. cit.*
130 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
131 NRSV translation.
commonplace and secular ideas, was never secular. It proceeded from a belief that God’s creative word permeated his creation and that by observation of the ways of the world, people could discern God’s plan, his Word, and his Wisdom. Israel’s Wisdom observed, in general, that good actions lead to good results and bad actions lead to bad results. In time this led to a misunderstanding of Wisdom teaching in which good results were equated with and the proof of good actions; bad results were equated with and the proof of bad actions. If we are wealthy, prosperous, comfortable, then we are good and God has blessed us. In time, the Wisdom movement produced thinkers and writings that challenged these false assumptions, yet the ‘comfortable’ wrong attitude endured. The story of Jesus curing the man born blind, referred to above, is one such example of challenging false assumptions and shaking people out of their complacency and false assumptions.

In the view of the author of Revelation, trials and hardships are a means of discipline, of purification, of proving the worth of a person’s actions and way of life. Just as it is necessary to correct and train a child, so Christ trains us through the trials of life to be ‘victors,’ ‘to overcome the ways of the world.’

11. Zeleue — ‘be zealous.’ This is the only occasion in the New Testament where this word occurs. Harrington notes that where Ephesus lacked ‘love,’ Laodicea lacked ‘zeal.’ In the light of the characterization of the Church as neither hot nor cold, this lack of zeal, again, does not refer to a half-hearted approach to living as followers of Jesus Christ. The evidence of their love, their acting as a community of Christians is missing. The imperative, here, is for the community to put as much effort into being followers of Jesus as they do into amassing wealth and living the good life. There are commanded to learn what is of real value and work for that instead. In the end, they are commanded to change/turn back/repent.

12. Idou eseka epi ten thyran kai krouo — ‘Behold! I have stood at the door and am knocking.’ V. 20 establishes a stark contrast with the letter to Philadelphia. This contrast is indicated by idou, Behold! This introduces a startling change. In the letter to Philadelphia, Christ set an open door before the community, a door no one could lock. They could enter. They belong. By contrast, here Christ stands before a ‘human’ door, knocking, seeking an invitation to enter. Hemer has described the practice of quartering Roman officials and soldiers in the homes of people in the occupied provinces. This was a power play, a forced entrance. He also noted that, in 40 BC, Laodicea was the only city in the area that closed its gates to the invader Pathicos, resisted him, and established its own monarchy. Herein lies the startling surprise of the image of Christ knocking at the door. It sets Christ apart from Roman and other world powers; he does not force himself on people. But also, the Church in Laodicea can maintain its obstinacy and sense of self-sufficiency. They can block the door to a power, a true power, making a claim on their allegiance and loyalty. On the other hand, they can open the door, invite Christ in, and they will dine together. ‘Dining’ is a clear reference to the Eucharist. What is at stake is the presence of Christ with his Church. The Church can invite him to be in their midst or choose to continue to shut him out.

13. Thronos. ‘Throne’ is the dominant image in v. 21. To the ‘victor’ Christ will allow a share of his throne, his authority, just as through his Cross he was a victor and shares the throne of his Father. This verse both moves forward the progressive identification of Christ and his Father and understanding of real power and authority that those who overcome trials and tribulation are destined to share.

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132 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
133 Colin J. Hemer, op. cit.
The last letter to Laodicea completes the alternating pattern of letters. In common with the two previous letters, the statement, ‘But I hold against you...’ does not occur. In the letter to Sardis, the basic message was one of censure. There was a word of promise and hope for the ‘few’ in the community found to be faithful, but the overall tone of the letter negative. The letter to Philadelphia rounded out the alternating pattern of letters to largely faithful Churches. It is the most positive of all the letters. The letter to Laodicea is the most negative. The entire Church receives censure and no ‘few’ faithful are given a message of promise and hope. As was the case in the letter to Philadelphia, the titles of Christ who addresses the Church are not drawn from the Inaugural Vision; and like the letter to Philadelphia, there are definite anticipations of themes and ideas that will appear in the later visions. This letter is also linked to the previous one with a contrasting image of a ‘door.’

The history of the city and its socio-economic conditions provide background for much of what is communicated to the Church. A mark of pride for the city was the fact that in 40 BC in shut its gates against an invader, resisting the onslaught and establishing an independent monarchy. Pride in its independence and self-sufficiency looms large in the minds of its residents. In the late first century, Laodicea was a prosperous city, with a thriving banking industry, the manufacture of a particularly fine black wool, and the production and sale of an ointment used as a remedy for eye ailments. As was the case in all the cities, the population of Laodicea was composed of pagan, Jewish, and Christian elements. What sets this city apart is the amalgamation of the various elements of its population within a culture of prosperity, self-sufficiency, and independence.
In typical fashion, the letter begins with the command to write and the introduction of its content with wording that mimics ‘Thus says the Lord’ from Israel’s prophetic tradition. The attributes of Christ include ‘the Amen,’ ‘the witness,’ ‘the faithful and truthful one,’ and ‘the beginning of God’s creation.’

In Hebrew, the primary meaning of ‘amen’ is ‘truth.’ The word is used as an affirmation – ‘so it is,’ ‘in truth.’ It is suggested that the background for this title/attribute is to be found in Isaiah, where God is defined as ‘the God of truth,’ ‘the God of Amen.’ It can also be related to many sayings of Jesus in John’s Gospel introduced by, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you…,’ which carries the sense of ‘I truly/truthfully say to you.’

Christ is also identified as a ‘witness.’ The structure of the letters regularly imitates the pattern of Israelite prophecy which often includes a ‘prophetic lawsuit’ followed by oracles of judgment. It is significant that, in this most negative of the letters, Christ is presented as a ‘true/truthful witness.’ It is likely that this title for Christ is drawn from Jesus’ words to Pilate in the trial scene from the Fourth Gospel. Jesus asserts that his very reason for coming into the world is to testify (witness) to the truth and that those who belong to the truth listen to his voice. The question for the Church in Laodicea is whether or not it will listen to the truth.

‘The faithful and truthful one’ is a rendering of the Hebrew phrase ‘hesed w\'emet.’ The phrase is regularly used in the Old Testament to describe God, his genuine faithfulness to his covenant people. The phrase implies a complete commitment that demands reciprocity. ‘If you belong to the truth, you will listen to my voice and respond in kind.’

The final title, ‘the beginning of creation,’ is allusively rich. It recalls several sayings in the letter to the Colossians in which Christ is referred to as the beginning, the firstborn of creation and the firstborn of the dead. More specifically, it calls to mind the prologue to the Fourth Gospel in which Christ, the incarnate Word of God, existed with God and through this ‘Word’ all things came into being. The beginning and source of all creation, then, is to be understood as the source of all the good things that make for a prosperous life in Laodicea. But more to the point, this ‘True Word’ of God, this witness to God’s truth, is the source of life and the firstborn of the dead. It is the life after death that is the concern, the life of the ‘victor,’ and not a comfortable and prosperous earthly life. These are issues that the letter will address.

The title arche, ‘the first,’ ‘the beginning,’ ‘the chief,’ is ascribed to Christ here, in the letter to Smyrna, 2:8, and in the final liturgical dialogue at the end of the book, 22:13. Arche, then, is a key word linking the beginning to the end.

As is usual, the message of Christ begins with what he has observed about the ‘works’ of the Church. In this case, their works are totally inadequate. The image of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ is best explained by the water supply of Laodicea. In contrast to the nearby cities of Colossae, whose water is cool and refreshing, and Hieropolis, whose water is hot and therapeutic, the lukewarm water of Laodicea is undrinkable. It causes vomiting. A popular understanding of the image of a lukewarm Church suggests that its lifestyle and efforts are half-hearted. But that understanding misses the point of the implied contrasts. The works produced by the Church are useless and ineffective. It is not that they are half-hearted in what they do; it is, instead, that what they produce, what they do has nothing to do with living as a Church. The reaction of Christ is, ‘I am about to vomit you out of my mouth,’ implying that he can’t stomach them, that the Church is Laodicea is not of Christ, that it does not belong to the truth, that it does not
listen to his voice. And yet, in all this, there is hope. “I am about to…” suggests intention, what is or could happen. There may still be time to repent, to change, to listen to Christ’s voice.

There is a model of the modern church as a ‘spiritual gas station.’ The parish is no longer seen as the center of both religious and social life. With this has come a loss of the sense of community. Individuals, even families, attend Mass on Sunday as if going to a ‘spiritual gas station’, to ‘fill up the tank,’ to get a warm feeling of spirituality, and then return to the ‘real world’ with no sense that what is celebrated has any connection to making a living, raising a family, planning for the future. That is to say, there is an image of the modern church that is a mirror reflection of the picture of Laodicea painted in the Book of Revelation. In the modern church, some individuals make retreats, attend scripture studies, join faith sharing groups, but often this can merely be ‘topping off the tank.’ The sense of community is still missing; the transfer of ‘spiritual activities’ to day-to-day living is missing, or minimal at best. How strong is the sense of community in my Church? Can I see the ‘works’ of my Church making an impact on the world? Do they bring Jesus Christ to others? How much of my participation in Sunday worship and spiritual activities is a personal filling of ‘my tank?’ How do I go beyond my comfort zone and my work-a-day life to build community and witness to Jesus Christ?

Vv. 18-19 contrast the false view of the Laodiceans with the truth of Jesus Christ. The text of v. 18 caricatures the Church. Its members claim to be rich. There is an age old truth, observable to anyone who pays attention – good actions lead to good results; bad actions lead to bad consequences. The error comes in reading this backwards, ‘I have a good life, so God has blessed me;’ ‘the poor and the suffering are lazy and irresponsible.’ The Church in Laodicea has taken this error one step further, ‘I have become rich.’ That claim implies that the individual has ‘made himself rich.’ It is by his efforts. Maybe he can acknowledge that God has blessed his efforts, but it is his effort that bought him a good life. The claim, ‘I have need of nothing,’ is a claim to self-sufficiency. It admits no need of God.

Against this false claim, Christ speaks the truth. The ‘beginning of creation’ describes the Church in Laodicea with five adjectives in a row. That pattern of five recalls, again, the five commands given at the dawn of creation, commands that relate humanity to the whole world and all that is in it. The five adjectives indicate that the Church is not living God’s plan established at creation and, even more, that what they say of themselves is delusional. The first word, ‘wretched,’ is the opposite of makarios, ‘blessed,’ ‘fortunate,’ ‘favored.’ This is the word contrasted with ‘cursed’ in covenant ratification ceremonies, the fate of the righteous and wise in Israel’s Wisdom traditions, and the word used by Jesus in pronouncing the beatitudes. ‘Wretched,’ then, implies unfaithful, unwise and unrighteous. The second adjective, ‘miserable,’ carries the sense of pitiable. Against their proud claim to riches and self-sufficiency, Christ finds the Church to be spiritually and morally bankrupt, blind – lacking the insight into where real values lie, and naked and vulnerable in Christian living. Throughout Revelation, the ‘victors’ and the ‘holy ones’ are clothed in white, in righteousness. They don’t ‘see’ the truth and are not of Christ.

The three adjectives describing the bankrupt condition of the Church are countered with remedies from Christ, who advises the community to buy gold, white garments, and eye ointment from him. These commodities are symbolic and figurative (‘Store up for yourselves treasure in heaven’ see Mt 6:19-21). They stand for Christ himself, the true Word of God, who teaches what is of true value.

Two things are significant about v. 19. In a Wisdom statement, Christ states that he reproves and disciplines whomever he loves. The statement counters the false claim of the Church to be blessed, while, in reality being wretched and the claim that it is self-sufficient when it is really to be pitied. On the one hand, Christ is offering a different view of reality. But on the other hand, he reproves and disciplines whomever he loves and he is, in fact, reproving and disciplining the Church. Again there is hope that all is not lost. That, in particular, is carried by the call to change/repent. The word for ‘zeal’ is used only here in the New Testament. Once again this is not a call for enthusiasm, a remedy for half-heartedness, but a call to change. The efforts of the community are centered on amassing false wealth; here they are called on the put their efforts into acts, works, that really matter.

The final image of the letter is that of Jesus knocking at the door. This recalls the image of the open door in the letter to Philadelphia. In that case, however, Christ placed an open door before the Church that no one could lock, assuring them a sense of belonging. Here, the image is reversed. Christ stands outside knocking, hoping for a welcome. This image is illuminated by elements in the history of the city. In 40 BC, Laodicea was the only city in the area to close their gates to a would-be conqueror. The city successfully resisted the attack and established its own dynasty. This continued to be a mark of civic pride, another indication of self-sufficiency. Alternately, in the current circumstances of the city, at the end of the first century, it was a common practice for Roman officials and soldiers to be quartered in the homes of local citizens. This was a power play. Christ is not like the power of Rome, not like the Roman emperor. He does not force an entry but patiently waits to be accepted and received. The image of being invited in and sharing a meal is certainly a reference to the Eucharist. In this, there is a glimmer of hope, but also a caution. The Church can receive Christ, but on his terms, or it can shut its doors and block the presence of Christ from its midst.

The final word of Christ in the letter loosens the message from its particular context and broadens it to address all Christians. The ‘victor’ will be given a share in Christ’s reign, in his authority and power. But this will not be power and authority as the world understands it. The ‘victor’ in the context of this letter, appears to be not so much the one who overcomes present difficulties in the world, but the one who overcomes himself, his own selfishness, ambition, and drive to self-sufficiency.

There is a constant theme that runs through both the Old and New Testaments – that we are invited to a partnership with God, that we have roles to play in God’s plan for humanity. This is but another instance of that theme, to share with Christ a mission whose power resides not in
dominating others, not in amassing wealth and self-sufficiency, but in the good works of the Church, works that flow from and express love, works that imitate and make real the love of Christ to the ends of the earth.

Probably the most powerful image of the letter is the image of Christ knocking at the door. When and how does Christ knock at the doors of our Church? In what ways can our Church express an attitude of self-sufficiency? What does Christ ask us to let go of? In the face of power politics, a socio-economic system that values the ‘bottom line,’ and a culture of consumerism, how is the model of Christ, taking up the cause of the poor and vulnerable, reaching out to the oppressed and powerless, and offering an alternate way of looking at and living in the world, an expression of real power?
The Scroll Vision
The Heavenly Temple – Chapter 4

4:1 After these things, I looked and, behold, a door having been opened in the heaven and the voice, the first, which I heard (was) like a trumpet speaking with me, saying: Come up here and I will show to you what is necessary to happen after these things. 2 Immediately I was (became) in a (the) Spirit and, behold, a throne was made to stand in the heaven and upon the throne one (someone) was sitting, 3 and the one sitting (was) similar to an appearance (aspect) of a stone, jasper (crystal, diamond) and carnelian (blood-red stone) and a rainbow (was) round about the throne similar to the appearance of (something) made of emerald.

4 And round about the throne (I saw) twenty (and) four thrones and upon the thrones, four and twenty elder ones (elders) (were) sitting, having been clothed (having clothed themselves) with white garments and upon their heads, golden crowns. 5 And from out of the throne came forth lightning flashes and voices (sounds) and thunder claps and seven lampstands of fire were burning in front of the throne which are the seven Spirits of God. 6 And in front of the throne (was) a sea of glass similar to a crystal and in the midst of the throne and round about the throne (were) four living creatures being full of eyes in front and in back. 7 And the living creature, the first, (was) similar to a lion and the second living creature (was) similar to a calf and the third living creature (was) having the face like a man and the fourth living creature (was) similar to an eagle flying. 8 One for one of them (each of them individually) having, each individually, six wings round about and within they were full of eyes and rest not do they have of day and night, saying; Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord, God, Almighty one, he (who) was, and he being and he coming. 9 And whenever they will give, the living creatures, glory and honor and thanksgiving to him sitting upon the throne, to the living one, to ages of ages, 10 (then) they will fall (prostrate themselves) the twenty four elders before the one sitting upon the throne and they will worship the living one to the ages of ages and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying: 11 Worthy are you, Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power for you created all things and through your will they came to be and were created.
Textual Notes

1. **Meta tauta** – ‘after these things.’ In biblical narrative, this phrase (Hebrew: *ahar ha debarim*; Greek: *meta tauta*) is used to indicate a change in the line of narration – a change in topic, action, scene, time or place. The phrase functions here to shift focus from concern for the Seven Churches to a heavenly vision. Harrington suggests that the shift here is used to direct the focus of the reader to the future.\(^{135}\)

2. **Eidon** – ‘I looked, saw.’ The primary meaning of the verb is simply ‘to see.’ But, with the change of perspective indicated by *meta tauta*, a more precise rendering would to ‘to look.’ The recipient of the vision changes his focus, the object of what he ‘sees.’

3. **Idou** – ‘Behold!’ As Alter has suggested, ‘Behold’ always indicates a change in perception, a heightened perception, a surprise, a change in viewpoint.\(^{136}\) The shift in perspective suggested here serves to introduce the heavenly vision.

4. **Thura** – ‘door.’ Harrington observes that the conception of the opened heavens is found in Ez 1:1, but that the more precise idea of a door standing open reflects current apocalyptic phraseology as is encountered in Enoch 14:15.\(^ {137}\) In a more immediate sense, however, the ‘door’ recalls the images used in the letters to Philadelphia and Laodicea. Specifically, in the letter to Philadelphia, Christ sets an open door before the Church which no one can shut. There it symbolized access to belonging to God’s people. Here, the open door symbolizes access to, a glimpse, of the heavenly realms, a glimpse into the mind and plan of God.

5. **Ouranos** – ‘heaven.’ In the physical sense, ‘heaven’ means ‘the sky,’ as in the phrase ‘the birds of the heavens.’ Figuratively and symbolically, the ‘heaven’ or the ‘abode above the heaven’ is the realm of the divine. Harrington has observed that, in this vision, the idea of ‘heaven’ combines both of these elements, since the ‘heaven’ will be portrayed as containing symbols for earth’s evils (4:6, 12:7, 13:1) and, by the end of the book, this ‘heaven,’ like the ‘old’ earth, will pass away (20:1, 21:1).\(^{138}\)

6. **He phone he prote** – ‘the first voice.’ It is likely, here, that ‘first voice’ refers to the voice heard previously, the voice commanding him to write to the Seven Churches. That is, the voice belongs to Christ. In this way, the Book of Revelation is woven together into a complete whole, with the messages to the Churches integrally linked to the visions.

7. **Salpingos** – ‘trumpet.’ A ‘theophany’ is defined as the ‘appearance’ of the deity in power. It is generally characterized by lightning and thunder, as in, for example, the appearance of God on Mt. Sinai. Ancient worship attempts to ‘recreate’ this theophany with light, smoke, fire, and sound. In the conquest traditions, people blowing on rams’ horns led the procession of the Ark of the Covenant, an ancient symbol of God’s presence with his people, as Israel marched against its enemies. The sounding of horns, burning lampstands, the smoke of incense, and the like accompanied the offering of temple sacrifices. As was the case in the Inaugural Vision, so, too, here ‘John’ gets a glimpse of a heavenly liturgy. In both cases, the voice like a trumpet blast announces to ‘John’ that he is in the presence of the Holy, that what he sees and hears is from God.

8. **Anaba** – ‘come up here.’ Harrington observes that, in the Inaugural Vision, the seer remained on earth. Now, he is invited/commanded to come up to the heavens. The notion of a ‘heavenly tour’ is a common element in apocalyptic writing.\(^{139}\)

9. **Dei genesthai** – ‘it is necessary to happen/become.’ Apocalyptic writings always include a ‘vision’ of ‘what has to happen.’ There is a deterministic outlook to these writings. That outlook, however, is not wishful thinking on the part of the oppressed, but a strong belief that God is true to his Word. He stands against all that is evil. His Word and his plan will work themselves out. The Book of Revelation does not set out, in a deterministic fashion, to describe exactly how God will overcome evil in the world, but to express in

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135 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
136 Robert Alter, *op. cit.*
137 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
symbolic and imaginative writing the conviction that God’s will is going to be accomplished — in his way and in his own time.

10. Egenomen en pneumatic — ‘I was/became in the spirit.’ Against many older commentators who see in this phrase an indication of ‘ecstatic experience,’ it is to be argued that the phrase functions as a claim to a keen perception of what God and his Word to his people really means. It is a phrase used to describe having a ‘prophetic spirit.’ It is used in the fashion of Is 61:1 as quoted by Jesus: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”

11. Thronos... kai epi ton thronos kathemenos — ‘a throne... and one sitting upon the throne.’ ‘One seated upon the throne’ occurs twelve times in the Book of Revelation and functions as a synonym for God. The ‘throne of God in the heavens’ is a frequent expression in the Old Testament and the description of the heavenly temple shows close similarities to the Inaugural Vision in Ezekiel. In addition to the religious aspects of the image, throne is also a symbol of political power and rule. As expected, there is a not so subtle polemic in the book as to who really rules, God in Christ or the Roman emperor.140

12. Horasei — ‘in appearance.’ While some of the earliest narratives in the Old Testament depicted God physically present to people (God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden; God visited Abraham in his tent and promised the birth of child), later narratives used symbols to indicate the presence of the unseen and unapproachable God. These symbols included heavenly messengers (angels), theophanies — the presence of God encountered in the forces of nature, and the like. In apocalyptic literature, a ‘vision’ of the divine is always couched in vivid images of an appearance, of what is seen and available to human eyes to suggest the presence of the almighty and unapproachable. There can be no immediate vision of God, only a ‘mediated’ one. (see Ezek 1:26-28).

13. Iaspis... sardion... smaragdinos... - ‘jasper,’ ‘carnelian,’ ‘emerald.’ Rogers and Rogers discuss the symbolic meaning of these stones and their color in the ancient world. ‘Jasper’ was a variety of crystal that could be found in many colors. It is possible that, here, it refers to diamond. That would suggest such qualities as majesty, holiness or purity. ‘Carnelian’ is named for Sardis where it is found, is one of the most common precious stones of the ancient world. Its blood-red color was thought to suggest wrath or judgment. ‘Emerald’ is used as the color of the rainbow around the throne. If the rainbow is imagined as a halo, then its color would be green, otherwise it would be the prismatic, multi-colored effect produced by a rainbow in nature. It is suggested that ‘emerald’ suggests the mercy of God.141

Looking a biblical occurrences of these terms, Harrington notes that these three stones are among the twelve stones used on the breastplate of the high priest (Ex 28:17-21). The twelve stones represent the twelve tribes of Israel. The three stones mentioned here appear again in the description of the New Jerusalem in Rev 21; they appear in Ezekiel’s description of the Garden of Eden (Ez 28:10-13). The image of the rainbow is suggested by the Inaugural Vision in Ezekiel (1:28), and also may suggest God’s covenant with Noah in which he ‘hangs his bow,’ his weapon, in the sky. We have a God who does not want to fight with his people. God’s final word, as in all Crime and Punishment stories, is mercy.142

14. Presbyteros — ‘elder.’ Though the word, in later Christian tradition, comes to mean ‘priest,’ the primary meaning of the word is ‘elder.’ Hieros, ‘sanctified one,’ is the usual term for ‘priest’ in Greek, indicating those at the service of the gods. From the earliest Israelite tradition, the ‘elders’ were understood to be the leaders of the Israelite tribes. In liturgical/covenantal imagery in the Bible, the traditional number of elders is 72, six for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Harrington writes that the ‘elders’ in the vision are not to be understood as ‘angels’ but as human beings, human symbols, drawing on Old Testament usage. He suggests that 24 is a reference to the twenty four classes of priests described in Chronicles (1 Chr 24:1-19). The ‘elders,’ here and elsewhere in Revelation (5:8-11, 11:16-18, 19:4), have a cultic/liturgical role. Likewise, they are ‘kings’ or share in a ‘kingly role.’ They are seated on thrones and wear crowns.

Harrington concludes that they represent the people of God, that they are a ‘royal house of priests’ (1:6). They are the heavenly counterpart of the earthly Church for, after their ‘Amen, Hallelujah’ of 19:4, they

140 Ibid.
141 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
142 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
are heard of no more; they are absent from the New Jerusalem.  

Two other aspects of the ‘elders’ appear worthy of note. First, they are clothed in white garments. ‘White’ is associated with righteousness, but white garments have also been promised by Christ to those who endure, who persevere (3:4-5). Second, the crown is not a diadema, a royal crown, but a stephanos, a crown or wreath of victory. The elders, then, are explicitly the victors, those who have overcome and have won the crown. Because they have ‘overcome,’ they are given seats on thrones, as promised in the letter to Philadelphia (3:21). They are not independent kings, but those sharing the throne and authority of Christ – the ideal leadership role in the Church.

15. Astrape... phone... bronte – ‘lightning... thunder.’ What is involved here is a theophanic image, an image of God’s presence in power. Harrington notes that the image recalls the appearance of God on Mt. Sinai in Ex 19:16, a passage that inspired Ez 1:13-14, the likely source of the imagery used here. The ‘seven flaming lamps’ and the ‘seven spirits of God’ are likely derived from Zechariah’s vision (Zech 4:2, 10). The meaning of Zechariah’s vision is that what is to be accomplished by God will not be accomplished by his power, but by his Spirit (Zech 4:6). In 5:6, the ‘seven eyes of the Lamb’ are the ‘seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.’ This recalls the Inaugural Vision in which the eyes of the Christ are flaming, penetrating, an idea picked up in the letter to Thyatira (2:18) in which Christ probes and penetrates inner dispositions. The sending out of the ‘seven spirits’ echoes Zech 4:10. The ‘seven spirits’ also recall 1:4, the ‘seven spirits’ before the throne, a symbol of the seven-fold Spirit – suggested by the gifts and works of the Spirit. The ‘seven flaming lamps,’ consistent with the lightning of the theophany, are the ‘seven angels of the face,’ the archangels of Jewish tradition, as is the case in 8:2.

16. Thelassa hyaline homoia krystallo – a sea of glass like crystal. This may reflect ancient creation imagery in which there is a vault in the heavens separating the waters above from the waters below. The earth is imagined as supported on four pillars keeping it above the lower waters. This imagery is reflected in Gn 1:7 and Ps 104:3. In this imagery, creation is conceived of as bringing order out of chaos. In the ancient imagery, chaos is imagined as Leviathan, a great sea monster overcome by the ‘creating god.’ Harrington notes that the ‘sea of glass’ may refer to the waters above the vault or firmament. He states, however, that the more immediate source of the imagery is to be found in current apocalyptic writings such as II Enoch 3:3, ‘And they showed me (in the first heaven) a vast ocean, much bigger than the earthly ocean.’ It is natural to suppose that this ‘sea of glass’ is the same as the ‘sea of glass mingled with fire’ of Rev 15:2. An association of the ‘sea of glass’ with the defeat of the chaos monster occurs in Rev 21:1.

17. Meso tou thronou kai kyklo tou thronou tessara zoa – ‘in the midst of the throne and around the throne (were) four living creatures.’ The sense of this phrase is difficult of determine. Rogers and Rogers offer an acceptable possibility. They state that the image portrays one of the four living creatures on each of the four sides of the throne, either stationary, or moving rapidly around. The exact location is a bit uncertain but ‘in the midst’ apparently means in the immediate vicinity. Thus, they surround the throne as an inner circle. The vision may be that of the mercy seat so the living creatures form a part of the throne; they are in the midst of the throne as constituents of it and the Lamb is in the midst of the throne as its occupant. (Note: The ‘mercy seat’

143 Ibid.  
144 Ibid.  
145 Ibid.  
146 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
refers to the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was a special religious object of the Northern Tribes that formed the nation of Israel. It was brought by David to his new capital, Jerusalem, and enshrined in the temple of Solomon. This move forged the unity between the Northern and Southern Tribes under the Davidic monarchy. The Ark purportedly contained the Tablets of Stone given to Moses and a jar of manna from the wilderness wanderings. The contents of the Ark represented the presence of God with his people. The lid of the Ark, with its two Cherubim, represented the cloud that covered Mt. Sinai whenever Moses ascended it to talk with God. This cloud ‘shrouded’ the presence of God from the people below. It was a sign of ‘mercy’ because the presence of the Almighty was too powerful for normal humans to see and live.

Harrington notes that the ‘four living creatures’ are similar to the Cherubim in Ezekiel and are common features in Jewish apocalyptic writings. They are the four angels responsible for directing the physical world and, as such, symbolize all of creation. He cites a Rabbinic writing, the Midrash Shemoth, which states: ‘Man is exalted among creatures, the eagle among birds, the ox among domestic animals, the lion among wild beasts; all of them have received dominion.’ The Cherubim of Ezekiel, human in form, had four faces – man, lion, ox and eagle; they have four wings and human hands. Revelation has simplified this complicated imagery from Ezekiel. As such, the ‘four living creatures’ are heavenly counterparts of the created order who offer before the throne worship fitting of the created world.

18. *Gemonta ophthalmon empprosthen kai opisthen* – ‘being full of eyes in front and behind.’ Harrington notes that Jewish apocalyptic writings have added to the Seraphim and Cherubim, the egregoroi, who never close their eyes, and the ophanim, who are covered everywhere with eyes. The multitude of eyes and the ‘ever open’ eyes are suggestive of constant vigilance before God, constant attention to the deity. It might also be possible to suggest that, since these are heavenly creatures, counterparts to the created world, that the eyes suggest vigilance on God’s part in ‘looking’ through them at the works of his world, and more particularly his Church.

19. *Pterygas hex* – ‘six wings.’ This is an image of Seraphim drawn from Is 6:2.

20. *Agios* – ‘holy.’ The triple ‘holy, holy, holy,’ is derived from Is 6:3 (‘And one – the Seraphim - called to another and said: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’) The phrase is repeated in the apocalyptic writings of I and II Enoch. In Leviticus, the people of Israel are called to be ‘holy’ as God is ‘holy.’ *Agios* translates the Hebrew word *kabod.* A primary meaning of *kabod* is ‘weightiness,’ ‘heaviness’ in the sense of ‘substantial.’ In the Old Testament, as an attribute of God, it refers to the absolute ‘otherness’ of God, his ‘inapproachability.’ When applied to humans, and to objects used in the worship of God, it connotes ‘set apart,’ ‘taken out of normal use and reserved for the sacred.’ An oversimplification of the nuances of the word suggests that *kabod/agios* separates the ‘sacred’ from the ‘secular.’ Such a separation fits the dualistic thinking of Revelation what sees a separation between the ‘heavenly’ and the ‘earthly,’ the ‘Godly’ and the ‘ungodly.’

As in Isaiah, ‘Holy, holy, holy’ begins a hymn of creation – hymn used in the sense of the hymnic psalms. This is carried in the term *pantocrator* – ‘Almighty,’ an attribute of God associated with his creative actions. The final phrase of the acclamation, as was discussed in the Inaugural Vision, indicates the eternity of God.

21. *Pesountai… proskynesousin* – ‘fall… bend the knee/worship.’ Literally, the words mean ‘to prostrate oneself’ and ‘to genuflect.’ They are traditional forms of showing obeisance to royalty and deities. They imply due respect and honor. In the New Testament, ‘to bend the knee’ is synonymous with ‘to worship.’ Harrington notes that the elders, in keeping with their cultic role throughout the book, join in the worship of all creation.

22. *Balousin tous stephanous* – ‘cast their crowns.’ Harrington states that, as vassal kings removed their crowns when coming into the presence of the emperor, these ‘kings’ lay their diadems of victory before their Lord. Their victory and their glory were from him. The language reflects the ceremonial practices of

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147 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
148 Ibid.
149 NRSV translation.
the imperial court.\textsuperscript{150}
It needs to be pointed out, however, that the word \textit{diadema} is reserved in the Book of Revelation for royal crowns. The word used in this verse is \textit{stephanos}, the crown or wreath of victory in battle or athletic contests, or the garland worn in festivals. The elders sit on thrones and share the authority of Jesus Christ, but they are still subordinate to him. There is also an implied polemical contrast between the heavenly liturgy and the ceremonial practices of the imperial court. It is God, in Christ, who holds the true reigns of authority.

\textit{Kyrios kai ho theos hemon} – ‘our Lord and God.’ As the Roman empire moved towards honoring its emperors as deities, it became more common for the Emperor to adopt the title \textit{Dominus et Deus} – \textit{kyrios kai theos} in Greek. This practice appears to be particularly true of Domitian in the late first century. The acclamation of the elders/presbyters, then is another indication of the polemic outlook of the book. God enthroned in the heavens is \textit{Lord and God} alone, despite the pretensions of earthly power structures.\textit{axios} – worthy. The acclamation of God is his due – he is worthy. More than this, there is a suggested association with those who ‘overcome’ and are proclaimed ‘worthy.’ In the ‘mixture’ of heaven and earth in this vision, what was suggested in the letters is demonstrated – there is a share in divinity and divine authority in which both God and humans are proclaimed as ‘worthy,’ within their own spheres, to exercise authority, to ‘Glory,’ ‘honor’ and ‘power’ are, typically, attributes of a mighty ruler/conqueror. In contrast, ‘glory’ carries a liturgical sense that, again, contrasts the acclamations of the living creatures and the elders with the pretensions of Rome.

\textsuperscript{150} Wilfrid Harrington, \textit{op. cit.}
Commentary

The vision of the throne begins with the words, “After these things...” In Biblical narrative, this phrase is an indicator of a change in topic, a scene change, a new direction in the story being told. The phrase implies all that has gone before – the Inaugural Vision and the letters to the Seven Churches. This is the context in which the visions will unfold.

The visions are told from the perspective of the ‘seer,’ the otherwise unknown ‘John.’ But it is necessary to remember that this voice is mediated through the voice of the all-knowing narrator of 1:1-3. The visions, the whole content of the book are addressed by the narrator to all who read – to us.

‘Behold!’ The use of this word always signals a change in perspective, a surprise, an intense insight. In this case, the “seer’s” perspective changes from earth to heaven. He has concentrated his attention on the situation and condition of the Churches in Asia; now his gaze turns to an ‘open door’ in the heavens. What comes now will view matters from a heavenly perspective. The image of a ‘door’ was used twice, in the letters to Philadelphia and Laodicea. In the first instance, it carried a sense of ‘belonging’ for members of the Church in the ‘temple of God.’ In the latter case, the image had Christ knocking at the door; it was a door that people could choose to open or not. The open door in the heavens recalls the sense of belonging for those who ‘overcome,’ for those who accept and live God’s will. But the image also reverses the sense of the image in the letter to Laodicea. There the questions was, ‘Will someone open the door and let Christ in?’ Here, the open door beckons. Will the seer (and the reader) accept the invitation to enter, to see things from God’s perspective? Will we?

The ‘first voice’ refers to the voice from the Inaugural vision, the voice of Christ. That voice was like a trumpet blast. The ‘trumpet blast’ was a common feature of Jewish temple celebrations. It represented the appearance of God to his people in a theophany, such as the lightning and thunder that accompanied God’s presence in the cloud on Mt. Sinai. The voice of Christ, carrying with it the very presence of God, beckons the seer to ‘come up.’ This reverses the pattern of the Inaugural Vision in which ‘John,’ on the Island of Patmos, sees the vision and hears the commands to write to the Churches. Now, he is summoned to the heavenly realms where Christ will show him what has to be, what must come about. The final words of v. 1 are ‘after these things.’ The envelope structure completes the transition from earth to heaven.

Being ‘in the Spirit’ regularly refers to prophetic inspiration, being caught up in God’s view of things. It does not necessarily mean ‘ecstatic experience,’ but a view of reality that conforms to God’s. The primary image of chapter 4 is the heavenly throne. In symbolic images, the seer will see a portrait of what authentic authority looks like. ‘The one sitting on the throne,’ in Revelation, always refers to God. The vision concerns an image of God, what God is like, not a vision of God himself. This is consistent with Jewish and Christian thought patterns in which God is absolutely ‘other,’ but also imminent, available to his people, but in a mediated way. (‘No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.’ Jn 1:18) The three stones in the image of God are highly symbolic. First, they are three of the twelve stones with which the breastplate of the high priest was adorned in Exodus. The twelve stones represent the twelve tribes of Israel. Second, each of the three stones has a symbolic usage or meaning: Jasper/diamond suggests God’s holiness and purity; Carnelian, a red stone, suggests wrath and judgment; and emerald, a green stone, suggests God’s mercy. It can be suggested that the three stones, as part of the twelve stones representing God’s

151 NRSV Translation.
people, may indicate the Godly aspect of this people, the Church. The people of God are, or should be, set apart, pure, holy; they share in God’s rule, to set things right, to discern between right and wrong, good and evil; they are to ‘rule’ with mercy. This specifically recalls the promise to those who ‘overcome’ in the letter to Thyatira (‘He will shepherd them (the nations) with an iron rod.’ 2:27).

A subtle, but significant aspect of this vision of the throne of God is the rainbow. Commentators suggest that it may refer to a halo above the throne or stones encircling it. In either case, the image is of a rainbow and this recalls God’s covenant with Noah after the great flood. The Noah story derives from common ancient near eastern myths in which arbitrary gods destroy the bulk of humanity out of anger over trivial ‘crimes.’ As is typical of Crime-and-Punishment stories in the Bible, humanity’s failure in the Noah story was significant, but in the end, God’s mercy prevailed. He hung up his ‘bow,’ his weapons. We have a God who does not want to fight with his people; we have a God whose final word to humanity is ‘mercy.’

In every one of the letters to the Churches, those of praise and those of censure, some aspect in the life of the Church was pointed out as worthy of judgment, of censure. In all cases, the Church, whether from its own actions or from the situation in the larger world in which it found itself, was in need of God’s mercy, compassion. In what ways does the Church today stand in need of God’s mercy? What are the circumstances of the Church in the world today that cause it pain and oppose God’s plan with human power? What are the actions of the Church that display self-interest, self-sufficiency, and unfaithfulness to God’s will and plan? How does the image of the throne speak to the needs of the Church in our time?

The throne of God is surrounded by twenty-four thrones occupied by twenty-four elders/presbyters. They are clothed in white and wear golden crowns. The garments and crowns represent victory; these are those who have ‘overcome,’ ‘endured,’ ‘been victorious.’ (see 2:27, 3:4-5, and 3:21 – promises of Christ to those who overcome.) The twenty-four elders function as a heavenly counterpart to the agioi, the ‘holy ones’ on earth, just as the seven lampstands in the Inaugural Vision were the heavenly counterparts of the Seven Churches of Asia. They symbolize for the Church, what can be. Especially, they have a role in the heavenly liturgy, presenting an ideal of how the Church, by its works, is to offer fitting praise to God.

It is important to note that, though presented as ‘kings,’ the word for ‘crown’ used here is stephanos, not diadema. They do not wear royal crowns, which would imply independent sovereignty, but crowns of ‘victory,’ crowns given by Christ to allow them a share in his authority. They are subordinate to, dependent on God and Christ in their rule.

With the description of the throne of God and the thrones of the twenty-four elders, the scene is set for a ‘heavenly liturgy.’ It begins with a description of God’s presence on the throne. Thunder, lightning, loud noise, fire – these are all components of a ‘theophany,’ the mysterious appearance of God in power, in the forces of nature, as was the case with God descending on Mt. Sinai in Exodus to enter into a covenant relationship with his people. The seven burning lampstands are identified with the seven spirits of God. This image draws on Is 11:2-3.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.152

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152 NRSV translation.
The lampstands also recall the golden lampstands of the Inaugural Vision, which represented the Seven Churches. The implication is that the seven spirits of God should animate the life of the earthly Church.

The ‘sea of glass’ around the throne is the image of still and peaceful waters. There is a suggestion that the throne is sitting upon this ‘sea.’ This recalls ancient Near Eastern creations imagery that lies behind the creation account of Genesis 1. God separates the waters below from the waters above, creating a vault or firmament in the sky. God resides above the heavenly waters and the earth emerges above the waters below, supported on four large pillars. Creation, then, is imagined not as making something out of nothing, but as bringing order out of chaos. In creation imagery, Leviathan, the watery chaos monster resides in the waters below the earth and threatens to bring a return of chaos, threatening to destroy the order God has established. It is the light of this imagery that the four living creatures are to be understood.

In Jewish apocalyptic writings, two classes of ‘angels’ have been added to the Seraphim and Cherubim, one class that never closes its eyes and the other covered with eyes all over. The imagery suggests that they are ever vigilant, always attentive to God. The most likely explanation of the image of the four living creatures is that they are ‘angels,’ heavenly creatures that function as pillars or supports holding up the throne of God. Their appearance is significant: the first appears as a lion, the most exalted animal among wild beasts; the second appears as an ox, the most exalted animal among domesticated animals; the third appears as a man, the most exalted being on the earth; and the fourth appears as an eagle, the most exalted bird of the heavens. These living creatures are heavenly counterparts of physical beings on the plane of creation. It is noteworthy that there is no living creature as a counterpart for the beings who dwell in the sea. It is possible to suggest that the most dominant sea creature is the watery chaos monster, the being who represents evil and opposes the order and goodness willed by God. The four living creatures, then, represent all of the physical cosmos.

The description of the living creatures ends with the note that they have six wings and repeats that they are covered with eyes. This firmly associates the living creatures with the Seraphim of Is 6:2 and the Jewish tradition that they are constant attendants at the throne of God proclaiming his praises. With the acclamation of the four living creatures, the heavenly liturgy begins. Their acclamation, ‘Holy, holy, holy, Almighty One, He who is and was and is coming,’ is a variation of the acclamation of the Seraphim in Isaiah, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! The whole world is full of his glory.’ ‘Lord of hosts,’ literally means ‘Lord of the armies.’ It is an acclamation of God as the one who defeats Israel’s enemies. Regularly, the Book of Revelation substitutes ‘Almighty one’ for this title. Instead of acclaiming God’s glory throughout the created world, the living creatures focus on the eternal nature of God: Most holy is the all powerful and eternal one. Their focus is on the ‘heavenly’ God, the God who is totally other, unapproachable.

In an antiphonal move, whenever the four living creatures issue their acclamation of praise, they are answered by the acclamation of the twenty-four elders. Yet, note the variation in their response: ‘Worthy are you, Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power for you created all things and through your will they came to be and were created.’ These elders prostrate themselves, a posture appropriate for worship, and cast their crowns before the throne, an action common for lesser kings in the presence of the emperor. In part, the variation is an example of the polemic tone of the book: it is God alone who is worthy of glory and honor and power. Before him, all claims of earthy status and

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153 Hirsch and Benzinger, “Seraphim,” Jewish Encyclopedia.com
power fail. It is God, not the Roman emperor, who is worthy. God is the creator, the source of all, including the supposed ‘earthly power structures.’ The action and acclamation of the elders also expresses human dependence on God, who created all and sustains all. This attitude speaks directly against the attitude of self-sufficiency seen as a characteristic of some the Churches addressed in the letters.

In the end, the throne vision explores an image of the relationship between God and his creation, between God and his Church. There is dignity for those who ‘overcome.’ They share the authority of Christ himself, an authority to shepherd the world, to set things right, to be a means of love and mercy. This is an ideal set before the Church, that it mirror the heavenly liturgy, the heavenly relationship between God and creatures. Is the dignity of followers of Jesus Christ, is the dignity of the Church apparent in our world? Is my Church community a ‘force’ for good in the world, a power to be reckoned with? Is the ‘power’ of the Church, on the local or universal level, exercised as an authority subordinate to Christ, or is it exercised on the model of earthly power, power wielded for its own sake? Does the throne vision shed any light on what it really means to be Christian, to be formed into the Church?
And I saw in the right hand of him sitting upon the throne a book (scroll) having been written inside and outside (on the front side and the back), having been sealed (with) seven seals.

And I saw a strong messenger (angel) proclaiming (heralding) in a loud voice: Who (is) worthy to open the book (scroll) and to loosen its seals? And no one was able in the heaven nor upon the earth nor under the earth to open the book (scroll) nor to look upon it. And I was crying (mourning) much (over many things) because no one worthy was found to open the book (scroll) nor to look at it. And one from the elders says to me: Do not weep. Behold, the lion was victorious, the one from the tribe of Judah, (from) the root (stump) of David, to open the book (scroll) and its seven seals.

And I saw in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and in the midst of the elders a lamb standing, like one having been slaughtered (sacrificed), having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God having been sent out into all the earth. And he came and received (took) (it) from the right hand of the one sitting upon the throne. And when he had received (taken) the book (scroll), the four living creatures and the twenty four elders fell before the lamb, each having a harp and golden bowls having been full (that were full) of incenses which are the prayers (supplications) of the holy ones (saints). And they are singing a new song saying: Worthy are you to receive (take) the book (scroll) and open its seals because you were slaughtered and you bought (back – redeemed) for God in your blood from out of every tribe and tongue (language) and people and nation, and you have made them for our God kings and priests and they will rule upon the earth. And I looked and I heard the voice (sound) of many angels (messengers) round about the throne and the living creature and the elders, and their number was myriads (a large, indefinite number) of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying in a loud voice: Worthy is the lamb having been slaughtered to receive the power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise. And every creature which (is) in the heaven and upon the earth and under the earth and upon the sea and the (that which) (is) in them all (and everything in them) saying: to him sitting upon the throne and to the lamb (be) praise and honor and glory and strength to the ages of the ages. And the four living creatures said: Amen. And the elders fell down and worshipped.
Textual Notes

1. *Biblios* – scroll, book. The scroll is seen in the right hand of the one sitting on the throne. Holding something in one’s right hand is a literary device indicating absolute ownership. This scroll belongs to God. ‘having been written/inscribed’ is a perfect, passive participle. The perfect tense denotes an action completed in the past that continues to be effective in the present. The passive voice, in biblical literature is often used to indicate the action of God while avoiding an active anthropomorphism. The implication is that, not only is God the owner of this scroll, it contains the Word of God. Rogers and Rogers suggest that the fact that the scroll is inscribed on both sides is an indication of how extensive and comprehensive God’s Word is.\(^{154}\)

Harrington notes that there are a number of suggestions as to the contents of this scroll: the Book of Life; the revelation of coming events throughout the book; the Old Testament. He suggests that it more likely to represent God’s plan for the world to be carried out by the Lamb.\(^{155}\)

2. *Angelos ischyros* – a strong/mighty angel. Harrington suggests that the source of the image is Dn 4:13-14. The reference is to a ‘Holy Watcher’ coming down from heaven to make a proclamation.\(^{156}\) The connection seems tenuous. In itself, there is a logic to the image. The ‘strong’ angel raises the question, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and loosen its seals?’ The implication is that the ‘strong angel’ can’t do it. V. 3 makes it explicit that no one in heaven, on earth, or under the earth was even able to look on the scroll.

*axios* – worthy. ‘Worthy’ carries the meaning of ‘morally fit,’ ‘suitable.’ Here, since heavenly creatures are unable to open the scroll, it also suggests simply ‘capable.’

3. *Eklaion* – ‘I was weeping.’ Harrington notes that the weeping is not to be understood as frustration at not being able to get a peek inside the scroll. Failure to open the scroll indicates that God’s word and plan remains remote. The fulfillment of God’s plan is being delayed for lack of a suitable agent to open the scroll.\(^{157}\)

4. *Idou enikesen ho leon* – ‘Behold! The lion was victorious/overcame.’ Harrington notes that the meaning of the verb is nuanced on several occasions in Revelation so that ‘victory’ means ‘to win the right to.’ This ‘victory,’ ‘winning the right’ is what makes one worthy to perform a task.\(^{158}\) ‘Behold’ indicates an occurrence contrary to what is expected, a surprise.

5. *Arnion hestekos hos esphagmenon* – ‘a lamb standing like one having been slaughtered.’ *Arnion* is the diminutive for ‘lamb’ – ‘little lamb.’ (Not to be confused with Mary’s.) *amnos* is the usual word. The use of the diminutive accentuates the contrast. The ‘seer’ looks to see the lion of the house of Judah – a messianic term, and instead sees a little lamb. Harrington notes that, from this point on, ‘lamb’ will be the preferred title for Christ in the book.\(^{159}\)

The unexpected and surprising nature of the image is heightened by the fact that the ‘lamb’ has been slaughtered and yet is standing. Harrington again observes that, while ‘slaughtered lamb’ may be suggestive of a ‘sacrificial lamb’ in temple sacrifices, the verb *sphazo* is not used for sacrifices but usually indicates a violent death – such as crucifixion.\(^{160}\)

6. *Echon kerata hepta kai ophthalmous hepta* – ‘having seven horns and seven eyes.’ Rogers and Rogers suggest that ‘horn’ is proverbially a symbol of courage, strength, and might. The seven horns (seven being a number suggesting perfection, completion) stress that Christ, the Lamb, is omnipotent, and the seven eyes stress that he is omniscient. The lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, bearing the wounds of

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\(^{154}\) Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*

\(^{155}\) Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

\(^{156}\) *Ibid.*


\(^{158}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{159}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{160}\) *Ibid.*

7. **Hepta pneumata** – ‘seven spirits.’ The ‘seven eyes’ of the lamb are identified with the ‘seven spirits’ of God. This image recalls both Is 11:2, a text used in the New Testament in messianic contexts, and Zech 4:10 (‘These are the seven eyes which range through the whole earth.’). The ‘seven spirits’ of God were introduced in the Throne Vision (4:5). The ‘seven spirits’ of God, represented by the flaming lampstands situated around the heavenly throne have been made available on earth by means of the all-knowing Lamb who has been sacrificed. (see Mt 11:27, Lk 10:22)  

8. **Eilephen ek tes dexias** – ‘he took/received (it) from the right hand.’ To take/receive something from the right hand of one sitting on a throne is a symbolic transfer of power, authority, ownership.  

9. **Kitharan kai phialas** – ‘harp and bowl.’ Harrington observes that the elders, in keeping with their cultic function, hold harps in the manner of the Levites (I Chr 25) and censers; they exercise the priestly office of mediation, offering the prayers of the faithful to God (see Ps 141:2). The agioi – ‘holy ones/saints,’ refers to the followers of Christ. The people of Israel, as the Chosen People, were to be ‘holy,’ ‘set apart.’ In New Testament thought, that ‘people set apart’ for their God has become God’s new people, those who believe in and confess God’s only Son. In late Jewish writings of the Intertestamental Period, the function of carrying the prayers of the people to God belonged to Michael and the Archangels. That function is clearly transferred to the elders around the throne.  

That the living creatures and the elders ‘fell down and worshipped’ the Lamb, is an indication of the movement within the book to progressively associate the Lamb with God.  

10. **Oden kainen** – ‘new song.’ ‘New song’ is a frequent expression in the Psalms (33:3, 40:4, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9, 149:1). A careful study of the Psalms indicates that most often the ‘new song’ is spun out of old images and sentiments. The ‘newness’ was seen in applying the old to a new occasion, or in re-invigorating older prayers and sentiments with a new fervor or sense of renewed faithfulness. Harrington observes that ‘newness’ in character, purity, and permanence is a favorite theme in Revelation – newness not as regards to time, but as regards to quality – the new name (2:17, 3:12), the new heaven and the new earth (21:1), and the new Jerusalem (21:10). In Ch 4, God is worthy of glory, honor and power because he is the creator; in Ch 5, the Lamb is worthy because he redeemed/bought back people from every tribe and nation through his blood – the price of redemption/buying back. The paralleling of God and the Lamb in the liturgies of Chs 4 and 5 conveys in subtle but unmistakable manner that creation and redemption are focal points of the book, and intimately related – redemption being the ultimate goal of creation.  

11. **Basileian kai hieres** – ‘kings and priests.’ The phrase recalls I:6 and serves to associate the redeemed with the elders of the throne vision, the counterparts of those redeemed on earth. It also reflects the ‘liturgical’ role of the elders and suggests that all earthly rule, if it is authentic, is to be exercised in such a way that it renders to God is due, acknowledges dependence on him.  

12. **Myriades myriodon kai chliades chliadon** – ‘myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands.’ The use of the repeated genitive, as in ‘King of kings,’ indicates a superlative. Uncountable numbers join in the doxology. This is a new feature in Revelation, but it draws on imagery from Dn 7:10 and I Enoch 40:1.  

13. **Axion estin ton arnion** – ‘worthy is the lamb.’ The doxology in praise of the Lamb is more expansive than that offered to God in ch. 4. This does not reflect the relative status of God and the Lamb, but most likely is a response to ‘joy’ in the fact that through the Lamb, the scroll can be opened, God’s Word can become available to his people. In v. 13, a doxology is offered to God and the Lamb equally. Harrington notes that the union of God and the Lamb represents an advanced Christology. The same worship is offered to both, just as they share the same throne (22:3). The scenes of heavenly worship in chs. 4 and 5 concern realities which, if heavenly, are part of the world’s existence.
present structure. The slain Lame, acclaimed in heaven, belongs to our world, even when not acknowledged here.\textsuperscript{166}

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
Commentary

The vision continues with ‘John’ seeing a scroll in the right hand of the one sitting on the throne, of God. The specification of the ‘right hand’ indicates full ownership, full authority over what is held. That the scroll has writing on both sides indicates the fullness, the comprehensiveness of God’s Word. Attempts to identify the writing on the scroll with some specific aspect of God’s Word all fail. It is the fullness of his word that is envisioned. While it can be noted that Roman law prescribed sealing certain documents, such as wills, with seven seals, it is more likely that the author, perhaps suggesting a contrast between the power of Rome and God’s authority, regularly uses the number seven as a sign of completion and perfection. This scroll, containing the fullness of God’s word, is completely sealed.

Next, the vision turns to a ‘strong angel’ who proclaims, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and loosen its seals?” The implication is that even this ‘strong angel’ is unable to do so. Nor is anyone in the heavens, on earth, or under the earth able to do so, or even to look at the scroll. God’s Word is completely sealed away from the created order. At this the ‘seer’ weeps bitterly – not because of frustrated expectations but because God’s Word, his will, his plan is delayed in its fulfillment. In the Lord’s prayer, we pray, ‘your kingdom come, your will be done…’ There can be sadness when the justice and peace that is hoped for and prayed for is delayed in becoming real. This is the sense of the sadness experienced by the ‘seer.’

And yet there is hope. One of the elders tells of something unexpected, surprising in the midst of the present sadness (Behold!). The ‘lion of Judah,’ the ‘root of David’ has won the right to receive and open the scroll. The titles used are messianic titles. The Messiah was expected to come from the tribe of Judah, from the house and family of David. There is such a person and he has already been victorious; his victory wins him the right to mediate God’s word to all creation.

What is surprising and unexpected does not end here. ‘John’ looks about the see the lion and sees, instead, the Lamb. It is a minor point, but the word *arnion* is used in place of the usual word *amnon*. The lamb that appears is a ‘little lamb.’ The appearance of this Lamb is jarring. It is a Lamb that has been slaughtered, and yet is standing. Having been slaughtered, it lives. The image of the slaughtered lamb does suggest temple sacrifices, but the word used for ‘slaughtered’ is not the usual word for sacrificial offerings; it is a word that indicates a violent killing, obviously suggesting crucifixion. It is in this that the lamb was victorious, that it won the right to receive and open the scroll.

The Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes. The ‘horn,’ especially the ram’s horn, is a symbol of courage, strength and power. The armies of Israel marched off to battle accompanied by the blowing of these horns. The blowing of horns, trumpet blasts, were used in temple worship to suggest the theophanic coming of God in power. The seven horns indicate that this ‘little lamb’ is omnipotent. The seven eyes indicate that it is all-seeing, omniscient. The seven eyes are identified with the seven spirits of God that have already been sent out, by means of the lamb, to all the earth. The victorious lamb already functions as a mediator of God’s Word, and will and Spirit. This omnipotent and omniscient Lamb, takes/receives the scroll from the right hand of God. To receive something from the right hand of a king, from one sitting on a throne, always indicates a transfer of authority, power, and ownership.

Now, a new heavenly liturgy unfolds. With the transfer of authority, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders all fall down before the Lamb. The elders are holding harps, an image drawn from the priestly function of the Levites as detailed in the First Book of Chronicles. That they hold censers whose burning incense represents the prayers of the ‘holy ones.’ The people of Israel was called to be
‘holy,’ to be a people ‘set apart’ for God. In light of the Jewish/Christian hostility that stands behind the situation of the Church in some of the letters, the image of the Lamb and the heavenly liturgy has a certain apologetic/polemic tone. In terms of an explanation (apologetics) the image proclaims the Lamb to be the expected Messiah in the line of David; in terms of an argument (polemics) the image indicates that the followers of the Lamb are ‘the holy ones,’ that they have replaced the Jews who do not accept the Christ, as the people set apart for God. In later Jewish writings, the function of carrying the prayers of the ‘holy ones’ before the face of God belonged to the Archangels. Now that function is transferred to the elders before the throne as a particularly priestly function.

The idea of ‘singing a new song’ is familiar from the Psalms. A close study of the Psalms, however, finds very little new in what is announced as a ‘new song.’ In most cases, the ‘newness’ seems to reflect a new situation in which the prayer is offered, or a renewed sense of fervor, dedication. That is the sense in which ‘new song’ is used here. The doxology offered is more expansive than that addressed to God in Chapter 4, but this reflects the sense of joy – even newness – that comes from having access to the fullness of God’s Word. The Lamb is celebrated as worthy because, at the price of his blood, he has redeemed some from every nation, people, tribe and language – from all people on the face of the earth. Redemption, in the ancient world and in the history of the people of Israel, literally means ‘to buy back.’ Debtors were enslaved or placed in a type of indentured servitude until the debt was fully repaid. They could be ‘redeemed’ by close relatives who paid the price to cancel the debt and return the debtor to freedom. The socio-economic practice functions as an image for the sacrificial practices of Israel to atone for sin, to pay back a debt to God. But these were sacrifices that had to be repeated. What Christ accomplishes for the world – buying people back from slavery to sin, reconciling a debt owed to God, is the final victory, a once-for-all cancellation of the debt. But the price of our redemption is nothing short of the blood of Christ. In Ch. 4, God is celebrated as worthy because of his acts of creation; here Christ is lauded as worthy because of his redemptive sacrifice. In the logic of the Book of Revelation, creation and redemption are inextricably connected, with redemption understood as the goal of creation, a goal that is accomplished in Christ.

In another ‘new’ move, the living creatures and the elders are joined by countless numbers of angels who sing a ‘new’ doxology, a ‘new’ statement of praise addressed to the Lamb. Throughout the heavens there joy and exaltation that the Lamb is able to make God present to all creation. This is followed by all creation joining in the praise for both God and the Lamb. There is a progressive association and identification of God and the Lamb throughout the book, which represents an advanced Christology, an advanced understanding of the Christ and his relationship with the Father. The chapter ends with the affirmation of the living creatures, “Amen,” and subsequent worship of the elders.

The vision of the Lamb and the Scroll speaks on the once-for-all victory of Christ, constituting him as our mediator and means of access to the love and mercy of God. In this, we have been established as priests and rulers, under the authority of Christ. In what way is the Church called on to exercise authority, to direct all people to God? What is our role in this as individuals? On the model of Christ, what must the Church sacrifice to participate in the redemption of humanity? What price are we willing to pay? Is it enough?
The Seven Seals
The First Four Seals (6:1-8)

6:1 And I saw, when the lamb opened one out of the seven seals, and I heard one from the four living creatures speaking as a sound of thunder: Come (be present, appear)! 2And I saw and, behold, a white horse and he sitting on it having a bow and was given to him a crown and he went forth conquering so that indeed he might conquer (be victorious).

3And when he opened the second seal, I heard (the voice) of the second living creature saying: Come! 4And went forth another horse, fiery red, and to the one sitting upon it was granted to him to take peace out of the earth that also one another they will slaughter and was given to him a great sword.

5And when he opened the seal, the third, I heard (the voice) of the third living creature saying: Come. 6And I saw and, behold, a black horse and the one sitting on it having scales in his hand. 7And I heard (something) like a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying: A dry measure of grain (wheat) of (for) a denarius and three measures of barley of (for) a denarius, and (but) the oil and the wine you should not harm (damage).

8And when he opened the fourth seal I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying: Come. 9And I saw and, behold, a horse, yellowish-green (pale, deathly pale), and he sitting on it, the name to him (was) Death, and Hades followed with (after) him; and was given to them authority over a fourth of the earth to kill with a sword and with famine and with death (plague), and by means of the beasts of the earth.
Textual Notes

1. *Hoto enoixen to arnion mian ek ton hepta sphragidon* — ‘When the Lamb opened one of the seven seals.’ Breaking/loosening the seals is a symbolic action and, because it takes the strength of the ‘Lamb’ to accomplish, an act of power — letting free God’s Word and its effects. In this case, breaking the seals unleashes a series of seven ‘plagues.’ Biblical ‘plague’ stories uniformly are political and polemical. The Pentateuch and Deuteronomical History, along with most of the writing prophets, achieve their final shape in the context of the Babylonian Exile. In that context, the plagues in Egypt take on a political and polemical tone. As God thwarted the pretensions of the Egyptians and their false sense of power, he will act again to bring down the false power of the Babylonians and restore the fortunes of Israel. It can be argued that the Egyptian plague narrative functioned as an ancient Israelite *Hogan’s Heroes.* Prisoners of war in a German camp, Hogan and his men regularly thwarted the supposed might of the Third Reich. The show was popular during the time of the Vietnam War, when the fate of American Prisoners of War was unknown. The show gave a sense of hope that, as POW’s in a German camp thwarted the Germans, so POW’s in Vietnamese camps would thwart their captors.

   A plague story forms part of the Ark Narrative in I Samuel. The whole Ark Narrative is modeled on the Exodus story. In this case, it is the supposed power of the Philistines that is countered by God’s involvement in the life of his people. Within the Deuteronomical History, the story functioned to give hope that God would again take up the cause of his people during the times of political crisis faced by the Israelite monarchy.

   In prophetic literature, the prophets announce oracles against both Israel and foreign nations. Against Israel, the hardships endured by Israel was for the sake of discipline, bringing the people back to covenant fidelity. The hardships to be endured by the foreign powers was punishment for assuming they were really powerful, when all power belongs to God.

   What is new in the Book of Revelation is that the wielding of God’s wrath is not directed to the redemption of his Chosen People alone, but all nations, people, tribes and tongues. What Revelation envisions is the overturning of what went wrong with the whole world, bring all of creation within the compass of God’s love and mercy.

   The source of the imagery of the first four plagues is derived from Zech 1:8-11, 6:1-8. Zechariah’s words looked and hoped for the demise of Babylonian power. In Revelation, Babylon is a symbol for Rome.

2. *Erchou* — Come! With the first seal broken, it is one of the living creatures that calls forth the first plague. It can be suggested that, as a heavenly representative of the whole created order, creation itself is calling for a cleansing, a purging. Harrington suggests that, since this living creatures calls out with a voice like thunder, it could be the ‘lion.’

   This is probably over-pressed since none of the other living creatures calling forth subsequent plagues are so identified.

3. *Hippos leukos* — ‘white horse.’ Throughout Revelation ‘white’ is the color of victory; those who overcome are clothed in white garments — these are identified as the ‘holy ones,’ *agioi.* Rogers and Rogers note that in the later Rabbinic writings the coming of the Messiah was associated with the sight of a horse. It is possible that war horses were associated with messianic woes, that is, with the suffering the preceded the dawning of the Messianic age.

   The Christology of the New Testament identifies Jesus Christ as the Messiah already present and effective in the world. The Jewish imagery of a ‘messianic age’ has been transferred to the Second Coming of Christ. This is an eschatological perspective. Since the coming of the Messiah, the world awaits the outworking of the redemption that has already been accomplished. The perspective of the Book of Revelation is that the event that changes everything has already happened in the Cross of Jesus Christ. It is in the events of the world, as we know it, that the final fulfillment of redemption unfolds.

4. *Toxon* — bow. Harrington observes that the imagery now becomes more pointed and particular. The bow points to the Parthians, the only mounted archers of the first century. Along the eastern frontier of the Empire, the Parthians were a contemporary threat to Rome. They are alluded to again in 9:14 and 16:12.

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167 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
168 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
The first seal would suggest hope of a Parthian invasion signaling the beginning of the end of Roman sovereignty.\textsuperscript{169}

5. \textit{Edothe auto stephanos} – ‘a crown was given to him.’ As typical of biblical literature, the passive of the verb ‘to give’ implies the instrumentality of God. It is a literary technique to avoid anthropomorphism. The ‘crown,’ \textit{stephanos}, is the crown or wreath of victory. The action of the plagues is initiated by the opening of the scroll, God’s word. As such, a successful outcome is assured.

6. \textit{Hippos pyrros... edothe auto machaira megale} – ‘red horse... was given to him a great sword.’ Harrington observes that, building on the first two images of the final woes in the Synoptic apocalypse, war and international strife (see Lk 21:9-10), the first two horsemen are not clearly distinguished. The ‘red horse’ suggests blood and the rider wields a great sword – an image of warfare. Again the passive, ‘he was given,’ points to the action of God.

7. \textit{Hippos melas... zygon} – ‘black horse... scales.’ Rogers and Rogers state that, in the ancient world, ‘black’ is the color of mourning, sadness and famine.\textsuperscript{170} Death through famine provides the background for the imagery associated with the third horseman. According to Harrington, a denarius is the normal daily wage (Mt 20:2) and a quart of wheat the average daily amount consumed by a workman. Barley was a cheaper, poorer quality grain. The prices stated here, then, are eight times more than normal, indicating a time of famine.\textsuperscript{171}

8. \textit{To elaion kai ton onion me adikeses} – ‘the oil and the wine you may not damage.’ Hemer finds in this instruction a direct reference to the famine in the Province of Asia in 92 AD. Wheat, barley, wine and oil were staples in Palestine and throughout Asia Minor. Contrary to the edict of Domitian to cut down grape vines (and possibly olive trees) in favor of growing grain, the third horseman, sent by God, is instructed not to damage oil and wine production. This is a polemical challenge to the remedy of Rome that diminishes crops that were producing in favor of crops that, in the situation of famine were not producing. In terms of long range planning, this was a questionable remedy at best.\textsuperscript{172}

9. \textit{Hippos chloros... Thanatos} – ‘pale horse... death/pestilence.’ \textit{Chloros} means ‘green,’ or ‘pale.’ Rogers and Rogers note that the ‘yellow-green’ color, in this context, refers to the ‘deathly’ color of a corpse or the blanched color of someone struck with terror.\textsuperscript{173} As was noted earlier, \textit{Thanatos} can mean both death and pestilence.

10. \textit{Hades} is the realm of death and roughly equivalent to the Hebrew concept of \textit{Sheol}.

11. \textit{Edothe autois exousia... apokteinai} – ‘authority was given to them... to kill/slaughter.’ The passive of the verb ‘to give’ again suggests the hand of God behind these plagues. The four horsemen are given the authority to kill. Summing up the vision of the opening of the first four seals, the instruments of death are cited: the sword – warfare, hunger – famine, death- pestilence, and the beasts of the earth. Harrington suggests that death from ravaging wile beasts would be common in lands decimated by war and famine.\textsuperscript{174} It can also be noted that wars, famine, pestilence and death by ravaging beasts are all conditions that occur in the natural world. Here, it is stated that these occurrences come from the hand of God as a remedy for what is wrong in his creation. At the dawn of creation, God wipes out all humans save one family, and all animals save one pair of each, male and female. His purpose was to start over again after the destruction. The, destruction is limited here – one fourth of the earth. The plagues are seen as a cleansing and purging, not a total destruction.

\textit{therion} – beast. A particular literary feature of the Book of Revelation is the use of foreshadowing. Elements in the inaugural Vision are repeated and developed in the letters; elements of the letters are picked up and further explored in the subsequent visions. ‘Death by wild beast’ was not specifically mentioned in the images of the four horsemen, but appears in a summary of their mission. The devastation to be unleashed on earth by the horsemen can also be seen as naturally occurring

\textsuperscript{169} Wilfrid Harrington, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{170} Rogers and Rogers, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{171} Wilfrid Harrington, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{172} Colin J. Hemmer, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{173} Rogers and Rogers, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{174} Wilfrid Harrington, \textit{op. cit.}
phenomena in the world of human society and human power structures. Warfare, famine, pestilence and ravaging beasts are evil – sometimes morally, sometimes as ills that go against how things could be and should be. Beginning in 13:1, ‘beast’ becomes the personification of evil, the personification of all that stands against God and his will for good. The mention of ‘beasts’ in the vision of the four horsemen foreshadows the later use of the term and, in retrospect, sums up the ‘plagues’ as evil. For all the violence of the images, the Book of Revelation makes a faith statement, a statement common in biblical literature, that God will use evil against itself, will use evil to accomplish his good will. This is the sense of Jesus’ statement in Matthew 12:22-28 – ‘A house divided against itself cannot stand... If Satan is divided against himself, then the Kingdom of God is at hand.’
Commentary

Initial Background

Chapter 6 begins a series of visions with gruesome imagery, depicting the battle between good and evil, between God and Satan. Three of the visions are distinct in employing a pattern of seven: seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls. These visions all narrate a series of four – seals, trumpets, and bowls – quickly, followed by the last three elements narrated in much more detail. In the vision of the seals and the trumpets, there is a break after the sixth element: the ‘Song of Victory’ (7:9-11) precedes the seventh seal and the ‘Vision of the Open Scroll’ (Ch. 10) and the description of the ‘Two Witnesses’ (11:1-2) precedes the final trumpet. It can be suggested that these interludes indicate that ‘victory’ occurs in the midst of trials and that patient endurance is the path to victory. Later in the book, the vision of the seven trumpets is preceded by the ‘Song of Moses and the Lamb’ and a description of the ‘Angels with the Bowls.’ The entire unfolding of the ‘seven plagues’ poured on the earth from the ‘seven bowls’ is seen in the light of ‘victory.’

It is only in the vision of the ‘Angels with the Bowls’ that the events unleashed on the earth are specifically identified as ‘plagues/strikings’ and allusions to the plagues in Egypt are evident. Now, the Book of Revelation is characterized by foreshadowings and retrospectives, elements earlier in the book pointing to images and ideas that will be dealt with later and items later in the book shedding light on the meaning of what has gone before. Recognition of this literary feature, especially with respect to the three visions employing a pattern of ‘seven,’ suggests that, in light of the vision of the Angels and the Bowls, everything unleashed on earth in the two previous visions, the seals and the trumpets, are to be understood also as ‘plagues.’

The story of the plagues in Egypt, in itself, was a political and polemic story. Egyptian Pharaohs were celebrated as gods. ‘Ramses’ means ‘son of Ra,’ the Egyptian sun god. The plague stories contrasted the might and sovereignty of Egypt with the power and will of Israel’s God, his power to free a people from bondage and enter into a mutual relationship with them, a relationship of mutual fidelity.

The story of the Exodus gives structure and shape to the ‘Ark Narrative’ at the beginning of the First Book of Samuel. In the story, the Israelites bring the Ark of the Covenant into battle against the Philistines, thinking, falsely, that the sacred ‘object’ would protect them in battle and assure their victory. Israel is defeated and the ark is captured by the Philistines whom God begins to plague. The Philistines wrongly identify the ‘Ark’ as Israel’s god and return it to Israel to end the plagues. The story, again, contrasts the power of the living God with false gods and idols, a lesson even Israel had to learn. Again, the purpose of the plagues, the strikings (the literal meaning of ‘plague’), was to accomplish God’s purpose for good.

There is a general pattern that can be observed in much of the material of Israel’s writing prophets. The pattern is suggested by the stories in the Book of Judges: 1) Israel does evil in the sight of the Lord; 2) God delivers them into the hands of a foreign nation; 3) the Israelites turn back from their infidelity and cry out to God; 4) the enemy is defeated by Israel through God’s action and intervention; and 5) the land has peace. Israel’s prophets point out the infidelity of the people, sometimes in a manner that has been described as the ‘prophetic lawsuit.’ There is a chance for the people to turn back, to repent, but if they do not, they will face the oracles of judgment pronounced as a sentence in the ‘lawsuit.’ Yet, as is consistent with God’s dealings with his people throughout the Bible, God’s mercy is the final word. Israel, by endurance of the trials imposed by God and purified by its endurance, will be restored. This is
promised in the oracles of salvation, oracles pronounced against the foreign nations in which the ‘plagues’ by endured them will establish the power and sovereignty of God.

The bulk of the material in the Pentateuch, of which the story of the Exodus is a part, in the Deuteronomic History, of which the Books of Samuel are a part, and the writing prophets was given its final shape in the context of the Babylonian Exile. In the context of the Exile, the collection and editing of God’s Word was intended to bolster the self-identity of Israel who faced loss of everything that made them God’s people – land, nation, temple. It also served a political and polemical purpose: just as Egypt, Philistia, and other nations proved to be small and insignificant compared with the power and sovereignty of Israel’s God, so, too, will Babylon prove to be. For all the gruesome images of God’s anger and judgment, there was hope; there was a possibility to ‘turn back,’ to go home, to repent.

The Four Horsemen

There is a pattern displayed in the Vision of the Seals. In each case, ‘John’ sees the lamb open one of the seals, after which a ‘plague’ is unleashed on the earth. The opening of the first four seals is marked as a unity because, in each one, when the seal is opened, one of the four Living Creatures issues the command, “Come!” In each case, the command calls forth one of the horsemen. In three of the four, the command is followed by, ‘And I looked/saw and behold...’ In this case, ‘behold’ seems to indicate a heighten perception, a deeper insight into reality, a recognition. ‘Behold’ does not appear after the opening of the second seal and this is likely an indication that the first two seals are to be taken as a unity, as two sides of the same coin. They both unleash a plague of violence, of war, but the first concerns war against others, while the second suggests insurrection, rebellion, a single people turning their swords on each other.

The imagery of the Four Horsemen is derived from Zechariah 1:8-11 and 6:1-8. Zechariah’s prophecy anticipated the fall of Babylon and, throughout the Book of Revelation, ‘Babylon’ functions as a symbol for Rome. What is envisioned here is that Rome, as all other nations exercising power for their own sake, for the glory of earthly reigns, must fail. On another level, it can be noted that in late, intertestamental Rabbinic writings, the appearance of a horse was a sign of the coming Messianic Age. From a New Testament perspective, the Messianic Age is already here; Christ, the Anointed One (the literal meaning of both ‘Messiah’ in Hebrew and ‘Christ’ in Greek) has won victory through his blood shed on the Cross. Jewish imagery of the ‘Messianic Age’ is transformed into an eschatological vision of what must be accomplished before the final return of the Christ, the Parousia, in which the Kingdom of God will be established. From the perspective of the Book of Revelation, the trials and tribulations endured by Christians are not what must be endured before the coming of the Messiah, but works of grace that will bring the mission of the Messiah to its completion, to its fullness.

The first horseman called forth rides a white horse. ‘White’ is the color of victory. The elders around the throne are clothed in white; it is the color of the garments granted to the ‘victorious,’ ‘those who overcome;’ it is the color of righteousness with which the ‘holy ones,’ ‘the saints’ are clothed. This rider is holding a bow. In the late first century, the only mounted archers were the Parthians on the eastern border of the Roman Empire. As Cyrus, the Persian ruler from the east of Babylon was God’s instrument in overthrowing the power of that country and allowing the Jewish people to return to their homeland, then, perhaps, another invader from the east can topple the oppressive power of Rome. But, maybe they won’t. The final element in the image of the first horseman is that a crown has been granted to him. The passive voice of the verb suggests that it is God who grants the crown. The passive is regularly used in biblical prose to indicate the action of God in a way that avoids anthropomorphisms. The word
for ‘crown’ is stepahnos, a wreath or garland of victory. The rider goes forth already crowned, already victorious. The implication, for the Church and the people who are its members, is that to take a stand against ‘Rome’ is already to be victorious. To take a stand against false power structures, false claims of self-sufficiency, false claims for dominion and mastery of life, is already victory.

The second horseman called forth rides a red horse. ‘Red’ is the sign of violence, bloodshed, war. He has been given (God has given him) to take peace from the world and a sword, again a symbol of violence and warfare. Specifically, this image notes that people will turn on each other with a sword. While this, again, can suggest warfare, it can also suggest insurrection, rebellion, internal fighting. This image can fit the situation of a subject people rebelling against their overlords – not the Parthians, but the subject peoples themselves overthrowing the power of Rome. However, in the context of the Book itself, especially in the light of the messages to the Seven Churches, it is possible to see here the need of the Church and its members to take a stand against the prevailing culture in which it finds itself, a culture of accommodation, of ignoring what makes the Church distinctive as the presence of Christ in the world for the sake of peaceful relations with neighbors, a sense of belonging in the world, and for the sake of economic success and power. This is the meaning of Christ’s statement:

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. (Lk 12:51-53)

The letters dealt with situations in which the Church was opposed by Christians following false teachings, by Jewish communities denying that Christians were true members of God’s people, by fellow citizens who made accommodations with Rome and accepted the pagan practice of Emperor Worship and pagan patronage of the trade guilds. To be true to Christianity, some even needed to take a stand against family members.

The images associated with the opening of the first two seals deal with warfare, with taking a stand against power structures and false ways of believing or living in the world. Both images are governed by a single ‘Behold!’ It would appear that the heightened perception of the author of Revelation is that Christianity allows for no accommodation with the world, that it involves taking a stand against the world’s power structures and against elements in our immediate surroundings that mitigate against faithfulness to God, against doing the ‘good works’ of the Church for the wrong reasons, against anything that compromises Christ’s vision of the dignity of all people as his brothers and sisters.

The third horseman called forth rides a black horse. ‘Black’ was a symbol of sorrow, mourning, but also of famine. A significant feature of this ‘vision’ is that it carries with it the sound of a voice coming from the midst of the four Living Creatures stationed around the throne, God’s voice. The voice specifies the going price for wheat and barley, but also commands the rider not to damage wine and oil. The stated prices are exorbitant for first century Asia Minor, suggesting that these are famine prices, reflecting the simple law of supply and demand. This corresponds to what is known about a famine in the Province of Asia during the reign of Domitian and his response to the famine with an edict to cut down grape vines (and probably olive trees) in order to plant grain. In the end, this was a disastrous economic policy – destroying crops that were producing to plant other crops that were, due to prevailing conditions, failing. Historically, the province of Asia was the most prosperous Roman province, a source of wealth

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125 NRSV translation.
for the power structure of Rome. The policy was likely motivated by Domitian’s desire to increase the grain supply for Rome at the expense of wine and oil producers in Asia. The wine and oil producers could afford the exorbitant famine prices, but eliminating half their vines and trees would cut their yield in half with no likelihood that the alternate crops would produce.

The historical circumstances tie the image to a particular time and place, but the clear perception of the ‘seer’ is that droughts and famines will happen. The work of the Church is for its members to care for one another and, on the model of Jesus Christ, to reach out to those suffering around them. There will be hard times – exorbitant prices, but policies to assure the success or well-being of the ruler class or some elite segment of society – the wealthy – are patently evil. Enduring hard times and supporting one another is what makes the Church ‘victorious.’ It is another way to stand up to power for its own sake.

The image of the fourth horseman called forward is truncated. Nothing ‘is given’ to him, as was the case with the first two horseman. There was a word of command in the image of the third horseman from a voice understood to be that of God. However, only in this image is the horseman named: ‘Death/pestilence.’ (note: thanatos can mean either ‘death’ or ‘pestilence.’ ‘Pestilence’ is the likely meaning in this context.) All that is said of this rider is that his name was ‘death/pestilence’ and the realms of the dead followed after him.

In the second half of v. 8, there is a summary statement of the purpose and mission of the four riders: 

To them was given the authority over one fourth of the earth, to kill by the sword, by famine, by pestilence, and by the wild beasts of the earth.’ Harrington suggested that, in lands decimated by famine or disease, it is not uncommon to encounter scavenging predators.176 The ‘beasts’ foreshadow the dragon and beasts later in the book, symbols of ultimate evil. The inclusion of ‘beast’ here serves to summarize all worldly hardships as evils, as what oppose God’s design. Yet, these plagues are the means by which God readies his world for the fulfillment of the mission of his Son; these plagues are the means by which those loyal to the Christ prove themselves worthy, by which they ‘overcome.’

In the world of any age, there are wars, disputes and divisions, famine, poverty, hunger, homelessness, disease of epidemic proportions, the reality of individual death, and scavenging predators looking to benefit from the suffering of others. How does the Church overcome these evils? How do individual members of the Church become ‘victorious’ in the face of these evils?

176 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
The Fifth Seal (6:9-11)

9 And when he opened the fifth seal I saw under the altar the souls of those having been slaughtered according to the word of God and according to the witness which they held (gave). 10 And they cried out (wailed) in a loud voice saying: Until when (How long), O Despot (absolute Lord), O Holy One and True, do you not judge and avenge our blood from (on) these dwelling upon the earth? 11 And was given to them, to each, a white robe and (it) was said to them that they will rest (in) yet a little time until they should fulfill, and their fellow slaves (servants, bound ones) and their brothers, being about to be slaughtered like them.

Textual Notes

1. Hypokato tou thysiasteriou – ‘under the altar.’ Both Harrington and Rogers and Rogers point out that the source of this image is suggested by Lv 4:7 – ‘... and the rest of the blood of the bull he (the priest) shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering...’ Since, according to Lv 17:11, blood is ‘the life,’ the ‘souls’ of the martyrs are where their life-blood is found.
2. Psychas ton esphagmenon – ‘souls of those having been slaughtered.’ In the late first century, it is highly debatable how influential Aristotle’s hylomorphic theory (everything is composed of matter and form, matter giving individuality to the form) was. This theory informs later theological definitions of ‘body’ and ‘soul’ as they are now understood. In the New Testament, psyche is used to render the Hebrew word ruah, which literally means ‘breath.’ Drawing on the creation account in Genesis, ‘Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man

177 Ibid.
178 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
179 NRSV translation.
became a living being,\(^\text{180}\) (Gn 2:7), \(\text{ruah}\), in the Old Testament comes to mean ‘life-force,’ ‘essential being.’ In the New Testament \(\text{ruah}\) is translated by the word \(\text{psyche}\), but this term, under the influence of the Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, had already taken on a ‘mental/intellectual’ connotation. That, probably, does not apply in this context. By this time, however, Jewish thinking had developed a belief in life after death, immortal life with God for the just. The \(\text{ruah}\) lived on. It is in this broad and general sense that we are to understand the use of the term \(\text{psyche}\), and not in the more specific connotations of Greek philosophy.

The \(\text{psychas}\) mentioned here are those who have been slaughtered. They are precursors of what ‘John’ envisions to be an inevitable outcome of standing up against the power of Rome. There is a price to pay for following the Lamb, but the price is worth the outcome – sharing in the glory and authority of the Lamb.

3. \textit{Martyrian} – ‘witness,’ ‘testimony.’ The primary meaning of \textit{martys} is ‘witness,’ ‘one testifying to the truth.’ In the early Church, as now, those who speak out for the truth speak a counter-cultural message and this can and is met with violence. The death of the early ‘witnesses’ is what led to the eventual identification of ‘martys’ as ‘those who die for their faith.’ That concept is in its nascent stages of development here; the primary meaning is still ‘those who speak/testify to the truth.’

4. \textit{Ekraxan} – ‘they were crying out.’ Harrington notes that this image calls to mind Gn 4:10, the blood of Abel crying out from the ground, and Lk 11:50-51, which mentions the ‘blood of the prophets.’ There is a sense, an image of the ‘blood,’ the ‘life-force’ of those unjustly killed crying out for justice, for redress.

5. \textit{Heos potे} – ‘until when,’ ‘how long.’ This plaintive cry is familiar from the Old Testament, especially the Psalms of Lament. The prayers are motivated by the psalmist’s acute sense of injustice and a deep felt expectation that God must act, must set things right. The expectation is that God will be consistent, will act for right and justice as he always has. The complaint and the longing, the burning question in the heart of the psalmist is, “How Long?”

6. \textit{Despotes} – ‘despot,’ ‘absolute Lord,’ ‘the one who exercises absolute authority.’ Another polemic title for God in contrast to the supposed ‘absolute rule’ of Domitian.

7. \textit{Ou krineis kai ekdikeis to haima hemon} – ‘do you not judge and avenge our blood.’ Harrington notes that \textit{krineis} means ‘to pronounce judgment’ with the sense of ‘to vindicate,’ ‘to establish the right of one party against another.’ \textit{Ekdikeis}, ‘to avenge’ means, more precisely, ‘to procure justice for.’ As in the Lament Psalms, the prayers is a cry for God to reveal himself, to manifest his justice. (see Ps 79:5-10, Rm 12:19, Lk 18:7-8).\(^\text{181}\)

8. \textit{Katoikounton epi tes ges} – ‘those dwelling upon the earth.’ Harrington notes that, throughout the book, these are the enemies of God, the oppressors of God’s people.\(^\text{182}\) It can also be noted, however, that these are precisely the ones to whom the holy ones are to bear witness, for whom they have a mission.

9. \textit{Heos plerois... mellontes apoktennesthai} – ‘until should be completed... those about to be killed.’ Harrington writes that the idea that the end would come when the roll of martyrs is complete was current in later Judaism. A remarkable is found in Ez 4:35-36. The death of the martyrs is the means by which God is to win his victory over the powers of evil, and only total victory can bring about the consummation of God’s purpose. The meaning is not that there is a predetermined number of the saved (see Lk 18:7-8). Rather, the idea is that the death of martyrs brings the eschaton nearer.\(^\text{183}\)
Harrington suggests a possible reading of 6:1-8 as a uniform depiction of the horrors of war. The result of armies ravaging the land is the destruction of crops with its resultant famine and widespread disease. As such, he sees the image of the ‘souls beneath the altar’ as the victims of the senseless violence of war. While this is a possible reading of the images, the particular historical situation that gives rise to the book is not one of war, though there are some who have died violent deaths at the hands of Roman authority for taking a stand against it. Earthquakes in the province have caused destruction and hardship, including hunger and disease; but there is also evidence of a famine leading to Domitian’s edict to destroy grape vines and olive trees in favor of attempting to raise cereal crops. Add to this the disputes between Christian communities and Jewish communities, Christian communities and the majority pagan population, and even disputes within the Christian communities themselves – disputes which could be life-threatening and certainly affected the livelihood of many Christians, and a picture emerges of the deaths of those who hold fast to Christ, who overcome the world around them, but at the price of their blood. It is not necessary to look to widespread warfare to explain the images.

The vision of the fifth seal opens in the typical fashion. With the seer looking on, Christ opens the seal. At the opening of the seal, what he sees is not prefaced by ‘Behold!’ There is an implication that what he sees is what is to be expected. Below a heavenly altar, he sees the psychas of those who, for the sake of the Word of God and because of their testimony, their witness to Christ, have been slaughtered. There is a certain comfort in the image. There is a price to pay for speaking the Word of God, for witnessing to the Christ, but those who have paid the price have found a place in the heavenly liturgy, under the altar and before the throne.

The image derives from priestly instructions in the Book of Leviticus. The priest pours some of the blood of the sacrificial offering below the altar. In the Old Testament, ‘blood’ is understood as the ‘life-force,’ and later in the vision the ‘those slaughtered’ cry out for God to vindicate them, avenge their blood. *Psyche* is a problematic word. It is usually translated as ‘soul,’ but this can’t be equated with the ‘body/soul’ distinction of later theology. In the New Testament, psyche is used to translate the Hebrew term ruah, ‘breath,’ ‘spirit’ – in the sense of ‘respiration,’ ‘inspiration,’ ‘expiration’ – breathing in and out. Based on the creation story, ‘... the Lord God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life...,’ the word came to mean the ‘totality of the living person’, ‘an individual person/personality.’ It is in that sense that the word psyche is used here.

There is a common image in the Old Testament that the ‘blood’ of the just cries out to God for justice. It is first encountered when God tells Cain that his brother’s blood is crying out to him, and Dt 21:1-9 describes a ritual of purification to absolve Israel of the shedding of innocent blood. On the pattern of the Lament Psalms, in which the plaintiff calls out to God to be present and bring about his justice, the ‘souls’ under the altar call for God to vindicate them, to ‘avenge their blood.’ Though in the presence of the throne of God, there is still something incomplete, a sense of justice denied, a question as to whether their suffering, their ‘overcoming’ has actually accomplished anything.

The final verse of the image provides an incomplete reward and promise to the ‘souls.’ They are given white robes. The passive, ‘to be given,’ once again indicates the action of God. They are rewarded as ‘victors,’ as those who have ‘overcome.’ Yet there is still no real rest for them, no sense of vindication, no justice because the ‘victory’ is not complete. It will take the suffering of more brothers and fellow

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184 Ibid.
servants to complete the victory. Harrington noted that the idea is that the death of the ‘martyrs’ brings the eschaton nearer. No specific number is, nor can be indicated to bring about God’s final will for the world. But by patient endurance it is possible that the powerless minority, the sub-culture in a dominant vision of how the world should work, can become a majority, can make God’s word and will active. Little victories can add up to big ones.185

Rev 6:9-11 provides a small interlude in the middle of horrific images. The images portray gruesome conditions and suffering for the Church. In the present moment, some have become ‘victors,’ and, by all appearances, nothing has changed. The Church is still engulfed by the power of Rome and the cultural climate of the world in which it finds itself. Does it matter if they stand up against this world? Does it matter if they speak a counter-cultural witness to their brothers and fellow servants, and to the world around them? Is God’s kingdom any Kingdom any closer? The image of the fifth seal offers hope, hope that the suffering of the innocent has value, that out of it God can bring good, that the little victories will add up to the big one.

In the ideas of psyche/ruah, in the blood of the just crying out for justice, the image of the fifth seal upholds the dignity of all human life. It proclaims the inherent value of every individual human person/personality. It expresses sadness over those who suffer, suffer unjustly, in a world where power is a commodity to be brokered, where wealth is a tool to manipulate others, where the dominant culture seeks to impose its values on everyone, even when those values are misguided and perpetuate evil and evil systems.

The Christian faith proclaims that Christ was victorious on the Cross, that in his agony, he overcame the world. The Messianic age is here, working itself out little by little in the lives of people who follow in his footsteps and overcome. In our world, where is the victory in a corrupt penal system that abuses the human rights and dignity of prisoners? Where is the victory in migrants and refugees, fleeing corruption and oppression and turned away from refuge as illegals, as unwanted, as a political problem rather than suffering brothers and sisters? Where is the victory for those hated because of their beliefs, because of the color of their skin, because of their sexual orientation? Where is the victory for innocent victims of war, for ‘collateral damage?’ Where is the victory for those suffering abject poverty in a plentiful world, for the homeless, for the enslaved in human trafficking and sweatshops? Is such suffering a participation in the Cross of Christ? Does it move us any closer to the fulfillment of God’s plan?

185 Ibid.
The Sixth Seal (6:12-17)

12 And I saw, when he opened the sixth seal, a great earthquake happened and the sun became black (dark) like sackcloth of hair and the whole moon became like blood, 13 and the stars of the heaven fell upon the earth as a fig tree casts (off) its unripe figs when shaken by the wind, 14 and the heaven was torn apart like a scroll (book) being rolled up and every mountain and island from out of their places were moved. 15 And the kings of the earth and the great ones and the commanders of a thousand and the rich and the mighty and every slave (bondsman) and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. 16 And they are saying to the mountains and to the rocks: Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one sitting upon the throne and from the wrath of the lamb, 17 for has come the great day of his wrath and who is able to stand?

Textual Notes

1. Seismos megas – ‘great earthquake.’ Harrington notes that the ‘cosmic earthquake’ is a regular feature in apocalyptic literature (Ez 38:19, Is 2:19, and a number of passages in Revelation – 8:5, 11:13, 16:18). In line with traditional imagery, the earthquake is regularly followed by cosmic upheaval – signs in the heavens and on earth. (see Joel 2:31 and Is 13:10, 34:4)186

It can also be noted that earthquakes were a regular occurrence in the province of Asia, the earthquakes of 17 AD and 60 AD being particularly catastrophic. While apocalyptic imagery uses earthquakes as signs

186 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
presaging the coming of the End Time, it is also possible to see in the imagery of the Sixth Seal a polemic against Rome. Rome’s handling of these crises still leaves the whole of creation trembling before the power of the only true God.

2. Helios... selene... asteres... ‘sun... moon... stars.’ These images are drawn from Joel 2:31, where they are signs of the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord, and Is 13:10. These images are adopted by the late Jewish writing, The Assumption of Moses, and are featured in the apocalyptic sayings of Jesus in the Synoptic tradition (Mt 24:29-31; Mk 13:24-27; Lk 21:9-11, 25-28). Rogers and Rogers point out that the world and its well-being depend on the faithfulness with which the heavenly luminaries fulfill their roles. When the sun, moon, and stars forsake this order, the end is at hand.187

3. Sakkos trichinos – ‘sackcloth of hair.’ Sackcloth made of the hair of black goats was worn as a sign of mourning and repentance. On the cosmic plane, the image is as shocking and unexpected as the animals of Nineveh wearing sackcloth in the Book of Jonah.

4. Syke... biblion hilissomenon – ‘fig tree... scroll having been rolled up’ Harrington suggests that the source of the image is Is 34:4188 (All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine, or fruit withering on a fig tree.)189 olynthos – Rogers and Rogers note that this word means ‘green fig’ which appear in the winter and, though some ripen, fall off in the spring. The trees produce, out of season, fruit that is worthless. They also note that the image of the ‘rolled up scroll’ refers to a torn papyrus who separate pieces curl up.190

5. Oros kai nesos... ekinethesan – ‘mountain and island... moved.’ The movement of mountains and other land masses is a common image in the psalms, prophets and apocalyptic writings. Such images always point to the ultimate power of God, the wrath of God that powerfully stands against evil and injustice. Mountains regularly symbolize the steadfast power of earthly kings and kingdoms, both for their vastness and ‘unmoveability,’ but also their easily defended ‘high grounds.’ They point to permanence, but such permanence amounts to nothing in the face of the power of God.

6. Basileis... megistanes... xiliarxoi... plousioi... ischyroi... doulos... eleutheros... ‘kings... great ones/magistrates... commanders/tribunes... rich... powerful... servants/slaves... freed men...’ Rogers and Rogers note an apparent seven-fold enumeration of the classes that made up Roman society, from the Emperor down to the lowliest slave.191 It can be suggested that this enumeration is intended to give specification to ‘those dwelling upon the earth’ from the imagery of the Fifth Seal. Harrington suggests that this enumeration represents a great leveling of all people before the power of God. He sees the source of this imagery in Is 2:19 and Hos 10:8 which also stand behind the imagery of Lk 23:30.192

7. Orges tou arniou – ‘the wrath of the Lamb.’ The phrase is jolting – paradoxical and oxymoronic. Yet it is the Lamb that is worthy and has the strength to open the seals; it is the victory of the Lamb on the Cross that proves that there is power in ‘weakness.’

8. He hemera he megale tes orges – ‘the great day of wrath.’ Harrington notes that this is a prophetic image deployed in Zeph 1:14-15, Nah 1:6, Joel 2:11, and Mal 3:2. The verse expresses the alarm of the conscience-stricken inhabitants of the earth; it is a prophetic reference to the final battle against the kings of the earth. He also notes that the ‘wrath of God’ and the ‘wrath of the Lamb’ indicates a further assimilation of the Lamb with the Father.193

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187 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
188 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
189 NRSV translation.
190 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
191 Ibid.
192 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
193 Ibid.
Treatment of John’s Gospel often speak of its ‘realized eschatology,’ the fact that we live between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet.’ This theological concept stands behind the imagery of the Fifth Seal. Those who have already overcome have found a place before the heavenly throne and are clothed in white garments, but their final vindication, the final establishment of God’s peace and justice has not yet occurred. The imagery of the Sixth Seal is an assurance that it will.

A common feature of apocalyptic writings is an anticipation of the End Time, and it was common to depict this End Time in gruesome images. Most apocalyptic writings have their setting in times of crisis and great suffering. The gruesome images function to instill hope in the hopeless that God cannot long ignore the suffering of his faithful people, that the tables will turn, that God will vindicate his people and establish his justice and peace once and for all. The setting for the Book of Revelation does not represent a crisis situation; the Churches experience difficulties, but not ultimate hopelessness. Still, if they adopt the radical Christianity proposed by ‘John,’ it would entail defying the power and authority of Rome and such a crisis could, most likely would unfold.

The imagery of the Fifth Seal depicted a conflict between those who have ‘overcome’ and ‘those dwelling upon the earth.’ In Revelation, that phrase always indicates the forces of the world, the powers of earthly kingdoms, and the social, political, and economic climate and culture in which the Church exists. It indicates everything in the world arrayed against God, his will for good, and the faith and truth found in the Church. God’s Word to all the earth through his Church is a counter-cultural message.

The opening of the Sixth Seal unleashes, first of all, an earthquake. Earthquakes are a common symbol of God’s power. They ‘shake the foundations of the world.’ (Is 13:13, Hag 2:6, Ps 18:7, Ps 29:8, Ps 82:5) In a context in which God’s will for the world is contrasted with the perspective of those ‘inhabiting the earth,’ the very ground on which they stand is shaken, their perspective is groundless, insubstantial. Next the sun is blackened, as if wearing sackcloth, the moon turns blood red and the stars fall from the heavens. The falling stars are like unripe figs from a tree. It can be argued that the ‘unripe figs’ refer to the fact that figs can sprout during the winter, but these figs, born out of proper season, fall from the trees in the spring, making room for productive growth. The heavens themselves are torn apart and roll up on themselves like a torn parchment. The heavenly lights regulate time and the seasons in an orderly fashion. When that order breaks down, life as it is known ceases to exist. In purely apocalyptic terms, the end is near; but perhaps in a less gruesome way, there is an indication of a dramatic paradigm shift in perspective, in world-view, in the framework under which the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ understand and order existence.

The image ends where it begins, with mountains and islands moved out of place. Mountains regularly function as a symbol of earthly power, vast, immovable and, and from high fortresses easily defended. Yet, by the power of God they are shaken and uprooted. The claims of solidity and stability on the part of earthly kingdoms is an illusion.

After the portrayal of cosmic calamity, the vision shifts its attention to the effects of the calamity on the inhabitants of the earth: kings, magistrates, military commanders, the rich, the powerful, slaves and freedmen. It is likely that this list of seven social classes reflects the make-up of Roman society. With Revelation’s penchant for using the number ‘seven’ to indicate completeness, what is portrayed here is a great levelling of the inhabitants of the earth. Kings and slaves alike are reduced to terror before the
power of God. This accords with the dignity of all people suggested by the imagery of the Fifth Seal. In God’s eyes, social class makes no difference; his justice is for all people.

All the inhabitants of the earth hide from the face of God, a typical Old Testament expression for God’s power, (‘No one can see the face of God and live?’ Ex 33:20). More interestingly, they hide from the ‘wrath of the Lamb.’ This is an utter paradox, bordering on the oxymoronic. Still, it is the Lamb who has been victorious, who has won the right to open the seals and unleash on the earth a great confrontation. The Lamb was victorious on the Cross, a sign of defeat, of being overcome by the powers of the world. Confrontation with this image, with this alternate view of reality produces terror.

It is the mission of the Church to speak a counter-cultural message to the world and its prevailing cultures, a message about the victory and the power of a Lamb, a small, skittish, sacrificial animal. It is the mission of the world to proclaim the power of the Cross, the power of defeat. Why, for the world, is this be such a terrifying message? How can embracing this message destroy the foundation of the secular world? To what extent has the Church accommodated itself to the culture of the world? How can the image of the Lamb and the message of the Cross be terrifying for us?
The Sealing of the Faithful (7:1-8)

7:1 After these things I saw four angels having taken their stand upon the four corners of the earth, having power over the four winds of the earth so that not should blow a wind upon the earth nor upon the sea, nor upon any tree. 2 And I saw another angel coming down from the rising (place) of the sun (the east), having the seal of the living God and he cried out in a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm (injure, damage) the earth and the sea, 3 saying: May you not harm the earth nor the sea nor the trees until we should have sealed the slaves (servants, bondsmen) of our God on their foreheads.

4 And I heard the number of those having been sealed, one hundred forty four thousand having been sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.

5 From the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand having been sealed; from the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand; from the tribe of God, twelve thousand; 6 from the tribe of Asher, twelve thousand; from the tribe of Naphtali, twelve thousand; from the tribe of Manasseh, twelve thousand; 7 from the tribe of Simeon, twelve thousand; from the tribe of Levi, twelve thousand; from the tribe of Issachar, twelve thousand; 8 from the tribe of Zebulun, twelve thousand; from the tribe of Joseph, twelve thousand; from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand, (all) having been sealed.

Textual Notes

1. Meta touto – ‘after this.’ As in 4:1, this phrase introduces a change in topic, a change in the narrative flow. It introduces a break in the pattern in which the opening of the seventh seal is expected.

2. Tessaras angelous – ‘four angels.’ Harrington notes that a common feature of apocalyptic is the idea that angels guarded or controlled the elements, forces of nature. They function symbolically as personifications of the forces of nature. 194

3. Tessaras gonias tes ges – ‘four corners of the earth.’ The cosmology of the ancient world imagined that the world was flat and supported on pillars sunk into the sea. The ‘four corners’ of the earth, then would encompass the entire world.

4. Tessaras anemous – ‘four winds.’ Harrington points out that, in Jewish tradition, the winds that blew from the four corners of a square-shaped earth, as distinct from the winds that blew from the sides, were

194 Ibid.
destructive. In Jewish apocalyptic tradition, it was expected that a great storm would usher in the end, carried on these destructive winds.\(^{195}\) (see Mt 24:31)

5. Allon angelon – ‘another angel.’ This ‘other angel’ represents God’s will in that he carries the seal of the living God and issues a command to restrain the first four angels from unleashing the destructive force of the winds.

6. Apo anatoles heliou – ‘from the rising (place) of the sun.’ The phrase is a typical reference to ‘the east,’ just as ‘the sea,’ from the perspective of Asia Minor, represents ‘the west.’ As the ‘dawning place’ of light, the east is regularly imagined as the source of wisdom (Wise men from the East). The image is multi-layered. Harrington notes that the phrase may be a reference to Ez 43:2, which envisages the glory of God coming from the east; Jewish tradition also held that the Messiah was expected to come from the east, a tradition reflected in Mt 2:1-2; the east can also be the source of both destruction and saving help, recalling the destructive force of Babylon and the later release effected by Cyrus, the Persian.\(^{196}\)

7. Sphragida – ‘seal.’ In the ancient world, every king had his own distinctive seal. The presence of the seal on a written message authenticated that message as having royal authority. The seal was also used to declare ownership. Anything marked with the king’s seal belonged to him alone. It is in the first sense that the scroll had been sealed with seven seals; in the next verse the faithful are to be sealed, marked as the special possession of the one sitting on the throne.

8. Sphragisomen... epi ton metopon auton – ‘should be sealed/marked... upon their foreheads.’ From the ‘mark of Cain,’ in Genesis, God’s seal or mark always symbolizes divine protection. The source of this image is found in Ez 9:4-6.

...and he said to him, ‘Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.’ To the others he said in my hearing, ‘Pass through the city after him and kill: your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. Cut down old man, young men and young women, little children and women, but touch no one who has the mark. And begin at my Sanctuary.’\(^{197}\)

9. Ekaton tessarakonta tessares chiliades – ‘one hundred forty four thousand.’ Rogers and Rogers note that ‘one thousand’ is the largest number for which there is a specific word in Greek, chiliades. It can mean the specific number, but is used often merely to indicate a vast sum.\(^{198}\) 144 = 12 X 12. It appears that the two twelves are symbolically significant. In the Old Testament, it is likely that the ‘twelve tribes of Israel’ was a literary fiction, symbolizing the twelve divisions of the people for the purposes of taxation, each division responsible for tribute and taxes one month out of the year. This system of division was in place probably as early as the reign of Solomon, and it is during his reign that the first written source of the Pentateuch took shape. The twelve divisions were read backwards into the story of the patriarchs – the twelve sons of Israel – to lend ‘divine’ support to the political-economic reality of the day. In the New Testament, the ‘all Israel’ ideal was depicted by the Twelve Apostles, companions of Jesus from whose mission the Church was born. It is to be noted that the list of the twelve apostles is also symbolic. The list appears in each of the synoptic Gospels, but with variation. As such, ‘twelve’ encompassed the whole Church. It is possible that 12 X 12 is meant to indicate both Jewish and Gentile Christians; but it is also possible, taking into account the ongoing mission of the Church, that it represents the faithful of the new Israel and the faithful of the old Israel who have not yet come to believe. Whatever the case, the 144,000 does not signify a specific number of those who are to be saved, but a vast number who are marked by God, recognized as being faithful within a world where syncretism and accommodation is too often the easy choice of living in the world. Harrington notes that the sealing of God’s servants does not symbolize protection from tribulation and death, but rather the pledge of being sustained in and through tribulation, being sustained so that it is possible for them ‘to overcome/be victorious.’\(^{199}\)

\(^{195}\) Ibid.

\(^{196}\) Ibid.

\(^{197}\) NRSV translation.

\(^{198}\) Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.

\(^{199}\) Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
One last feature of the sealing of this vast number of people is of note: This sealing is an obvious imitation of the marking of the doorposts of the Hebrews in Egypt before the final plague. This sealing comes before the opening of the final seal. However, the blood on the doorposts protected everyone in the house. They were Hebrews, members of God’s people. From the perspective of ‘John,’ bloodlines do not make people God’s servants, but only faith expressed in the authentic works of the Church, accomplished for the right reasons makes one God’s servant. It is individuals who are here marked out. But on a hopeful note, the number marked is vast, not bleakly narrow as might have been suggested by, for example, the ‘few’ faithful found within the Church of Sardis (3:4).

Commentary

With the words, ‘after this/these things,’ a definite break occurs in the narration of the opening of the seals and the havoc that ensues. This break allows for the ‘sealing of the faithful’ before the final seal is opened. This break is an obvious allusion to the night of the Passover in Exodus during which the Hebrews mark their doorposts with blood so that the ‘angel of death’ will ‘pass over’ their households. The sealing of the faithful, like the marking of the doorposts, takes place immediately before the ‘final plague.’ It provides an indication of God’s mercy in the midst of horrific events.

The seer observes four angels taking their stands at the four corners of the earth and holding back the winds that emanate from each of these four corners. In late Jewish writings, especially in apocalyptic, ‘angels’ function as symbols of the forces of nature. According to ancient cosmology, the known world is imagined as a large square sitting on pillars sunk into the sea. The ‘four corners’ of the world, then, encompass all of the earth. It was imagined that the winds that arose from the corners of the earth were destructive forces, while the winds arising from the sides were normal breezes.

With the four angels poised to unleash destructive force, the seer observes still another angel coming from the east, from ‘the rising place of the sun.’ As the place of dawning light, the east regularly functions as a symbol of wisdom. In Ez 43:2, the east is depicted as that place from which the glory of God will appear. In the context of Ezekiel, addressing the people who had been conquered by Babylon, a land to the east of Palestine, the coming of God’s glory from further to the east suggests the imminent overturning of the power of Babylon. In both Ezekiel and Revelation, the invocation of the image of the ‘rising place of the sun’ can have polemic and political overtones. Babylon fell to the Persians, a land to the east of Babylon and in late prophetic writings Cyrus is seen as an instrument of God’s vindication of his people; Revelation seems to express the hope, carried in the description of the first horseman, that the Parthians, on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire might, in the same manner, topple the power of Rome. Drawing on the images of dawning light and the coming of God’s glory and vindication, some Rabbinic writings suggest that the Messiah, when he comes, will come from the east. This fifth angel symbolizes the very authority of God; he bears the seal of the living God. In the ancient world, every king had a distinctive seal. The seal was imprinted on messages and edicts to establish the authenticity of what had been written. The sealed document was the ‘word of the king.’ It is in this sense that the seven seals on the scroll authenticate its contents as the ‘Word of God.’ The seal was also used to ‘mark’ the king’s possessions, objects reserved solely for the king and his use. In this sense, the sealing of the faithful marks them as servants of God, belonging only to him. This image is somewhat of a two-edged sword: 1) God’s servants are his; the Roman Emperor has no authority over them; and 2) God’s servants are exclusively his and can make no accommodations with the political, economic, social or cultural structure of the world.

This angel, armed with God’s authority, commands the first four to hold off unleashing destructive force until God’s faithful are sealed. While this is modelled on the Passover story of Exodus and is an
indication of God’s mercy in the midst of hardship and tribulation, there is a distinct difference. In Exodus, the ‘angel of death’ passed over the houses marked with blood. God protected his people from experiencing the ‘plague.’ Here, the unleashing of destructive forces is delayed until God’s servants have been sealed. They are not exempted from hardships, but rather are marked out as belonging to God; they will be sustained by God in time of hardship and those who endure will be ‘victorious.’

It is significant that ‘John’ does not see those sealed, but only hears that their number is vast. This detail was as critical for the late first century Church as it is for the Church in the modern world. Recalling the admonition to the Church in Ephesus, the very first letter, that the community, in the face of false teachers, had lost its ‘first love,’ ‘John’ is not allowed to see who is marked. It is not his place to judge who is saved and who is not; judgment belongs to God. Rather, as was the case with Ephesus, the ‘first love’ of the Christian Church is to seek out others, to invite them to the truth. Christian life admits of no smug self-satisfaction that ‘God love us, not you.’ Together we undergo the trials of life, the struggles in building God’s kingdom, and along the way our mission is to bring others into the fold – even those most hostile.

‘John’ hears that the number marked is 144,000. ‘One thousand’ is the largest number for which there is a specific word in the Greek language. It can mean, specifically, one thousand, or, more often, it is a symbol for ‘a vast amount.’ 144 = 12 X 12. It is the symbolic value of 12 X 12 that is significant. Twelve always calls to mind the Twelve Tribes of Israel, a specification of ‘all Israel,’ the whole of the community of God’s Chosen People. In the New Testament, this symbolism is modified in the Twelve Apostles, the twelve specific followers of Jesus given his commission to ‘Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.’ They are the ‘Founding Fathers’ of the Church. There are a number of ways of understanding the significance of 12 X 12. It can refer to the communities of the Church composed primarily of Jewish Christians and those composed primarily of Gentile Christians, a blending of the Old Order and the New. It can possibly refer to a ‘faithful remnant’ in God’s original people who have not yet been evangelized and the new Israel, the Church. In that case, the incomplete mission of the Church comes into focus. Only by completing its mission, it’s ‘first love’ can the world be ‘overcome’ and the Kingdom of God finally be established.

However 12 X 12 X 1000 is understood, it means a vast number, but not specifically identified people who are in some way destined to be saved. The symbolism of 12 X 12 indicates that the marking of God’s servants is inclusive rather than exclusive. And there is at least an implication that the filling out of the number of those sealed as ‘God’s servants’ hinges on the Church fulfilling its mission, a mission to spread the Good News, a mission to speak a counter-cultural message that there is an alternate view of reality, that the values taught by Jesus Christ speak to living that reality far better than the power structures predominant in the world.

Finally, the naming of each of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, a listing that does not correspond to any listing of the tribes found elsewhere in the Bible, suggests that the New Israel, the new People of God, is composed of a variety of distinct groups, but also that membership in any group is no guarantee of being included in the roster of God’s servants. That depends on how individuals live. Still, the number of those marked is vast, likely to be more inclusive in God’s eyes than it would be from a human perspective. Again, the judgment is his, not ours.

The imagery in the scene of the sealing of the faithful presents an interesting paradox. The brand of radical Christianity proposed by the Book of Revelation brooks no compromise with the values and power structures of the world. Those who stand against these things are portrayed as the ‘victorious.’ At the
same time, ‘radical Christians’ are still to carry out the ministry of the Church to engage others and bring the Good News to all the world. While the outlook of Revelation is dualistic, seeing reality in terms of good and evil, the Christian Church cannot divide the world into two camps, the insiders and the outsiders, the marked and unmarked. Somehow, everybody has a place in the Church and it’s the mission of the Church to invite all to enter in, to become God’s servants. How do we reconcile these dichotomies? How do we stand against the power structures and culture of the world and not create or contribute to polarization? How do we address the issues of legalized abortion, unequal distribution of wealth, abuse and oppression of the poor, the plight of refugees and immigrants without creating an atmosphere of polarity? How do we work with others who hold different values to implement the call of Christ to value all human life and not risk compromising who we are and what we believe to win a little shift in power, a small but compromised victory for some good?
The Song of Victory (7:9-17)

9 After these things I saw (looked) and, behold, a large (diverse) crowd (multitude), which, to number (count) it, no one was able from out of every nation and tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the lamb, having been clothed in white robes and palm branches (were) in their hands, 10 and they cry out (are crying out) in a loud voice saying: Salvation (is) to our God, to him sitting upon the throne and to the lamb. 11 And all the angels had stood (been standing) round about the throne and the elders and the four living creatures and they fell before the throne on their faces and worshipped (did homage) to God, 12 saying: Amen. Praise and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might to our God to the ages of ages. Amen.

13 And answered one from the elders, saying to me: These having been clothed in white robes, who are they and from where have they come? 14 And I said to him: My Lord, you (emphatic) have known (the perfect with a present sense of – you surely know); and he said to me: These are those coming forth out of the great tribulation and they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. 15 Because of this, they are before the throne of God and they worship him day and night in his temple and he sitting upon the throne will tabernacle (dwell in a tent) over them. 16 Not will they be hungry any more nor will they thirst anymore and indeed not should fall upon them the sun nor any scorching (heat), 17 for the lamb in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them along the way to living fountains (springs) of waters and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.
Textual Notes

1. *Meta tauta* – ‘after these things.’ These words mark another narrative shift. The scene shifts from earth and the sealing of the faithful, to a vision of the victorious worshipping around the heavenly throne. This heavenly vision again delays the opening of the seventh seal.

2. *Idou* – ‘Behold!’ On one level, ‘Behold!’ indicates the change in perspective – from earth to heaven. More than this, the reader is alerted to look for something new or unexpected in what is seen. It can be suggested that this ‘surprise’ comes in those who are included in the ‘vast throng.’

3. *Ochlos polys* – ‘great crowd/multitude.’ At face value, *polys* means ‘many.’ By connotation, it also carries the sense of ‘varied/variegated.’ (e.g., a *polyglot* is a person capable of speaking many different languages.) Given how this multitude is about to be described, the sense of these words can be rendered, ‘a diverse multitude.’ Commentators agree that this ‘diverse multitude’ corresponds to the 144,000 persons sealed, where 144,000 does not mean a specific number, but a vast amount, a multitude too large to be counted.

4. *Hv arithmesai auton oudeis edynato* – ‘which, to count it, no one was able.’ The innumerability of the crowd is made specific.

5. *Ek pantos ethnous kai phylon kai laon kai glosson* – ‘from every nation and tribe and people and tongue.’ Often in Revelation this specification of diverse peoples is equivalent to ‘those inhabiting the earth,’ and stands for the earthly order arrayed against the heavenly order. Here is what is striking and unexpected in the vision of the vast/diverse multitude: it is composed of people least expected to belong.

6. *Peribelemenous stolas leukas* – ‘having been clothed in white robes.’ The voice of the participle is both middle and passive. If it is read as a middle voice, it would mean ‘having clothed themselves.’ If it is read as a passive voice, it would mean ‘having been clothed.’ It can be suggested that this ambiguity is intentional, creating a multi-layered image. This vast multitude is made up of those who have ‘overcome,’ who have ‘been victorious.’ They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. They, by their faithfulness and patient endurance have clothed themselves in righteousness – white. On the other hand, the passive suggests the action of God; they have been clothed by him who recognizes their faithfulness. This interplay of meaning highlights the mutuality of a Christian’s relationship with God, of the Church’s relationship with God.

7. *Phoinikes* – ‘palm branches.’ Harrington notes that the waving of palm branches is both a sign of victory and rejoicing, especially after war (II Macc 10:7). In Jewish tradition, the waving of palm branches featured also in the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles (Lv 23:33-36, Neh 8:13-18). In Zechariah, the celebration is set in the ‘Messianic era’ (Zech 14:16-19).200 ‘Palm branches’ is another multi-layered image. All four of the Gospels include the story of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, hailed as the ‘son of David’ by people waving palm branches. ‘Son of David’ is both a kingly and messianic acclamation. This triumphant, victorious entry into Jerusalem is followed by the Crucifixion just as the waving of palm branches here is followed by the opening of the seventh and final seal. This association suggests that for the faithful Christian, as it was for Jesus, the path to final ‘victory’ passes through patient endurance, even enduring unjust death.

8. *Soteria* – ‘salvation, deliverance, preservation.’ *Soter* (deliverer) and *soteria* (deliverance) translate the Hebrew word verb *yasha* and its cognates. It is a term regularly used in the Book of Judges for the one raised up by God to deliver, preserve Israel from the hands of foreign powers. In this sense, it can also imply ‘victory.’ ‘Jesus’ is derived from this word. The acclamation of the vast and diverse multitude attributes ‘victory, deliverance from tribulation’ to God and the Lamb. On the model of the plague narrative, the acclamation, the ‘Song of Victory,’ has been transferred before the final plague. Having been sealed, the support of the saving God is assured. The acclamation of salvation before the final seal is opened strengthens the contention that the theological perspective of the Book of Revelation is that of ‘Realized Eschatology,’ that the trials endured by the faithful are simply a working out of the implications of what is already theirs through the grace of God.

9. *Pantes hoi angeloi* – ‘all the angels.’ This recalls the expansion of the heavenly liturgy in 5:11.

200 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
10. **Amen... eulogia... doxa... sophia... eucharistia... time... dynamis... ischys...** - ‘Amen... blessing/well speaking... glory... wisdom... thanksgiving... honor... power... strength.’

‘Amen,’ in its sense of an affirmation, looks both backwards and forwards. It can be the angels’ assent to the acclamation of the vast multitude (‘deliverance belongs to God’) and an opening assertion of the truth of the seven-fold attributes of God which they are about to pronounce. The seven-fold pattern of attributes mirrors the pattern of the angelic acclamation of 5:12, though there is a variation in the attributes listed. The seven-fold pattern points to ‘complete worship,’ while the variation affirms that no list of attributes can fully express the greatness, the otherness of God. It should be noted that the attributes spoken in 5:12 were those of the Lamb, while these are attributes of God, the one sitting on the throne. This, again, furthers the assimilation of the Lamb with God unfolding in the book.

11. **Heis ek ton presbyteron** – ‘one of the elders.’ Harrington notes that, as in 5:5, one of the elders intervenes to interpret the vision. The pattern for the dialogue form of vision interpretation is found in Zech 4:4-5 and 6:4-5. In general, in apocalyptic writings, the voice interpreting a vision belongs to the ‘interpreting angel,’ a heavenly being. That it is the voice of one of the elders that is heard, even though the 24 elders are ‘heavenly’ in sitting on throne around the throne of God, is significant. The elders remain human beings within the heavenly court. This is a step in the merging of the heavenly and earthly realms, the goal of God’s creation.

12. **Kyrie mou su oidas** – ‘My Lord, you know.” Harrington points out that this response mimics that of Ezekiel in Ez 37:3. What is particularly significant about this allusion is that the dialogue comes from the vision of the ‘dry bones.’ Ezekiel is asked, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ During the time of the Exile, in which the Book of Ezekiel had its origin, Israel had not yet developed a belief in a resurrection. The ‘dry bones’ functioned as a symbol for the dry, lifeless situation of the Israelites in captivity. At issue was the loss of hope by many of the captives, the conviction that their God had finally and fully abandoned them. The question had the force of, ‘Can God restore the fortunes of his people?’ Still, in later writings, this passage of Ezekiel was cited in developing the concept of eternal life and resurrection. In this light, the question addressed to the seer in Revelation has the force of, ‘Can there be life and victory after the great tribulations?’

13. **Eplynan** – ‘they have washed.’ Harrington notes that the soteria experienced by the vast multitude is not merely a passive one. ‘To wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb’ they have joined their sacrifice to that of the Lamb. It is the outlook of Revelation that absolute faithfulness to the Lamb, Christ, is very likely to create a persecution since ‘radical Christianity’ directly opposes the power of Rome. Only those who have remained steadfast and have endured as Christ endured, have a place in the New Jerusalem – there are close parallels between this heavenly scene and the description of the New Jerusalem in 21:2-22:5.
Commentary

‘After these things’ introduced the Throne Vision that was followed immediately by the opening of the seals. ‘After this’ introduced the scene of the Sealing of the Faithful. That break in narration before the opening of the last seal and the final ‘plague’ mirrors marking the doors of Hebrew households before the final plague in Exodus, the death of all first-born sons. In Exodus, the Hebrew households were marked for exemption from God’s wrath. By contrast, the Sealing of the Faithful marked them as God’s special possession, his faithful servants, claiming their allegiance to him alone, and not to Roman authority. But that sealing carried with it the implication of God’s support for his faithful ones while they endured the trials and tribulations that ensue from being totally committed to their God in a hostile world. This associates the faithful with the Lamb, God’s only begotten son – God’s first born. The Passion account in all four Gospel presents the crucifixion of Jesus with Exodus/Passover imagery. His patient endurance won the ultimate victory, a victory in which the faithful can participate by their own patient endurance.

‘After these things’ introduces another shift, the resumption of the opening of the seals. The pattern repeats the opening of the section, with a heavenly vision, here a heavenly ‘Song of Victory,’ followed by the ‘climactic’ opening of the seventh seal. Again, this is modelled on the Exodus pattern. In the call of Moses, Moses is given 3 + 1 signs to motivate and reassure him to take up his mission; in Egypt, the Hebrews and Egyptians are given 3 + 3 + 3 + 1 signs/plagues to accomplish God’s will for the freeing of his people. In each case there is a ‘climactic’ final sign. The heavenly ‘Song of Victory’ is likely an allusion to the ‘Song of the Sea’ in Exodus 15. Notice, however, that the ‘Song of the Sea’ is a song of victory that occurs after the climactic, final plague, the death of the first-born in Egypt and the drowning of the Egyptian pursuers in the sea. The heavenly ‘Song of Victory’ narrated in 7:9-17 occurs before the final seal is opened. The song celebrates the ‘victory of the Lamb,’ a victory already accomplished. The faithful are not passive lackeys in benefitting from this victory; it is by their patient endurance of the trials about to unfold that they associate themselves with the Lamb, stand apart from the world, and participate in his victory.

The vision narration begins ‘Behold!’ As has been noted, this is a ‘red flag’ word signaling a chance in perspective or something surprising and unexpected. The seer beholds a ‘vast crowd/throng.’ Regularly in the Book of Revelation, *megale* is the word used to indicate ‘great’ or ‘large.’ Here, the word is *polys*, a word that means ‘many’ or ‘varied/diversified.’ Something is different here. This vast throng matches the 144,000 who have been ‘sealed.’ As noted in the comments on vv. 1-8, 144,000 does not signify a specific number, but an innumerable amount from the symbolic ‘twelve tribes of Israel.’ Whether this number indicated the new people of God, the Church, or some combination of the new people of God and those faithful ones within the old people of God who had not yet been evangelized, isn’t completely clear. Whatever the case, that vast number is depicted here, in a heavenly liturgy, as ‘victorious.’

It is the next phrase that is completely surprising and unexpected. This vast throng is drawn from ‘every nation and tribe and people and tongue.’ In Revelation, this phrase is used as a specification of ‘those dwelling on the earth,’ and that regularly refers to what is ‘of this world’ in opposition to what is ‘heavenly,’ what is ‘of God.’ It is this inclusiveness of those ‘sealed,’ the inclusiveness of those who make up the vast throng before the throne of God in a heavenly liturgy that, for a first century audience, would be shocking. Within some of the cities, the Christian Church was opposed by some communities of Jews who claimed that, as God’s Chosen People, as Children of Abraham, they were the sole possessors of God’s favor, love and protection. What is unfolding in the image of the heavenly liturgy
now is a challenge to the same type of exclusiveness, the same type of arrogance that can, and unfortunately, does exist within the Church. Yet, if the Church is true to its mission, ‘Go out to all the world and tell the Good News,’ how can the vast throng fail to be composed of a variety of peoples and tongues? How can the vast throng not represent all of God’s creation?

The description of the throng involves multi-layered imagery. They were clothed in white garments with palm branches in their hands. The participle for ‘being clothed’ is ambiguous. It can be either the passive or the middle voice. The passive voice is regularly used to depict the action of God while avoiding anthropomorphisms. Revelation regularly describes the faithful, those who overcome, as clothed in white garments. It is a symbol of both ‘victory’ and ‘righteousness.’ God clothes them (passive voice) as a reward for their ‘victory.’ But the ‘victory’ reflects that fact that they have ‘clothed themselves in righteousness’ (middle voice), they have been faithful to their Christian calling. It is likely that the ambiguity is intentional – there is a partnership between God and his servants in living the Christian life.

In the cultural framework of the Roman world, white garments and waving palm branches points to ‘victory,’ victory in battle or in athletic contests. At one level, the imagery has in view ‘overcoming’ the Roman world. At another level, however, the waving of palm branches is part of the Feast of Tabernacles (Succoth). This is also called the Feast of Ingathering, a harvest feast. It is likely that, at harvest time, the people would have lived in tents (tabernacles, Succoth) in the fields. It is likely that the palm branches represented the building of such shelters. As a whole, then, the feast celebrates a sense of thanksgiving for God’s sustenance of the people in the land he has given to them. Beyond this, the idea of ‘tenting’ suggests the wilderness wanderings in which the people were sustained by their God along the way; God ‘tented’ with them in the tabernacle/tent that was constructed along the lines of the temple of Solomon. As such, the Feast of Tabernacles/Ingathering in Jewish tradition came to be a joyous celebration of God’s presence with his people bringing about provisions for their needs. That presence and sustenance of God is exactly what the Christian Church needs to ‘overcome,’ to make their way in the world around them as God’s servants.

On a final level, it is impossible not to see in this imagery allusions to Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus is met by joyful crowds as a ‘victor’ and acclaimed as ‘the son of David,’ a kingly and messianic title. The implication is that the diversified and inclusive heavenly throng are ‘servants of the Lamb,’ those who acknowledge the ‘victory’ and ‘kingship’ of Christ. Still, the image of Jesus’ triumph is a mixed image. He is hailed as victor and king, but the final victory will not take place until the final triumph of the Cross. The people who hailed him, turned against him in the end and that is a very real possibility for the Church – it can opt for accommodation with the Roman world, with the surrounding culture and values of the world in which it finds itself. But the final victory has been won. The vast throng can share in it by participating in patient endurance, by standing against the world and its false values.

The heavenly liturgy begins with the acclamation of the multitude: ‘Salvation (belongs) to our God, to him sitting on the throne and to the Lamb.’ In English, ‘salvation’ and ‘redemption’ are often treated as synonyms. In both Hebrew and Greek, salvation (soteria) and redemption (exagora, lytrosis, apolytrosis) are distinct concepts. ‘Redemption’ literally means ‘to buy back.’ It is used in the context of paying off a debt to release someone from bondage. Morally, on the analogy of the economic practice, the concept referred to ‘slavery to sin,’ from which bondage a person needed to be released, redeemed. ‘Salvation,’

204 http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14185-tabernacles-feast-of
on the other hand, means ‘to protect,’ ‘to defend,’ ‘to extricate someone from danger.’ It is the ‘salvation’ attributed to God and the Lamb that strengthens the faithful to stand up to the world and its dangers, which draws them out of succumbing to the false values of the world – its power structures, economic practices, and social stratification.

In answer to this acclamation, in a kind of reverse order, the angels, the heavenly beings gathered around the throne, the elders, those human ‘victors’ sharing in the ruling authority of Christ, and the four living creatures join the liturgy with a seven-fold doxology. The seven attributes of God listed here differ from the seven attributes proclaimed in 5:12. For ‘John’ seven is a number of completion and perfection. Yet no list of attributes of God can fully express his power and majesty. The implication is that the seven attributes of praise and worship are as complete as creatures before an infinite God can make them. God’s goodness can never be exhausted. A further difference can be noted. In 5:12 the praise was offered to the Lamb, but here to God. This is a further movement in the Book of assimilating and associating the Lamb with God. It can also be noted that this doxology begins and ends with the affirmation, ‘Amen!’ That this word of affirmation, ‘It is true!’ precedes and follows the doxology is a mark of the intensity of the praise. It can also be noted that the first ‘Amen!’ can be read as an affirmation of the angels, elders and four living creatures to the acclamation of the vast throng – ‘Salvation comes from God and the Lamb.’ It is likely that both readings are in the mind of the author. God’s protection really does defend us and that protection is really a spur to laud the God whose goodness and power can’t be captured completely in mere words.

A customary feature of apocalyptic is an ‘interpreting angel’ who explains a vision for the seer. As in the Scroll Vision (5:5), it is one of the elders who takes on this function. The dialogue form of the ‘interpretation’ is derived from Zechariah (Zech 4:5 and 6:4-5). Zechariah’s images depicted an imminent fall for Babylon and, in Revelation, Babylon is a symbol for Rome. The ‘interpretation,’ then, is intended to be understood in the context of the life of the Church in the midst of the Roman Empire. The focus of the ‘interpretation’ is the meaning of the vast throng, the ‘victorious.’ The ‘interpretation’ is intended to spell out just what it means to be ‘victorious.’

‘John’ is fully aware that taking a stand against the power of Rome, refusing to submit to the cult of the Emperor, distancing the Church from the customs and practices the surrounding culture will inevitably produce conflict, will be an occasion for the ‘great tribulation’ to be unleashed. The powers of evil in the world will fight back. The ‘victorious’ will be those who hold fast to the Lamb, who make no compromise with the world’s power structures, who become victims of the ‘tribulation.’ The ‘victorious’ are the ‘righteous.’ ‘Righteous’ always carries the meaning of ‘just,’ of promoting ‘justice’ as a way of living God’s will. God’s justice is always all-inclusive, always a promotion of the ‘rights’ and dignity of all people, always a just and equitable caring for all of God’s creation. The shocking image of the ‘righteous’ is that they are the ones who have washed their garments white in the blood of the Lamb. For the Church of the late first century, this explicitly referred to death, to martyrdom – witnessing to God’s truth even if, as it did for Christ, the Lamb, sacrificing one’s own life rather than capitulating to an exercise of power for its own sake. They have joined their sacrifice to that of the Lamb and participate in his victory while the struggle to bring the effects of his victory to all the world continues.

The fate of the victors, the righteous, is union with God. They will worship before the throne and God will ‘tabernacle’ over them. This image derives from late Jewish writings where the presence of God is imagined as brilliant light, associated with the more ancient ‘tent’ of meeting. In Hebrew this is the
shekinah, a word regularly rendered in Greek by doxa, ‘glory.’205 There is a merging here of Jewish and Christian imagery, a blending that indicates continuity and, again, inclusiveness.

In the presence of God’s glory, the righteous will no longer hunger or thirst, no longer suffer from the scorching heat of the sun, no longer be sorrowful. Christ’s promises to his followers will be fulfilled; the Beatitudes will become for them a reality (Mt 5:3-11). But the wording suggests much more than this since the way people demonstrate that they belong to the Christ is by doing his works; that is the means of their judgment (Mt 25:31-46). Matthew’s Last Judgment scene is summarized by “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Mt 25:40). But doing those things which bring justice to the world, and insisting that these are the things all people must do, pits the Church squarely against the power structures of the world that seek power and wealth and comfort at the expense of others, justifying their actions with false claims of ‘maintaining the peace.’ The Pax Romana was a good thing, but at what price? In the same way, the American Dream is a good thing, but at what price?

The explanation of the ‘victors’ includes one last, paradoxical image. The Lamb will ‘shepherd’ the righteous. In the Throne Vision, the elder tells the seer that ‘the Lion of Judah has been victorious’ and the seer looks for this Lion only to see a Lamb, a slaughtered Lamb. In Ps 23 the shepherd leads his flock to still waters – sheep are skittish animals, easily frightened by rippling, flowing water. But now the Lamb becomes the shepherd and leads his flock, the ‘victorious’ to flowing/living waters. This image conjures the idea of Baptism in which the believer dies with Christ (is submerged) to rise to new life with him. Christ leads the baptized, the Church, to flowing/living waters, to the waters of true life. But participation in living waters, eternal life, comes at a price, washing our clothes in the Blood of the Lamb.

It is easy enough to see in the ‘Song of Victory’ and the image of the ‘victors’ a call to the Church in today’s world to promote justice, to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care of the sick, secure justice for the oppressed. But for whom do we perform these works of Christ? What if the stranger wears the face of Isis? What if the hungry are homeless alcoholics or drug users? What if strangers at our door impact our economy and sense of well-being? Can we be peacemakers by meeting violence with violence? And what price are we willing to pay to do the works of Jesus Christ? Can we choose to participate in his suffering? Can we build an all-inclusive kingdom?

205 http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13537-shekinah
The Seventh Seal (8:1-5)

8:1 And when he opened the seventh seal there was silence in the heaven for about a half hour. 2 And I saw the seven angels who had taken their stand before God and was given to them seven trumpets.

3 And another angel came and was stationed at the altar, having a golden censer, and much incense was given to him so that he will give (it – add it) to the prayers of all the holy ones upon the golden altar before the throne. 4 And went up the smoke of the incense to (with) the prayers of the holy ones, out of the hand of the angel before God. 5 And took, the angel, the censer and filled it from the fire of the altar and cast (it) upon the earth and there happened thunder claps and sounds (rumblings) and lightning flashes and an earthquake.

Textual Notes

1. *Egeneto sige en to ourano* – ‘there happened a silence in the heavens.’ Harrington suggests that this silence may echo a Jewish tradition of a primeval silence preceding the first day of creation (IV Ezra 7:30-33). More aptly, given Revelation’s close linking of heavenly worship and eschatological drama, the opening of the seventh seal brings liturgical silence in heaven. It is a ritual anticipation of the plagues of trumpets, which are introduced by heavenly worship in 8:3-4.206 Rogers and Rogers suggest that the silence is a dramatic pause that makes even more impressive the

206 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
judgment about to fall on the earth. Although a thirty-minute period is relatively short, it would form an impressive break in such a rapidly moving drama. It could be silence so that the prayers of the holy ones on earth may be heard or silence out of reverence just before the judgment of God falls. In any case, it is a pregnant pause.

2. *Hepta angelous* – ‘seven angels.’ Harrington notes that these are the ‘angels of the presence,’ the seven Archangels of Jewish tradition who serve the immediate presence of God – Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Raguel, Sariel, and Remiel. (Is 63:9, I Enoch 20:1-8, Tob 12:15, Lk 1:19).

3. *Edothesan autois hepta salpinger* – ‘were given to them seven trumpets.’ The passive form of the verb is used to indicate the instrumentality of God while avoiding anthropomorphism. From the earliest times, trumpet blasts were used to indicate the judgment of God, as in the blowing of trumpets when the armies of Israel went into battle (e.g., the story of the Fall of Jericho, Josh 6:1-27). This imagery is used in prophetic literature (Joel 2:1, Zeph 1:16, Is 27:13). In the New Testament, trumpet blasts sounded by angels proclaim God’s final judgment (Mt 24:31, I Cor 15:52; I Thess 4:16).

4. *Allos angelos* – ‘another angel.’ Harrington concludes that this angel makes a number of appearances in the book, usually associated with the altar and in the context of heavenly worship. While the altar before the throne was first presented as the altar of sacrifice (6:9), here it is the altar of incense. Harrington suggests that the author may have in mind a dual-purpose altar. This ‘other angel,’ then, appears in 7:2; 10:1; 14:6, 8-9, and 18:1.

5. *Puros tou thysiasteriou* – ‘fire from the altar.’ Harrington notes that this image is likely drawn from Ezek 10:2, where the prophet is instructed to scatter burning coals over Jerusalem. In the context of Ezekiel, it is likely that the symbolic action represented both a judgment and a purging/cleansing action. In this passage, the angel is instructed to cast fire on all the earth. Harrington cites Wis 19:13 as representative of the late Jewish tradition that God’s judgment will not be executed without a previous warning in his thundering. As such the image here – which is largely the unleashing of a theophany, an appearance of God in power – can represent a warning, a chance for the world to recognize the sovereignty and power of God.

**Commentary**

Patterns have been broken. The rapid transition from one ‘plague’ to the next has run its course through the opening of six seals. The climactic opening of the seventh seal has been delayed, as was the climactic tenth ‘plague’ in the Exodus story. In both cases, what intervenes in the progression is a pause for God’s mercy to become effective. In Exodus, God’s mercy encompassed the Israelites, his Chosen People, but here the suggestion has been that God’s mercy is for the whole world, for all who embrace the victory of the Lamb. To make this even more evident, ‘John’ inserts the ‘Song of Victory,’ which followed the final plague in Exodus, before the opening of the seventh seal. The ‘victory’ has been won.

Against all expectation, when the seventh seal is opened, it is met with silence. What is expected, at this point, is that the four angels standing at the four corners of the world will unleash the violent winds of destruction. But they don’t appear again until the ‘sixth trumpet.’ Instead, in the intervening silence, ‘John’ sees another seven angels, most likely to be understood as the ‘angels of the presence’ of Jewish tradition who serve before the throne of God and whom God arms with seven trumpets (the implication of the passive voice of the verb again implying God’s action). The trumpets are suggestive. They are blown in religious services to mimic the sounds of wind and thunder and lightning – the image of God’s theophany, his presence in power. They were also blown when the armies of Israel marched into battle – again an image that the powerful ‘Lord of Hosts’ was with them, fighting their battles for them. But,

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207 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
208 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
209 Ibid.
again, the story is delayed. Before the reader can discover the purpose of these seven angels with trumpets, another angel makes his appearance. The silence continues.

This angel is stationed before the altar. He holds a golden censer, but what is noteworthy is that the incense is given to him. Again, the passive suggests God’s action. Burning incense represents the prayers of God’s faithful rising up before him. But it is God himself who provides the ‘means’ for those prayers to come before him. Harrington has suggested that the silence in the heavens provides an interlude of quiet so that the prayers of those on earth can be heard. Whatever the case, the reader encounters here a pregnant pause, perhaps a calm before the storm, a moment of peacefulness for intimacy with God.

In the final scene of this vision, another unexpected reversal takes place. The angel before the altar fills his censer, whose incense carried the prayers of the faithful on earth ‘up’ to God, with fire and hurls it ‘down’ to the earth. Thunder and rumblings and lightning flashes and an earthquake occur. A theophany. The opening of the seventh seal results in the presence of God with power on the earth. God himself becomes personally involved with the situation of the Church, with the need of the world to embrace the victory of the Lamb, for the world to come to realize where true power and sovereignty are to be found. God answers the prayers of his faithful.

‘John’ and like-minded Christians in late first century Asia acknowledged that the victory had been won, but that embracing that victory would, of necessity, pit them against the false power of their world, the Roman Empire with its false cult of the Emperor and its false sense of power and authority. They expected their single-minded adherence to Christ to unleash tribulation – even death – for them. With apocalyptic fervor, they hoped for God and his Christ to intervene and topple the unjust power structures. Still, the scene of the opening of the seventh seal offers them, and us, an alternate view. Everything that has been unfolding defies logic and shatters expectations. God answers the prayers of his faithful ones, God supports and sustains their faithful and patient endurance, but in his way and in his time. It is the Lamb who has won the victory and it is the Lamb who will shepherd and lead the world that he has overcome. As the early Christians, we have a role to play in the working out of the divine plan, we win our way by patient endurance, but the plan and the victory belong to God. So, how do we stand against false and abusive power structures in our world, how do we speak out against physical and economic oppression, how do we combat senseless violence, enduring patiently but also leaving things in God’s hands and timeframe? What expectations do we have of our God that reflect seeing things as ‘human beings see and not as God sees?’ How can we leave behind our expectations and not lose hope? What does ‘trust of God’ really require of us?

210 Ibid.
The Seven Trumpets

The hurling of the golden censer upon the earth does not exactly fit the unleashing of a tribulation that is expected with the opening of a seal. It can be noted, however, that the narrative of the Seven Trumpets does not begin, as might be expected, with ‘After these things...’ This indicates a continuity between what has gone before and what is now being narrated. This suggests that ‘The Seven Trumpets’ narrative is to be read as the ‘contents’ found by opening the seventh seal.

The First Four Trumpets (8:6-13)

6 And the seven angels having the seven trumpets prepared themselves that they might blow (sound) the trumpet.

7 And the first sounded the trumpet and hail and fire happened, having been mixed in blood, and it was cast upon the earth and a third of the earth was burned up and a third of the trees was burned up and all the green grass was burned up.

8 And the second angel sounded the trumpet and like a great mountain in fire burning up was cast into the sea and a third of the sea became blood. 9 And died a third of the creatures of those in the sea having life (psyches, souls) and a third of the ships were destroyed.

10 And the third angel sounded the trumpet and fell out of the heaven a great star, burning like a torch (lamp) and it fell upon a third of the rivers and upon springs of waters.

11 And the name of the star is called Wormwood (Apsinthos) and a third of the waters became into (were changed into) wormwood and many of the men died from the waters for they became bitter.

12 And the fourth angel sounded the trumpet and was struck (smitten) a third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars so that was darkened a third of them and the day would not shine (be bright, lit), a third of it and the night likewise.

13 And I saw and I heard (the sound) of one eagle flying in mid-heaven saying in a loud voice: Woe! Woe! Woe to those dwelling upon the earth from the remaining sounds of the three angels, those being about to sound the trumpet.
Textual Notes

1. *Chalaza kai pyr memigmena en haimata* – ‘hail and fire having been mixed in blood.’ Harrington notes that the image of hail and fire is derived from Ex 9:23-26. The combination with ‘blood’ in the context of judgment is found in Joel 2:30. He notes that in Jewish imagination the mingling of hail and fire is a miracle within a miracle.\(^{211}\) However, fire can imply lightning in a violent hail storm. The mixture with blood certainly refers to a life-threatening plague.

2. *Triton... triton... pas...* - ‘a third... a third... all...’ Harrington suggests that the switch from ‘a third of the earth’ and ‘a third of the trees’ to ‘all the green grass’ is simply an example of the author’s literary freedom in weaving his images.\(^{212}\) Alternately, in the Exodus passage, the destructive force of the hail impacts all of Egypt – except the Land of Goshen, where the Israelites dwell. Here the destructive force is both wider and more limited, 1/3 of all the earth certainly encompassing more that all of Egypt, but 2/3 of the earth not touched represents much more than the land of Goshen. There is, perhaps, a veiled suggestion that God’s judgment on the earth is not for the sake of mere destructiveness, but to motivate change, to demonstrate his power in the face of false power for the good of the world. ‘All the green grass’ remains a problem. Still, it is possible to suggest that what is unfolding in the plague is a situation that would most likely result in famine conditions. This can indicate a polemic contrast between the power of God and the power of Rome/world power structures. In late first century Asia, Roman policy was ineffective, even disastrous, in dealing with famine conditions. The implication of the vision is that, by contrast, God can control nature; he can create famine conditions and certainly he can relieve those conditions.

3. *Hos oros mega pyri* – ‘something like a great mountain of fire...’ There are numerous images of God moving, crushing, and burning mountains in biblical literature. Several include casting them into the sea. It would seem that these images fall into two categories: 1) God’s mastery over creation whereby even the majestic, solidly founded mountains crumble before him or are returned to watery chaos; 2) God’s mastery over mountains as symbols of long established (ancient) kingdoms of the world, firmly established power structures. (Zech 4:7; Is 40:4, 41:15; Lk 3:5; Jb 9:5, 28:9; Dt 33:22; Ps 46:2-3; Ez 38:20; Hab 3:6) Specifically, Harrington notes that the imagery here is likely drawn from I Enoch 18:13, which he sees as an apocalyptic dramatization of the first plague in Egypt and a text of Jeremiah where Babylon is compared to a destructive mountain. If, in allusions to the plagues, Rome is to be understood as “Egypt,” she is also “Babylon,” a recurrent symbol in the book. The burning red-hot mass of the mountain turns the waters of the sea into blood. Once again the destructive force of the plague is limited to 1/3 of the sea.\(^{213}\)

4. *Egeneto to triton tes thalasses haima* – ‘became a third of the sea blood.’ This is a clear allusion to the first Egyptian plague. Harrington writes that, in vv 8-9 and 10-11, the author has transformed it into two plagues; whereas in vv 8-9 he speaks of the ocean, in vv 10-11 he turns to rivers and springs.\(^{214}\)

5. *Aster megas kaiomenas* – ‘a great star burning.’ Harrington notes again that, like the burning mountain the great, burning star that destroys 1/3 of the fresh water supply is derived from I Enoch. He also notes an allusion to the dirge for the King of Babylon in Is 14:12 – ‘How are you fallen from the heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!’\(^{215}\) Again, the image can suggest both an imminent demise of Roman power as well as a decrying of the destructive power of Rome.

6. *Onoma tous asteros... apsinthos* – ‘name of the star... wormwood.’ Rogers and Rogers note that ‘wormwood’ is so named because of the strong, bitter taste of the plant. It symbolizes God’s punishment; or, more generally, bitterness, suffering, and sorrow.\(^{216}\) Harrington notes that ‘wormwood’ is used as a

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\(^{211}\) Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

\(^{212}\) Ibid.

\(^{213}\) Ibid.

\(^{214}\) Ibid.

\(^{215}\) Ibid.

\(^{216}\) Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
symbol of God’s punishment in Jer 9:15 and 23:15, and in Lam 3:15, 19. In Prv 5:4, it is a symbol for disaster. The plague, then, is a reversal of the miracle at Marah (Ex 15:23-25). In Amos 5:6-7 and 6:12, ‘wormwood’ stands for perversion of justice. In all of this, then, it can be suggested that ‘wormwood’ is the star of the new Babylon (Rome), which has poisoned by its idolatry the ‘springs’ of its own life.217 We can probably also see, here, an allusion to the actual situation of the Church in Laodicea, whose water was undrinkable. That Church receives the strongest condemnation in the letters. It is the Church that is most fully accommodated to Rome, Roman practices and the surrounding culture. Like the ‘star,’ they have poisoned the very source of their life.

7. *Helios… selena… asteras…* - ‘sun… moon… stars…’ Harrington notes that both Amos 8:9 and Joel 3:15 record a similar disturbance in the heavenly bodies. Strictly speaking, dimming a third of the sun, moon and stars would cause a dimming of brightness, not a shortening of daylight. It is likely that the author is aiming to produce an effect – a disturbance in the heavenly lights – and to emphasize again the partial character of the ‘plague.’218 The effect of the image is again to stress not God’s destructive wrath, but a display of his power to move those dwelling on the earth to see the truth.

8. *Aetos* – ‘eagle.’ Rogers and Rogers note that, while the primary meaning of the word is ‘eagle,’ it can also be used for ‘vulture.’ In this context, ‘vulture’ would suggest impending doom. The vulture hovers in mid-heaven, visible to all, and cries out in a loud voice so that none will fail to hear.219 Harrington agrees with translating *aetos* as ‘vulture,’ citing Lk 17:37 and Hos 8:1 where the LXX uses *aetos* in this sense. The presence of the vulture calls forth the trumpet alarm: ‘Set the trumpet to your lips, for the vulture is over the house of the Lord.’220 Another level of meaning, which neither Harrington nor Rogers and Rogers mention, is the ‘eagle’ as the symbol of Rome. In this case, there is ambiguity in the term, which ‘John’ seems to favor as a literary device. The ‘eagle,’ representing the power and glory of Rome, hovers over the world – or with the allusion to Hosea in mind, over the house of the Lord – signaling impending doom, doom for those who submit to the power and authority of the ‘vulture’ rather than to that of the ‘Lamb’ and the ‘Dove.’

9. *Ouai, ouai, ouai…* - ‘Woe! Woe! Woe!’ The ‘eagle/vulture’ sounds three shouts of ‘Woe,’ presaging the next three angels and what the sounds of their trumpets will unleash. The ‘woes’ suggest the opposite of the ‘blessings.’ Note how Luke split the Beatitudes into four blessings and four ‘woes.’ This suggests, in covenantal terms, the pronunciation of blessings and curses on the covenantal parties, dependent on their faithfulness to the agreement. In that sense, the ‘plagues’ are simply what is deserved, but throughout, God holds back from what is deserved (one third); for all the gloom, his mercy prevails.

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217 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
218 Ibid.
219 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
220 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
A Note on Structure

The ‘Sealing of the Faithful,’ on the model of the plagues in Egypt, corresponds to marking the Israelite doorposts with blood. The ‘Song of Victory’ corresponds to the ‘Song of the Sea,’ but it has been shifted to precede the opening of the final seal. The victory has already been won. It has been suggested that, while opening the first six seals unleashes a single ‘plague,’ the opening of the seventh seal ushers in the Seven Trumpets. The ‘Song of Victory’ begins with the words, ‘After these things...’ In biblical narrative the phrase always indicates a new topic or a new direction in the story being told. The phrase will not appear again until 15:5, the vision of the heavenly tabernacle and the seven angels holding seven bowls. While 15:5 marks another shift in the storyline, Harrington has noted correspondences between the ‘Seven Trumpets’ and the ‘Seven Bowls’ based on allusions to the Egyptian plagues. Building on his observations, it can be noted that the ‘plagues’ provide a bracketing of the whole narrative from 8:6-7 to 16:17-21. This bracketing encloses the plagues and the cosmic battle with evil that intervenes, to close out God’s acts of power to win over the world and moves the narrative into the working out of the victory – the end of Babylon, the end of Evil and the vision of the New Heaven.

8:6-7 Hail, fire, blood (Plague 7) 16:17-21 Thunder, hail (Plague 7)
8:8-9 Sea into blood (Plague 1) 16:12-16 Frogs (Plague 2) [Euphrates]
8:10-11 Bitter waters (Plague 1) 16:10-11 Darkness (Plague 9)
8:12 Darkness (Plague 9) 16:8-9 Burning Heat
9:1-11 Locusts (Plague 8) 16:4-7 Water to blood (Plague 1)
9:13-21 Euphrates 16:3 Sea into blood (Plague 1)
11:15-19 Heavenly Worship 16:2 Ulcers (Plague 6)

Plague 7 (8:6-7)
Plague 1 (8:8-9)
Plague 1 (8:10-11)
Euphrates (9:13-21)
Heavenly Worship (11:15-19)

Plague 1 (16:3)
Plague 1 (16:4-7)
Plague 2/Euphrates (16:12-16)

Plague 7 (16:17-21)

The whole sequence begins and ends with thunder, hail, fire and blood – typical signs of a theophany, an experience of God’s power. The inner brackets include two instances of the first plague, one impacting the seas and one impacting potable water – rivers and streams. In both cases there is mention of the Euphrates – merely mentioned in the opening bracket and plagued with frogs (plague 2) in the closing bracket. The Euphrates is significant and symbolic, the great river and life source of Babylon. Heavenly worship concludes the Seven Trumpets, just as heavenly worship concluded the Seven Seals. The seventh element in the sequence of ‘bowls,’ however, is the final plague – again a suggestion of God’s theophanic appearance in power. There is a certain sense of ‘completion’ in the pouring out of the final bowl; God’s demonstrations of power are finished. All that is left is human choice and the working out of the consequences of the victory already won.

221 Ibid.
Commentary

The plague cycle about to unfold in the ‘Seven Trumpets,’ a cycle to be completed with the ‘Seven Bowls,’ is modelled on the Egyptian plagues and serves the same purpose:

... and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, “the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; let us now go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.” I know, however, that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; after that he will let you go. (Ex 3:18-20)  

What was accomplished in Egypt, the freeing of God’s people to be able to serve him, is now repeated not only for the sake of the Church, but for the whole world, that all the inhabitants of the earth will see the power and glory of God and embrace service to him alone.

Still, in both Exodus and Revelation there is a proliferation of plagues, of seemingly violent actions on the part of God to apparently force his will on the world. In the Exodus cycle a recurring motif is particularly problematic – the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. In some cases, Pharaoh’s heart is simply hard; he is unmoved by God’s action, resists God’s power and asserts his own will to dominate. That occasions further action on God’s part, the unleashing of another plague in an attempt to convince him that he is not all-powerful, that there is a higher authority. In other cases, however, Pharaoh’s stubbornness is attributed to God; God hardens Pharaoh’s heart and the plague cycle continues.

Robert R. Wilson has studied the ‘hardening’ motif in Exodus and his observations are consistent with the narrative of the ‘plagues’ in Revelation. He observes that resistance to God’s will in Exodus is not limited to Pharaoh alone. The Israelites, and even Moses himself, are resistant and refuse to listen. In the narrative of the Call of Moses, Moses balks, asks God to send somebody else instead. When Moses confronts Pharaoh and the Egyptian oppression of the Israelites ramps up, the Israelites complain against Moses, willing to accept their situation and make the best of things as they are. Even after the Israelites are freed, they complain during the wilderness wanderings, suggesting that they had fared better under Egyptian oppression than they fared on the trek through the desert. On the one hand, the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart occasions additional divine signs of power to overcome his own stubbornness, the arrogance of worldly power that sees itself as self-sufficient and accountable to no power beyond itself. On the other hand, God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart allows him to address the stubbornness of his own people, to show them the baselessness of human power, to encourage them to embrace a relationship with him, not as co-opted lackeys, but as a people who chooses to serve and revere the Creator and saving/freeing God, the source of not just power, but power and authority for the sake of good, a freeing power that allows those chosen to bring God’s blessings to the whole world. For the Israelites in Egypt, as for the Church in the province of Asia, there is a price to pay, a risk to be taken; God’s people have to stand against false power and demand basic human rights, basic freedoms, basic acknowledgment of truth and true power.

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222 NRSV translation.
Returning to the text at hand, the heavenly liturgy, marked by silence, is finished. The angel at the altar has hurled the fiery censer to the earth causing thunder, lightning, rumblings and an earthquake – signs of a theophany, of the presence of God with power on earth. The serious nature of what is about to unfold is conveyed in the notice that the seven angels prepared themselves for their task. What is at stake is not where real power and authority lies, but to whom the Church and the people inhabiting the earth will listen.

In a similar fashion to the opening of the Seven Seals, the results of sounding the first four of the Seven Trumpets is narrated quickly. The narration then slows down for the last three and there is an interlude between the sixth plague and the sounding of the seventh trumpet.

When the first angel sounds the trumpet, one third of the earth is burned up in the storm of hail and fire. All the green grass is consumed. As was the case in the Egyptian plagues, there is an exception, a limitation. In Exodus the plagues strike all of Egypt except the land of Goshen where the Israelites dwell. Here, the impact of the plague is both greater and less. It strikes one third of all the earth, but leaves two thirds untouched. The exception in the Exodus story encompassed only a single people, but the ‘exception’ here includes all the earth. God acts with power to demonstrate his sovereignty, but also with restraint. Consistently, throughout the Bible, God’s acts of judgment are always tempered with mercy.

It can be noted that the destruction of one third of the trees and all the green grass is likely to produce conditions of famine. This plague is probably suggestive of the late first century famine in the province of Asia and Domitian’s inadequate and self-centered means of dealing with it. This is but another polemic contrast between God and the power of Rome, and Rome comes out the loser.

When the second trumpet sounds, a great, fiery mountain is uprooted and thrown into the sea. Images of uprooted, crumbling mountains, even mountains hurled into the sea are frequent in the Old Testament. The images regularly symbolize God’s mastery over either creation – captured in the idea of massive, firmly rooted mountains – or over the kingdoms of the earth, again symbolized by mountains. In the particularity of historical circumstances standing behind the imagery of the Book of Revelation, the mountain certainly represents Rome. In the context of the Pax Romana travel was possible and protected and the main entry to the province of Asia was through the port in Ephesus. And from that port tribute would flow to Rome. In the symbolism of a mountain hurled into the sea, there is a return to watery chaos, the exact opposite of the order that should prevail in kingdoms, in human societies. What is significant here is that the mountain poisons one third of the sea, kills one third of the fish, and destroys one third of sea traffic. Again there is a polemic note: the power of Rome is corrupt; it poisons the sea, what lives in it, and those who make their living by sailing.

As was the case with the sounding of the first trumpet, the destruction is not absolute, and the question remains: To whom will the Church and the inhabitants of the world lend their allegiance? The God of all Creation or the petty potentate in Rome?

When the third trumpet sounds, a star falls from the heavens and poisons one third of fresh water, rivers and streams. It is possible to see in this image an allusion to Isaiah’s dirge over Babylon. In the plague stories in Exodus, especially in the final form of the Pentateuch, Egypt came to function as a symbol of Babylon. In Revelation, Babylon functions as a symbol for the power of Rome. Again it is possible to see particular historical circumstances in this image – the undrinkable water of Laodicea. That Church received the most severe condemnation in the letters; the city and its Church had ‘hitched
its fortunes’ to Rome and the cultural climate of the city, but even the might of Rome can do nothing to heal the poisoned water.

On the sounding of the fourth trumpet the sun, moon and stars are darkened. Similar disturbances of the heavenly luminaries occur in Amos and Joel, and in the apocalyptic passages in the Synoptic Gospels these phenomena presage the coming of the Son of Man, the final judgment. The plague of darkness occurs in the Exodus story immediately before the climactic final plague. While it can be argued that the dimming of the heavenly lights will not reduce the hours in the day, as the image suggests, on a symbolic level the image warns that time is becoming short. Perhaps the author has in mind an expectation of an imminent Parousia, but by the late first century it is evident that the Church was coming to grips with the fact that the Second Coming of Christ would probably not be soon and that no one could know its time. Perhaps the author is suggesting a sense of urgency, urgency to live the radical Christianity the book promotes before it is too late, before the trials and tribulations of standing against the power of the Empire begin to cause suffering for everyone, the faithful and unfaithful alike. Such an urgency to make the right response, to be disciples and do what Jesus did no matter the cost is a central theme in Mark’s Gospel, a Gospel whose background is to be found in the Jewish-Roman war of 66-70 AD.

In the end, the rapid narrative of the sounding of the first four trumpets concludes with a summary notice, the image of an eagle in the mid-heavens shouting a warning of ‘Woe!’ to the inhabitants of the earth. There is ambiguity in the word aetos – ‘eagle.’ That is the primary meaning of the word, but, in context, it can also mean ‘vulture.’ Time is getting short and the vulture is circling. But, again, there is a polemic note to the image. The eagle is the proud symbol of Rome, yet that proud bird of prey is equated with a vulture, an eater of dead flesh. All the glory of Rome leads to death and corruption, while the witness, the ‘martyrdom,’ the death of the faithful leads to life. It is the slaughtered Lamb who has won the final victory. Woe to those who do not listen, the next trumpets are about to sound.

With the sounding of the first four trumpets the imagery of Revelation becomes much more of a two-edged sword. The particular circumstances of the Churches in the province of Asia become much more pronounced in the plague sequence. There is a definite anti-Roman polemic in the plagues. Who is Rome – or Egypt or Babylon – to flaunt their supposed power before the creative and redeeming power of God? What will it take to get world powers, powers interested only in maintaining themselves, to hear and respond to God’s word and will for all creation? But even more troubling, what will it take for the Church, for God’s own people to hear and respond to his word and will? To stand up to limited, nationalistic visions and embrace a global community of brothers and sisters? To be willing to suffer and sacrifice for a universal Church, a global community? To reject a culture that says might makes right, that peaceful relations are to be maintained – with those from whom we can benefit while all others are to be at best ignored, at worst eliminated? How much does the American Dream, the Zionist Dream, the Jihadist Dream, with all the self-interest they imply, cloud the vision of who we really are, of who we are meant to be? How clearly do we see the vision and hear the message and warnings of Revelation? In the end, how free are we?
The Fifth Trumpet / First Woe (9:1-12)

9:1 And the fifth angel sounded the trumpet and I saw a star out of the heaven having fallen to the earth and was given to it the key to the pit of the abyss. 2 And he opened the pit of the abyss and arose (something) out of the pit like smoke of a great, fiery furnace and was darkened the sun and the air from the smoke of the pit. 3 And from out of the smoke came forth locusts upon the earth and was given to them authority (power) as (just as) they have authority (power), the scorpions of the earth. 4 And it was said to them that they will not harm the grass of the earth, nor any green thing, nor any tree except (if not) the men who do not have the seal of God upon the foreheads. 5 And it was given (granted) to them that they should not kill them but that they will torment (them) five months and their torment (was) like the torment of a scorpion whenever it should strike a man. 6 And in those days, they will seek, the men, death and not yet will they find it and they will long to die and death escapes (from) them.

7 And the appearances of the locusts (were) like horses having been prepared for war and upon the heads of them (something) like crowns, similar to gold, and the faces of them like faces of men, 8 and they had hair like the hair of women and their teeth like (those) of lions were they, 9 and they had breastplates (chests) like breastplates (chests) of iron and the sound of their wings like the sound of chariots of horses, many, rushing to war, 10 and they have tails like scorpions and stingers and in their tails (is) their power (authority) to injure (harm) men (for) five months. 11 They have over them a king, the angel of the abyss, the name to him in Hebrew (being) Abaddon and in Hellenic (Greek) he has the name Apollyon.

12 The woe, the first, has passed; behold, are coming still two woes after these things.
Textual Notes

1. *Astera ek tou ouranou peptokota* – ‘a star from the heaven having fallen.’ Based on I Enoch 6-13, a legend based on Gn 6:-14, the *Nephilim*, sometimes translated as ‘giants,’ but referring to quasi-divine beings who copulated with human women, Harrington observes that ‘a fallen star’ is a symbol for a ‘fallen angel.’ This is the same tradition reflected in Luke’s apocalyptic discourse: ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.’

2. *Phreatps tes abyssou* – ‘the pit of the abyss.’ Harrington writes that the ‘abyss’ is the usual rendering of the Hebrew *tehom* in the LXX. In a number of cases *tehom* is roughly a synonym for *sheol* – the realm of the dead. In Revelation the ‘abyss’ is the provisional abode, or jail, of Satan and the fallen angels. ‘John’ pictures the abyss as entered by a shaft whose mouth was kept locked; a fallen angel was permitted, edothe, to unlock it.

Rogers and Rogers cite Rabbinic traditions that images the abyss as an unfathomable, bottomless deep, a place of imprisonment for disobedient spirits and the entrance to Gehenna (*sheol*). It was conceived to be narrow at the top but widening at lower depths.

To these observations can be added that the usual Old Testament understanding of *tehom* is that of watery chaos, the home of the water sea monster, Leviathan, the symbol of evil, of all that stands against God and his will for order and good. As such, it is easy to understand its appropriation as the ‘prison’ of ‘fallen angels’ in late Jewish writings.

3. *Kapnos* – ‘smoke.’ ‘Smoke’ invokes the image of the theophany on Sinai: ‘Now mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently.’ (Ex 19:18) This was the image invoked when the angel before the altar threw his fiery censer to the earth. That symbol of God’s presence in power leads to the sounding of the trumpets. But note here how the image is reversed. It is not smoke from above, but from below, pouring out of the pit and filling the air, blocking the sun. This is not smoke drawing attention to God’s power, but obfuscating smoke, clouding and blocking clear vision; it is smoke whose source is evil. There seems to be an indication that battle lines are being drawn.

4. *Akrides… skorpioi…* - ‘locusts… scorpions.’ In his brief note, Harrington notes that the plague of locusts reflects the eighth plague in the Exodus account (Ex 10:12-15. It is also used in the imagery of Joel (1:6-7, 15; 2:1-11). *Edothe* is another passive form indicating the action of God – ‘It was granted to them.’ The locusts are instruments of God’s purpose. That they are given the ‘power of scorpions’ is a dire description since scorpions are known to be proverbially hostile to humans (Lk 10:19).

Rogers and Rogers write that throughout the Old Testament the locust is a symbol of destruction, and among the ancients the locust plague was viewed as a sign of the wrath of the gods. The Roman historian, Pliny, stated that locusts of exceptional size had been observed. They flew with such noise of their wings that they were mistaken for birds, and the hordes were of such size that their flight obscured the sun. Their natural habitat was the desert from which they came in droves in search of food. They were capable of stripping cultivated lands free of all vegetation.

5. *Errethe autais hina me adikesousin…* ‘it was said to them that they should not harm…’ The passive of ‘to speak, say’ is another example of the ‘divine passive.’ While the ‘locusts’ are representatives of the forces of evil, they still fall under divine control. Contrary to the common belief of ancients in the capriciousness of the Gods, the Hebrew mindset had developed a theological perspective that evil was caused by sin and that God’s hand in evil occurrences was for the sake of bringing good out of evil (e.g., in Judges, God hands Israel over to the hands of foreign powers, not to abandon them but to demonstrate that he is God, and to motivate them to return to faithfulness. When they do, the foreign power is overthrown.)

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224 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
225 Ibid.
226 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
227 NRSV translation.
228 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
229 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
6. *Basanisthesontai* – ‘to torment.’ Contrary to the normal behavior of locusts, these representatives of evil are instructed not to touch vegetation but to torment men – but only those not marked by the seal of God. Harrington notes that the sting of a scorpion, though exceedingly painful, is usually not fatal. These locusts are commissioned to torture, not slay. He further notes that there is a limitation to how long the torment can last, suggesting that five months reflects the normal life-span of a locust.\(^{230}\) Whether or not the ‘five months’ is meant to suggest the life-span of a locust, the period of torment is a limited time, and the torment is limited to those who have not been sealed by God, though a constant motif in Revelation is that the faithful must endure patiently the trials and tribulations of the world. The exemption of those sealed corresponds to the exemption of God’s people living in the Land of Goshen in the Exodus story. But beyond this there is a limitation of duration for the inhabitants of the earth, those not sealed. Given the understanding that evil is the result of sin, these men are meant to experience the burning pain of their own actions but will still live, will still have the opportunity to see the truth and turn to the living, creative and redeeming God. In short, God treats them as he treats his ‘faithful.’

7. *Zetesousin hoi antropoi ton thanaton* – ‘the men will seek death.’ Harrington observes that the extreme suffering inflicted by the scorpion sting calls to mind the situation of Job (Jb 3:20-21), who seeks death and it eludes him; it also seems to allude to the ‘faithful remnant’ finding death preferable to enduring the fate of the unfaithful during the Babylonian crisis (Jer 6:15-17).\(^{231}\) What is significant in the allusion to Jeremiah is that the faithful sealed are exempt from the torment; it is possible to suggest that, in God’s design, the ‘remnant’ suffering from the locusts are those God wants to win over by means of the tribulation. Can they come to see the ultimate consequences of their actions, their life-styles?

8. *Homoiomate ton akridon* – ‘appearance of the locust.’ Harrington states that the description of the appearance of the locusts apparently derives from Joel 2:1-11.\(^{232}\) Their features are described at length in vv. 7-10. The appeared as horses – this can mean that they had the heads/faces of horses (the limited meaning of ‘appearance’) or that their overall appearance was huge, like a horse. Significantly, the appear as horses prepared for war. This is the battle between good and evil.

On their heads were crowns like gold – *stephanoi*. As has been noted, *stephanos* is not a royal crown but a crown of victory. This gives a suggestion of their invincibility, as was the case in the description of the first horseman sent forth at the opening of the first seal (6:2). These are formidable foes.

*prosopa auton hos prosopa anthropon* – ‘their faces like the faces of men.’ Harrington notes that the human appearance of the locusts symbolizes the human dimension of evil. Evil is the result of human rebellion against God.\(^{233}\) *trixas hos trixas gynaikon* – ‘hair like the hair of women.’ Again Harrington suggests that what might be in mind here is the ‘long-haired’ Parthians. These fierce warriors were also alluded to in the description of the first horseman in 6:2.\(^{234}\) While the Parthians, on the eastern edge of the Empire could have posed a threat to the dominance of Rome and could have been viewed as another possible Cyrus, who defeated Babylon, they still represent the power structures of the world, a force of evil based on human designs and the will to dominance that rebels against the sovereignty of God.

*odontes auton hos leonton* – ‘their teeth like (those) of a lion.’ In the description of the four living creatures, the image of the lion has already been deployed as a symbol of primacy among the wild beasts. What is suggested here is that there is something animalistic about fierce warriors, something inhuman about waging war to establish power and control.

9. *Thorakas siderous… armaton hippon* – ‘breastplates of iron… chariots of horses.’ The militaristic image continues in the description of the locust’s armor. Rogers and Rogers note that the scaly backs and flanks of the insects resembled iron coats of mail. The idea of ‘iron’ indicates the hopelessness of any effort to
destroy assailants so well-protected.\textsuperscript{235}

The sound of their wings was as the sound of many chariots rushing into battle. This again seems to point to the invincibility of the horde – but, though seemingly invincible, they cannot kill men and their time to torment them is limited. Only God could bring about such a limitation in the face of such a fierce enemy.

10. *Ouras homoias skorpiois* – ‘tails like scorpions.’ In this ‘genetically modified’ hybrid of a locust and scorpion, the weapon is the ‘stinger.’ Rogers and Rogers suggest that this is also an allusion to the backward shooting archers of the Parthians.\textsuperscript{236} Yet, for all the fierce and warlike imagery, it is noted again that they cannot kill, but only harm, and that their time to torment is limited. It can be noted that ‘five months’ appears in v. 5 and is repeated here. The *exousia*, authority/power of the locusts is completely circumscribed in what has been granted to them by God.

11. *Basilea... angelon tes abyssou... Abaddon* – ‘a king... the angel of the abyss... Abaddon.’ That there is a ‘king’ for this horde of locusts may symbolize the evil of an absolute monarchy that extends its power and enforces its rule by means of force – an image of the evil of the power of Rome, especially when its power is deployed to control ‘rebellion’ against the claims of the absolute monarch to be ‘godly,’ all-powerful, a force unto himself. This ‘king’ is the ‘angel of the abyss,’ a fallen angel, a discredited force. His name is *Abaddon*, a word, in Hebrew that means ‘destruction.’ Harrington notes that the word is found almost exclusively in Israel’s Wisdom Literature where it is used as the name of the region of the Dead, a synonym for *Sheol*. This ‘great king’ rules death. *Apollyon*, the Greek word for ‘destruction,’ may suggest an intentional pun. It is possible that Domitian, who saw himself as *deus et dominus*, may have adopted the name of Apollo. In the polemic of Revelation, God is the God of life, Domitian rules only death.

\textsuperscript{235} Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{236} Ibid.
Commentary

As was the case with the Seven Seals, so too the first four trumpets were narrated quickly. With the fifth trumpet the narrative slows considerable and the reader is forced to grapple with horrific images, images, it can be suggested, of ‘un-creation.’

In the ancient worldview, creation was not conceived of as making something out of nothing, but as bringing order out of chaos. With the sounding of the fifth trumpet created order begins to unravel. A star falls from the heavens, a symbol in late Jewish writings of a fallen angel. (The story of Michael and the good angels defeating Lucifer and his rebellious lot and expelling them from heaven is not biblical but based on a late Jewish legend.) Yet this ‘fallen angel’ is not beyond God’s reach. He is granted/given a key to the pit of the abyss, the divine passive implying God’s involvement in what is about to unfold.

The ‘abyss,’ *tehom* in Hebrew, is the usual word for the watery depths and creation imagery depicts God holding back watery chaos and defeating the ancient sea monster, Leviathan, to establish his order throughout all of creation. This ‘fallen angel’ is given the right to unlock the abyss, to unleash the forces of chaos. It can also be noted that in Israel’s Wisdom Literature, *tehom* was used as a virtual synonym for *Sheol*, the realm of the dead. By the association of the two uses of the word, chaos and death are associated; the fallen angel can unleash chaotic death to opposed God’s will for order and life.

The prelude to the sounding of the Seven Trumpets saw the angel serving at the altar before the heavenly throne filling his censer with fire and casting it upon the earth. This caused fire, lightning, rumblings and thunder on the earth, typical elements of a theophany, an image of the presence of God in power. The image is derived from the description of God’s appearance on the top of Mt. Sinai in Exodus. The people at the foot of the mountain could gaze upon the smoke and fire and know that their God was present with them. On opening the abyss, smoke flows out filling the air and blocking out the sun. The opening of the pit, the unleashing of evil chaos dims the presence of God in the world. The imagery is bleak. This image presents evil as a return to the primordial chaos.

Following the smoke, locusts are seen crawling up out of the pit. This recalls the sixth of the Egyptian plagues, but with a difference. A horde of locusts is typically seen swarming in the air, coming from desert regions. These are crawling out of the pit, the region of death. Natural locusts devastate vegetation; these, with the divine passive, have been given the power of scorpions, a creature inimical to man. God is again portrayed as controlling the powers of evil to accomplish his will. Specifically, with another divine passive, these creatures are commanded not to act according to their natures, not to harm any vegetation, but only to harm those inhabitants of the earth who have not been sealed on their foreheads. Initially, this seems to be inconsistent with the idea expressed in Revelation that the holy ones win victory by their patient endurance of the tribulations plaguing the whole world. In this case, the inhabitants of the earth are made to feel the ‘sting of evil,’ to feel the consequences of sin in the hopes of bringing them back to the God of mercy and redemption. Whatever the holy ones suffer, it cannot, because of their righteousness, include this ‘sting.’

With another divine passive, it is stated that the locusts have the power to torment the inhabitants of the earth, but not to kill them. There is also a limit allotted to them to do harm – five months. The number ‘five’ has been used a number of times in Revelation and its use seems to reflect the general biblical pattern in which ‘five’ is suggestive of the Five Books of Moses, the Torah or ‘Law.’ What is emerging in the gruesome image of the locusts is a kind of ‘divine discipline,’ a painful teaching of recalcitrant children to instruct them in the ways of truth, the ways of God’s justice and mercy.
The afflicted people long for death and it alludes them. This particular detail recalls, especially, the Book of Job. Sorely afflicted, Job curses the day of his birth and longs for the relief and release of death. What is significant in the allusion is that Job addresses his complaint to God. That appears to be the whole point of the plague, that those afflicted will realize that they are not self-sufficient, that earthly power can’t fix everything, that there is a higher power to whom they can have recourse. In this light, there is both a sense of mercy in limiting the duration of the plague and a sense of urgency. God, in a harsh image, will try to draw his creation to him, but will not torture them without end; he will demonstrate his power through the very evils that men perpetrate and experience, but he will not co-opt his people. They will respond or they won’t; the time is limited.

Vv. 7-11 form the heart of the image of the evil unleashed by the blowing of the fifth trumpet. The locusts emerge from the abyss like war horses with the faces of men – large, powerful creatures, instruments for men to exert dominance, power. They are crowned with stephaniōi, ‘crowns’ or ‘wreaths’ of victory. There is a merging of images, men of war depicted as the means of war, highlighting the destructive force of the men who wield the weapons of destruction. There is an arrogance in those who wage war already assured of their victory, their right to dominate by sheer force and power. Their long hair, hair like women, is suggestive of the Parthians, long-haired warriors on the eastern boarder of the Roman Empire. What is immediately apparent is the similarity between the locusts and the horseman unleashed by the opening of the first seal. He, too, was wearing a stephanos and was armed with a bow. This was also suggestive of the Parthians, noted for being fierce, mounted archers. In the first case, however, the horseman was a symbol of God’s opposition to the armed might of Rome, the power of Rome exercised by conquest, maintained by threats of reprisals and destruction. In this case, however, the locusts are symbols of the powers of evil, of Rome and all world powers who believe that they are self-sufficient, that they are the source of power and, with that power, have the right to dominate.

In the Inaugural Vision, the four living creatures around the throne of God were described as the ‘high points’ of God’s creation, the preeminent creatures within the classes of creation – birds, domestic animals, wild animals, and humans. According to God’s plan for creation, humans were to have dominion over all lesser creatures, not a dominion of abusive power, but a dominion of caring, cultivating, benefitting. The locusts emerging from the pit have breastplates of iron just like warriors wearing chainmail. But in their human faces are the teeth of lions – again a mixed image of warriors presented as ravaging beasts. The image of warriors is beastly, inhuman.

The sound of the locust wings is like that of chariots rushing into battle. In itself, this is suggestive of the destructive force of a swarm of locusts, stripping the land of all vegetation. But these are not normal locusts; they have the tails and stingers of scorpions, usually stealthy and solitary creatures whose sting, though not often deadly, causes great pain to the person stung. These hybrid locusts/scorpions are unleashed on mankind for a period of five months. This is an unnatural force. It has been suggested that the ‘stingers’ provide another allusion to Parthian archers who can shoot backwards from their horses and chariots. If that is the case, then even the Parthian might, which could possibly challenge the dominance of Rome, is seen to be just another of ‘might makes right,’ another unnatural corruption of the divine order ordained at the dawn of creation.

The first ‘Woe.’ Woe to a world that values military might, that enforces its will and power by force and domination. Woe to power structures that are sufficient unto themselves, that ‘rule’ by right of conquest. Woe to nations and states that become inhuman, that succumb to savagery to ‘maintain order’ that is nothing more than control.
In our modern world it is easy to point fingers at Al Qaeda, ISIS, the Syrian Regime, the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs. There is savagery in our world, beastly, inhuman exercise of power, control, dominance. There is persecution and oppression of those who do not conform to the ideology of those in power – persecution based on differing religious beliefs and practices, on differing political views. But is the Christian world any less barbaric and inhuman? We meet threats with ‘targeted’ bombings in which ‘collateral damage,’ the loss of innocent lives is acceptable for ‘the greater good,’ for making ‘the world safe for democracy.’ We meet opposition by carrying out secret missions of assassination – without any form of due process before the law. We fight wars against ‘crime’ and ‘drugs’ in which human addiction and poverty and hopelessness is criminalized so that it can be met with ‘violence.’ But, as Christians, the Book of Revelation asks us, ‘Where is your first love?’ How do the images of inhuman, warlike violence speak to our world today? How much beastliness and inhumanity tolerated or even embraced as a viable solution to the problems and unrest in our world? Can meeting violence with violence ever produce peace? How do we confront those situations in our world that are terrifying without sinking to the level of those we fear? How do we build a world, as disciples of Jesus Christ, where ‘good order’ is maintained only by strength and dominance? What is a radical Christian to do?
13 And the sixth angel sounded the trumpet and I heard the sound, one, from the four horns of the golden altar, the one before God. 14 Saying to the sixth angel, the one holding the trumpet: Release (loose, set free) the four angels having been bound at (by) the great river, the Euphrates.

15 And the four angels were set free (released), those having been prepared for the hour and the day and the month and the year, so that they might kill a third of the men. 16 And the number of the armies of horsemen (was) twice myriads of myriads; I heard the number of them. 17 And thus I saw the horses in the vision and those sitting upon them having breastplates, fiery and like hyacinth and like brimstone, and the heads of the horses (were) like heads of lions and out of their mouths comes forth fire and smoke and brimstone. 18 From these three plagues were killed a third of the men, by fire and smoke and brimstone coming out of their mouths. 19 Indeed the power of the horses, in their mouths (it) is, and in their tails, for indeed their tails (are) similar to serpents having heads and in (with) them they do harm.

20 And the rest of the men who were not killed in these plagues, not did they repent (turn back) from the works of their hands so that not will they worship (do homage to) demons and golden idols and silver and bronze and stone and wooden, which neither are they able to see nor to hear nor to walk about. 21 And not did they turn back (repent) of their killings nor of their sorceries (alchemies, pharmacology) nor of their sexual immorality nor of their thefts.
Textual Notes

1. *Ekousa phonon mian* – ‘I heard one voice.’ As with the opening of the seals, the sounding of the trumpets immediately results in something happening, the unleashing of some tribulation. That pattern is broken here with the sound of a voice emanating from the altar. That variation functions in much the same way as ‘Behold!’ It draws attention to what will follow, marks it as something significant. Beyond this, Harrington notes that the ‘voice’ also takes on the function of an ‘angel interprens,’ giving an explanation of what John is about to see. 237 Again it can be noted that the voice of an ‘angel interprens’ commonly follows the vision. The reversal of the pattern in this instance again functions as a pointer to what will follow, a marker of significance.

2. *Thessaron keraton tou thysiasteriou* – ‘four horns of the altar.’ ‘Horns of the Altar’ refers to the four raised ‘peaks’ at each corner of the altar’s flat surface. Barton and Kohler note that the origin of these ‘horns’ is shrouded in obscurity. One suggestion is that they arose from an attempt to carve the altar in the shape of an ox. Another suggestion is that they are meant to represent the horns of the sacrificial victims that, at an earlier time, had been hung on the altar. Whatever their origin, they were regarded as a sacred part of the Altar. 238 Rogers and Rogers suggest that the ‘horns of the altar’ represented God’s power. 239 Harrington further suggests that the ‘voice from the altar’ is the voice of the ‘prayers of the holy ones,’ prayers offered/heard at the heavenly altar of incense before the sounding of the Seven Trumpets. 240 It seems, however, that the imagery is more complex and ambiguous. It would seem that, most often, the ‘horns’ belong to the altar of sacrifice, not the altar of incense. Still, there seems to be a blending of the two altars in the heavenly ‘temple,’ so any distinction may be moot. The text explicitly notes that the ‘voice’ came from the four ‘horns of the altar,’ which can simply mean in the vicinity of the altar – perhaps from the angel who burned incense or the ‘prayers’ of the holy ones. It is also possible that the voice/sound can be conceived of as emanating from the altar itself, from the four ‘horns.’ In this case, if Rogers and Rogers are correct, that interpreting voice can be that of God. Whatever the case, there is a disruption of the normal progression of the sounding of the trumpet and the unleashing of a plague; this disruption is occasioned by a voice/sound from the ‘heavenly liturgy.’ It is from this ‘liturgy’ that instructions are given to the angel to carry out his task.

3. *Tessaras angelous tous dedemenous* – ‘four angels having been bound.’ Initially, it would seem that these ‘four angels’ are the four referred to in 7:1, dispatched to the four corners of the earth, but held back from unleashing the destructive winds. However, these four angels are not stationed at the four corners of the earth, but at the Euphrates. That Mesopotamian river marked the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. Harrington suggests that these ‘bound’ angels form an allusion to the ‘fallen angels,’ and that the mention of the Euphrates can be an attempt on the part of the author to exploit Rome’s paranoid fear of the Parthians dwelling at the eastern frontier of the Empire. 241 It can also be noted that ancient Babylon was located on the Euphrates. Throughout Revelation, Babylon functions as a symbol of Rome and Rome’s exercise of power to dominate, to subjugate and enforce its culture and beliefs on subjugated peoples. In this regard, it can also be suggested that the image of the ‘four angels’ stationed at the Euphrates represent the possibility of further unleashing the power of Rome on the Christian Church in Asia. This would appear to be consistent with the images of warfare unleashed by the ‘fallen angel’ when the fifth trumpet sounded.

237 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
238 George Barton and Kaufmann Kohler, “Altar,” JewishEncyclopedia.com
239 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
240 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
241 Ibid.
4. *Horan kai hereran kai mena* – ‘the hour and the day and the month.’ Harrington writes that the ‘ministers of wrath’ are set free to carry out their task. The fixing of their time of release, down to the very hour, emphasizes the truth that all is happening in accordance with a divine plan; or, better phrased, that nothing happens outside the divine purpose. He further sees this scene as an anticipation of 16:12-16, again supporting the contention that the whole of Revelation is woven together by an intricate web of foreshadowings and retrospectives. 242

5. *Apokteinosin triton ton anthropon* – ‘they might kill a third of the men/mankind.’ In the plague unleashed by the sounding of the fifth trumpet, the locusts were given authority to torment ‘men/mankind,’ but not to kill them. Those afflicted were specifically identified as the inhabitants of the earth who had not been sealed with God’s seal. The time of torment was limited – five months. It is to be supposed that the victims of these ‘four angels’ are the same men, those not having the seal of God on their foreheads. In this case, however, one third of them are to be killed. The supposition is that, even after the torment, they have not recognized the power of God. As in the plagues of Egypt, a plague of death comes only at the end of the cycle when all of God’s previous signs have been ignored. Harrington notes that, once again, the scope of the plague/sign is limited to one third. 243 There is a sense of people ‘reaping what they sow,’ suffering the consequences for their own stubbornness and recalcitrance. But even here, the scope is limited. God works his wonders to win people over, not to obliterate them.

6. *Arithmos ton strateumaton hippikou dismyriades myriades myriadon* – ‘the number of the armies of horsemen (was) two myriads, myriads of myriads.’ Harrington notes that the vast number of armed horsemen likely looks back to the hordes of locusts unleashed previously. Their swarm was reminiscent of the locust plagues in Ex 10:14 and Joel 2:2-11. He concludes that the reason for focusing on the vast number of troops cited by ‘John’ escapes us. 244

Against Harrington, it can simply be noted that, on comparison with a swarm of locusts, the numbering of troops – here actually human troops and not unnatural images of them, is consistent with matching what is said here with the previous image. It can also be noted that it was the common practice of the Roman Empire to dispatch legions to areas of trouble within the Empire. By sheer force of numbers the Emperor enforced his will. Keeping in mind the beastly and inhuman images of warfare, of imposing rule by violence and force that followed the sounding of the fifth trumpet, it is possible here to recall the prelude to Jesus’ victory. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when a follow of Jesus draws his sword in defense of Jesus, the Lord says:

‘Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen this way?’ (Mt 26:53-54) 245

There would seem to be a clear contrast implied here. ‘Victory’ is not won by force of numbers, but by patient endurance.

7. *Thorakas pyrinous kai hyakinthinous kai theiodes* – ‘breastplates, fiery and hyacinthine and brimstone-like.’ Harrington notes that the colors of the breastplates, the armor of the horsemen – fiery red, smoky blue, and sulphurous yellow – matched the colors of the sire, smoke and Sulphur breathed from the mouths of their mounts. 246 Rogers and Rogers note that it is difficult to determine whether the armor was tri-colored or whether there is some division of the troops, each division with a different color breastplate. 247

8. *Hos kephale leonton* – ‘as the head of a lion.’ While the image of the locusts blended a vision of unnatural locusts/scorpions with the faces of men, indicating the beastliness and inhumanity of warfare and

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242 Ibid.
243 Ibid.
244 Ibid.
245 NRSV translation.
246 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
247 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
subjugation of people by conquest, this image of warfare clearly indicates human warriors, but human warriors who ride domesticated animals, trained war horses, with the intent of inflicting brutal and beastly devastation – the heads of lions. There can be no mistaking the human involvement in inhuman acts.

As horrible as the image of violent destruction is, Harrington notes that, again, the hand of God is to be seen in the background. He cites the late Jewish book of Wisdom 11:17-18, as an indication of how God will manipulate his Creation to accomplish his will:248

For your all powerful hand, which created the world out of formless mater, did not lack the means to send upon them a multitude of bears, or bold lions, or newly-created unknown beasts full of rage, or such as breathe out fiery breath, or belch forth a thick pall of smoke, or flash terrible sparks from their eyes.249

9. *Apektanthesan ton triton ton anthropon* – ‘were killed a third of men/mankind.’ In case there is any doubt about who rules the universe, these words complete a command/execution pattern, common in biblical literature. The fulfillment of the command is stated in the exact same words as the command, and indication of the authority of the one who issues the commands; when he speaks, what he commands is carried out exactly.

10. *Exousia ton hippon en to stomati... kai en tais ourais* – ‘the power of the horses (was) in their mouths and in their tails.’ That the tails of the horses were like serpents takes the image of the locusts with scorpion tails one step further. It was noted that the sting of a scorpion was extremely painful but not usually lethal; the bite of serpents, on the other hand can be deadly. It is again possible that mounted Parthian archers are behind this image; on the other hand it is to be noted that the development of cavalry marked a distinct breakthrough in the art of warfare. Mounted swordsmen and archers had a distinct advantage over foot soldiers. The advantage in battle falls to the army with more troops and with better, more advanced weapons. The numbers of the Roman legions as well as the availability of mounted warriors and charioteers gave them a distinct advantage in their wars of conquest – might makes right.

11. *Oude metenoesan* – ‘did not repent.’ Again, ‘repent’ does not mean merely to ‘feel sorry for,’ but ‘to turn back,’ ‘to return,’ ‘to change.’ The emphasis is on God’s purpose in his signs, his acts of power to motivate people to ‘turn back,’ to come to see the truth and acknowledge God’s will and power. For the two thirds not killed off in the plague – in wars of conquest and domination – there has been no change of heart, no change in how they view what constitutes real power. There is a sense of loss and futility here, much the same as for Pharaoh and his troops who witness of the death of first-born sons in Egypt, seem to relinquish control to the God of Israel, only to turn back to their old ways and pursue the Israelites at the Sea. For them the result is catastrophic.

12. *Ergon ton cheiron* – ‘the works of their hands.’ In this phrase there is a clear recollection of the messages to the Seven Churches in which praise or censure is dependent upon the ‘works’ of the Churches and what motivates those works. This is a clear indication that ‘faith’ and ‘faithfulness’ is not a mere matter of words but of a way of living that is consistent with what is professed. God’s actions vis-à-vis his creation is to bring men back, to bring their actions into alignment with what is really true. Stubbornness and recalcitrance, however hold sway.

13. *Me proskynesousin ta daimonia kai ta eidola* – ‘so that they will not worship (bend the knee to) demons and idols.’ ‘Demons’ is to be understood in the sense of the ‘forces of evil,’ ‘idols’ are the false gods, the false attribution of power and sovereignty to anything but the living God. On this point, Harrington notes that Zech 1:4 and Wis 14:22-26 are informative. In particular, the Wisdom passage explicitly states that the worship of idols is the beginning, cause and end of every evil.

14. *Metenoesan* – ‘repent, turn back.’ Specifically it is noted that they did not turn back from ‘works’ that flow directly from false worship – the worship of the sources of evil: murders and sorceries (*pharmakon*)

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248 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
249 NRSV translation.
and sexual immorality (adultery, prostitution, or any sexual perversion) and thefts. Rogers and Rogers note that ‘sorceries,’ according to Pliny, suggests a special sense of magic spells and potions meant to incite illicit lust. Rogers and Rogers, op. cit. Harrington notes that, like Paul in the Letter to the Romans, the author of Revelation does not these moral evils as the fundamental sin, but only the symptom of man’s idolatry, his refusal to accept his own creaturely status and his dependence on his Creator. Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
Commentary

The sounding of the sixth trumpet inaugurates a vision that compliments and completes the vicious, inhuman image of warfare unleashed by the sounding of the fifth trumpet. While the vision that follows the sounding of the fifth trumpet focuses on the brutal and inhuman quest for power and the violent imposition of the values of the conqueror on the conquered, the vision subsequent to the sounding of the sixth trumpet points to the evil consequences of adopting or accommodating oneself to a social order in which power is sought for its own sake, where the norm of morality is whether or not people and rulers have the power to do what they want with impunity.

At the start of the vision, patterns of expectation are broken. In the first five trumpet visions, the unleashing of a plague immediately follows the sounding of the horn. In the case of the sounding of the sixth trumpet, however, a voice intervenes, a voice that both commands the sixth angel to act in a specific way, and a voice that functions as an interpreter of the vision that unfolds. In apocalyptic writings, the interpreting voice is a common feature, but it regularly comes at the end of the vision to explain to the seer what the vision means. These broken patterns, what Robert Alter calls ‘repetition with variation,’ serve to set this vision apart, to call special attention to what the images convey.

The voice issuing the command and interpreting the vision emanates from the ‘horns of the altar’ before the throne of God. There is a sense of ambiguity about this voice. Previously the role of the ‘angel interpres’ has fallen to one of the elders on the thrones around the throne of God. The voice could be understood to be that of the angel before the altar of incense from the heavenly vision that immediately precedes the sounding of the Seven Trumpets. It has even been suggested that the ‘voice’ is the sound of the prayers of the holy ones, offered up to God by the angel.

Just as confusing is the mention of the ‘horns of the altar.’ The origin of these raised corners on Israelite altars is obscure, but in the end, Jewish tradition seems consistent in asserting that the ‘horns’ symbolize the power of God.

It is possible to see intentional ambiguity here. From the celebration of a ‘heavenly liturgy’ comes a voice of righteousness and faithfulness that reflects all the participants in the liturgy – God, the officiating angel, the members of the heavenly court and the faithful, holy ones of the earth whose prayers are presented to God in the ‘heavenly liturgy.’ It is a voice of what should be addressing the sad fact of what is – ‘man’s inhumanity to man,’ if the use of cliché can be tolerated.

The sixth angel is commanded to set free the four angels stationed by the Euphrates, the river to the east, the river of ancient Babylon. Initially it might be tempting to see these four angels as the four who had been stationed at the four corners of the earth and who, as of yet, have not released the destructive winds that arise from those four corners. However, these are angels ‘having been bound,’ some of the ‘fallen angels’ from the late Jewish story of the cosmic battle in the heavens in which Lucifer and the rebellious angels, angels coveting the power of God, had been expelled. They are ‘sources’ of evil, of rebelliousness, of an arrogant sense of self-sufficiency that acknowledges no need of God. The releasing of these angels has the effect of stating to the world: ‘Here is your drive for power, for self-sufficiency. Let’s set loose the full consequences of what you believe and how you act and see if you are as powerful and self-sufficient as you think. Let’s see what results from your way of looking at the world.’

That the angels are stationed by the Euphrates is a significant and ambivalent detail in the vision. The Euphrates marks the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire and is again suggestive of the Parthians,
living at this frontier, who are a possible rival to Roman power. Mentioning the Euphrates, then, on one level, can carry the suggestion, ‘Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.’ The so-called powers of the world are not as powerful as they think. On another level, the Euphrates was the river of ancient Babylon and Babylon, in the Book of Revelation, is a symbol of the evil and arrogance of Rome. Unleashing the ‘power of Babylon’ can be synonymous with releasing the ‘power of Rome.’ This is what ‘John’ fully expects to happen if Christians adopt the stance of ‘radical Christianity’ in the face of the power of Rome. In the prevalent culture and power structure of the world, there are human – and evil – consequences for living in the truth and faithfulness of God. But finally, from the perspective of the Church in the Province of Asia, the Euphrates is to the east. Already the Book of Revelation has utilized the symbolism of the east as the Rising Place of the Sun, the source of light and truth, the source of Wisdom (7:2, see also 16:12 and 21:13). This is a prevalent theme in Israel’s Wisdom Literature and even in Matthew’s Gospel, the Magi, sometimes referred to as the ‘Wise Men,’ come from the east representing humans in general who can recognize the presence of God in the world. Yet, this ‘wisdom’ is human wisdom and St. Paul points out that even the folly of God is wiser than the wisdom of men (I Cor 1:25). In sum, the imagery surrounding the naming of the Euphrates, on all levels, calls for a shift in world-view, a shift in how we are to understand the world and our place in it.

And so the four angels are released to kill one third of the inhabitants of the earth. For this, an exact time has been set – ‘the hour and day and month and year.’ The precision of the timing is indicative of the hand of God at work, as are the three sets of fourteen generations from Abraham to the birth of the Messiah. Who, but God, could make the randomness of time and generation so specific and precise?

In the imagery following the sounding of the fifth trumpet, the warlike locusts were unleashed to torment humanity, portraying the inhumanity and beastliness of rule by right of conquest, of human power structures that maintain their control by torture, violence and oppression. It can, again, be suggested that releasing the four bound angels unleashes the consequences of maintaining such power structures: it is death. ‘Killing’ in this context is to be understood both literally and metaphorically. The result, the consequence of the savagery of war and domination by violent force is physical death, but also a killing of the human spirit, a killing of freedom, the freedom to be faithful to a loving, creating, sustaining God rather than to false human power. It represents a slaughtering of human dignity, a dignity shared by all humanity, a dignity for which all people were created.

The death of one third of the inhabitants of the earth is reminiscent of the final Egyptian plague, the killing of the first-born of the Egyptians. As is the case here, the ‘killing’ was limited. It is a ‘deadly’ climax to the stubbornness and recalcitrance of the Egyptians in not recognizing the power of Israel’s God and letting the Israelites go free to serve their God. And, as was the case with the Egyptian plagues, the killing did not accomplish anything. Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued the Israelites, with deadly results. The result of sounding the sixth trumpet and unleashing death has the same result. In the end, those spared did not repent, change, turn away from how they lived and viewed the world. The consequences are deadly, again physically and morally.

The force of v 16 is to portray the extent of evil in the world, the extent of a world view that values power for power’s sake, that values dominating others as a sign of self-sufficiency and ‘success.’ The number of the armies of horsemen is ‘twice myriads of myriads,’ twice innumerable. This ‘numbering’ corresponds with the ‘hordes’ or ‘swarms’ of locusts unleashed previously. In the imagery of the locusts, it was the savagery of violent power overreaching its bounds to dominate the world that was the focus. This violence was viewed as an evil in itself. The imagery deployed upon the sounding of the sixth trumpet expands on and nuances this idea. It is the horsemen and not the horses that are the
focus and this implies intentionality, a will to evil. The horsemen master and train their horses for war; they set out, by their own designs, to dominate and oppress, to impose their will, not God’s, simply by right of force, simply because they can.

Another difference/expansion that occurs between the locusts and the warriors is that both the horses and the riders are described. It is the riders, not the horses/locusts who are wearing breastplates, armored protection. The breastplates are tri-colored: fiery red, smoky blue, and sulphurous yellow. It is unclear whether the breastplates of each warrior are tri-colored or whether there are three divisions of troops, each identified by a different colored breastplate. What is clear is that the ‘colors’ correspond to the violence that spews forth from the mouths of the horses. And, in correspondence with the description of the locusts, these horses are hybrid creatures – with the heads of lions and serpents for tails. This is an unnatural blending of wild and domesticated animals, again highlighting the brutish nature of dominance through force and violence. It can at least be suggested that what the author may have in mind with this description of warfare is the deployment of various troops and machines of war/weaponry – perhaps sword wielding infantry, archers – mounted and on foot, those who man the siege implements – catapults and battering rams, and the like. The could be the intent of the ‘three plagues,’ the three means of death. It would seem that this is consistent with the images of the text – that the evil intention to dominate involves not only amassing superior numbers of troops, but also developing ever more efficient means of killing, ever more sophisticated weapons.

The final two verses, vv 20-21, of the episode of the sixth trumpet are the most telling – and the most damning. Evil has been unleashed so that the inhabitants of the earth can see it for what it really is and the sad and horrifying result is that those who did not die from the plagues did not see, did not understand, did not turn back from their own evil works. There was a cultural outlook in the world of the Roman Empire that might, that shear force justified the Empire’s dominance and control, that justified the Emperor simply doing whatever he wanted. Why? Because he could. That culture permeated society so that the value upheld by all is simply that they could have what they wanted, they could do what they wanted as long as they were strong enough to get away with it. They could all be little gods, sufficient unto themselves. That was the idolatry of the day. They continued to worship demons – the sources of evil; they continued to worship false gods, gods where were nothing, who could do nothing, but whose ‘cult’ could assure success, wealth, power. They continued to kill – both literally and figuratively – to remove anyone who stood in the way of what they wanted; the continued there ‘sorceries,’ their manipulations of reality to suit their desires; they continued to engage in illicit sex, treating others as objects, their whole goal being to satisfy their personal lusts and cravings; they continued their thefts, taking what they wanted because they were strong enough to do so. All of these evils flow from a basic outlook of selfishness, from an outlook that sees all of creation as a personal play thing, something to be enjoyed and manipulated however they wanted, as long as they were strong enough to get away with it. There was no higher power than man and his ability to get what he wanted. There was no accountability except to oneself and whoever held the upper hand. The Emperor, the Roman Governor, the local guilds, and the gods of the local guilds, were simply to be placated to continue to get what one wanted.

What is even sadder is the perspective of the modern world. Have we learned anything? Have we come to see and understand and submit to God’s plan for the world – for peace, for sharing the good things of the world, but building a kingdom of justice and right and peace? We live in a world where ‘peace’ is assured by the threat of mutual annihilation, where nuclear capability assures a nation that its policies and values can be enforced. We live in a world where success in business is measured by a healthy bottom line, no matter who is hurt or abused in achieving that goal. We live in a world where murder is a viable
option to assure that there are no witnesses to violent crimes. We live in a world of human trafficking. We live in a world where the citizens of a nation are controlled by the oppressive and lethal practices of dictatorial governments. We live in a world where stealing from employers or shirking work is acceptable, where ‘everybody does it.’ We live in a world where the work force is often viewed as a commodity for production and human dignity and participation in society and the economics of society are dismissed as obstacles to what individuals want and can achieve because they can get away with it. We live in a world where nationally and globally, the vast majority of the wealth of creation is controlled, is dominated, by a small fraction of the total population. How much have we accommodated ourselves to this world? Is the Church, the community of faith, in any way a voice and force against the evils of modern society? Who, in today’s world, takes the stance of ‘radical Christianity’ proposed by ‘John?’ What idols vie with God for the hearts and minds of people? How can people come to see the plan of God in a culture so inimical to the values of brotherhood, the common good, equal dignity under a loving God? Can we see the violence perpetrated on others by the culture in which we live? Can we see that meeting violence with violence is futile? What recourse do we have? How do my actions show my tendency to want to be god? What are my intentions for making my way in the world?
10:1 And I saw another angel, a mighty one, coming down from the heaven, being clothed (in) a cloud and a rainbow upon his head and his face (was) like the sun and his feet like pillars of fire, 2and having (holding) in his hand a small scroll (book) having been opened and he set his right foot on the sea and also the left on the earth, 3And he cried out in a loud voice just as a lion roars and when he cried out the seven thunders rumbled (sounded) the sounds of themselves. 4And when spoke (sounded, rumbled) the seven thunders, I was about to write and I heard a voice from the heaven saying: Seal the things that the seven thunders said (sounded, rumbled) and let you not write them. 5And the (angel) messenger whom I saw having taken his stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his right hand to the heaven 6and he swore by the living one who created the heaven and those things in it and the earth and those things in it and the sea and those things in it, that time (a delay) no longer will there be, 7but in the days (these days) (would be) the voice of the seventh angel when he is about to sound the trumpet and the mystery of God has been brought to completion just as he proclaimed to the servants of himself (his own servants), the prophets.

And the voice which I heard from the heaven again speaking with me and saying: Go now. Take the book (scroll) having been opened in the hand of the angel having taken his stand upon the sea and upon the earth. And I went forth to the angel, telling him to give to me the little scroll (book), and he says to me: Take and eat it (consume it completely). And it will make bitter your stomach but in your mouth it will be sweet like honey. And I took the little book (scroll) out of the hand of the angel and completely consumed it and it was, in my mouth, like honey (being) sweet, and when I ate it, my stomach became bitter.

And he says to me: It is necessary for you again to prophesy over (concerning) many peoples and nations and tongues and kings.
1. **Katabainonta** – ‘coming down, descending.’ Harrington makes the point that ‘John,’ who began seeing things on the Island of Patmos, was transported to heaven to see heavenly things in 4:1. He is now back on earth because he sees the angel ‘descending.’ That argument seems over-pressed and too literal. Apocalyptic visions are highly symbolic presentations of reality, heavenly and earthly. They are not the result of ‘ecstatic experiences’ of the author, by stylized conventions of the literary genre. The actual position of the ‘seer’ is moot. The point is that the ‘seer’ is presented in the logic of the author as having attained insight into reality and this insight is presented in highly cryptic and symbolic language.

2. **Angelos ischyros** – a strong/mighty angel. In treating 5:2, Harrington suggests that the source of the image is Dn 4:13-14. The reference is to a ‘Holy Watcher’ coming down from heaven to make a proclamation. The connection seems tenuous. In itself, there is a logic to the image. The ‘strong’ angel raises the question, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and loosen its seals?’ The implication is that the ‘strong angel’ can’t do it. V. 3 makes it explicit that no one in heaven, on earth, or under the earth was even able to look on the scroll. What is important to note in 10:1, is that this is ‘another angel,’ not one of the seven charged with sounding the trumpets and unleashing the plagues. As was the case in the round of opening the seven seals, the vision of the scroll in the hand of a ‘strong/mighty’ angel provides an interlude, a delay before the sounding of the seventh trumpet.

3. **Peribeblemenon nephelen** – ‘having been clothed with a cloud.’ From Daniel 7:13 and Ps 104:3, the imagery of a ‘cloud’ as a heavenly vehicle has emerged. In Mk 14:62 and Mt 26:64, the image is adapted to describe the Parousia, the second coming of Christ – the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven. While it is not the Christ, but a ‘strong angel’ who descends to earth wrapped in clouds does not suggest the Parousia and the culmination of God’s plan, the imagery or the heavenly vehicle does suggest that what ‘John’ sees is a significant point in the evolution of God’s plan.

4. **He iris epi ten kephalen autou** – ‘a rainbow upon his head.’ Harrington notes that the description of the rainbow is likely derived from Ez 1:28. Further, the image evokes God’s promise to Noah never to destroy all creation, especially all humanity again. What is being described is not just an angel, like those sounding the trumpets, but a ‘strong’ angel, an angel who could easily wreak havoc on the world. But, drawing on the Noah story, that isn’t the type of God we have, he will not force loyalty, and God’s messenger/angel, for all his strength, is not a messenger of capricious destruction or vengeance.

5. **To prosopon autou hos ho helios** – ‘his face like the son.’ Harrington notes that the description of the face shining like the sun was applied to the one in human form in the Inaugural Vision (1:16). This correspondence suggests that the ‘strong angel’ is the angel/messenger of Christ. Beyond this, it can be noted that one of the most recognized usages of the image of the bright, shining face refers to Moses when he comes down the mountain after conversing with God. Moses functions as the mediator of God’s word and will to the Chosen People, and Christ is the mediator who reconciles all humanity with his father. This angel, then, by these associations, is to be understood as a messenger/angel of God’s salvation.

6. **Styloi pyros** – ‘pillars of fire.’ Harrington notes that this image may recall Ex 14:19, 24 – where the angel of God and God himself is imagined as moving about in a pillar of cloud and fire, looking down and protecting his people. The fiery feet are also reminiscent of the one sent to Daniel (Dn 10:6). All this again speaks to a mighty angel, reflecting God’s glory, as a spokesman for God’s saving purpose.

7. **Biblaridion eveogmenon** – ‘a little book/scroll having been opened.’ The word used for ‘scroll/book’ is a diminutive. While this word may simply be interchangeable with biblos, it is suggestive of a contrast. The scroll sealed with seven seals appears to represent the fullness of God’s plan, a full statement of God’s word. This ‘little scroll’ is not so weighty. The further contrast can be noted in the fact that this scroll has

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252 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
253 *ibid.*
254 *ibid.*
255 *ibid.*
256 *ibid.*
been opened; its message is open and apparent while the full expression of God’s will and plan is more inscrutable.

8. *Thelasses... ges... - sea... land...* Harrington writes that the stance of the ‘angel,’ one foot on the land and one in the sea, suggests that his message is for all the world.\(^\text{257}\) Beyond this, however, that image suggests a towering being, a kind of Colossus. With the detail that the ‘little scroll’ was opened, its message available, it would also seem that the image of the stance of the ‘angel’ would suggest that the message/messenger cannot be ignored.

9. *Phone megale hosper leon mykatai – a loud voice as a lion roars.* Phone megala is an often repeated phrase in Revelation. The phrase is modified here, ‘as a lion roars,’ to set it apart from other instances of the phrase. There is something different here, something special, something worthy of note.

10. *Hepta brontai – seven thunders.* A common Old Testament image for the presence of God, for the sound of his voice, is thunder (e.g., Ps 29:3 ‘The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders’ and Jer 25:30 ‘The Lord will roar from on high... against all the inhabitants of the earth’). With the author’s penchant to use ‘seven’ as a number of completion and perfection, the thunderous voice of God is imagined as ‘seven thunders.’ Harrington suggests, then, that the ‘roar’ of the mighty angel is a call or signal immediately answered by the seven-fold thunderous voice of God.\(^\text{258}\)

11. *Sphragison ha elaleson hai hepta brontai – Seal up that which have spoken the seven thunders.* Harrington suggests that this command is derived from Dn 8:26 – ‘Seal up the vision, for it pertains to many days hence.’ In this case, ‘John’ is hidden, by a heavenly voice, to seal the message communicated to him, a message concerning events yet in the future. The purpose of the sealing of the message of the seven thunders is not immediately clear. It may be to insist that ‘John,’ though he provides a revelation of Jesus Christ, is not privy to the whole of divine knowledge. Alternately, and more likely, it seems that in this context, the ‘seven thunders’ might be understood to speak a message of doom; the command to ‘seal up’ means that God has cancelled the doom. This is consistent with the ‘rainbow’ around the messenger/angel, recalling the ‘Covenant with Noah.’ This notion of God withholding doom is also reflected in Jonah 3:10 and Mk 13:20.

12. *Eren ten cheira... eis ton ouranon – raised his hand... to the heaven.* ‘Raising the right hand’ is a widely recognized gesture for taking an oath. Harrington also notes that the messenger/angel, who is standing with one foot on the land and one in the sea, now ‘touches’ the heaven – all three components of creation, because he is going to swear by all of creation and the God who created it.

13. *Chronos ouketi estai – time (delay) no longer will there be.* Harrington suggests that this variation on Dn 12:7, that there would be a time before the final culmination of God’s plan, is consistent with the author’s call, to announce what must shortly come to pass (1:1). There had been the delay of the seals and the trumpets, with God giving opportunity for repentance, but now ‘the hidden (sealed) purpose of God’ is to be accomplished.\(^\text{259}\)

The nature of God’s ‘hidden purpose’ is clouded in obscurity. The sounding of the seventh trumpet has been delayed. In the plague unleashed by the fifth trumpet, one third of the inhabitants of the earth had been tormented; in the plague unleashed by the sixth trumpet, one third of the inhabitants of the earth had been killed. What might be expected, in a strict logical progression, is that all the inhabitants of the earth not sealed by God’s seal on their foreheads are to be annihilated. Yet both the fifth and sixth plagues carried with them a sense of God’s mercy, forbearance and the gruesome, warlike images were deployed as castigations of the evils of war, of violent imposition of human dominance over fellow human beings. Is the sealing of what ‘John’ intended to write from what he heard from the voice of the seven thunders, as Harrington suggested, a rescinding of a judgment of doom? Or is God hiding his purpose to inflict the world with a great, cosmic ‘Gotcha!’

14. *Etelesthe to mysterion tou theou – will be completed the mystery of God.* Ambiguity and uncertainty continue. The text states that the seventh angel is about to sound the seventh trumpet and the ‘mystery,’ the ‘hidden things’ of God will be brought to completion. It seems that many commentators think that

\(^{257}\) Ibid.
\(^{258}\) Ibid.
\(^{259}\) Ibid.
the sounding of the seventh trumpet will herald the end. But what is the nature of that end? There have already been indications in the Book of Revelation that the final victory has been won – by the slaughtered Lamb, in the Cross of Jesus Christ. Movement to a ‘final consummation’ is but the working out of the implications of that victory. Is the culmination of God’s plan to be a radical division of God’s faithful, the victors, from the rest of the inhabitants of the earth? Is the culmination to occur when God’s faithful fully embrace their mission to the rest of the world, despite what consequences this may entail for them?

15. *Hos euangelisen tous heautou doulous tous prophetas* – ‘as he proclaimed (evangelized, spoke good news to) his own servants the prophets.’ The choice of the word ‘to proclaim the good news’ is significant. The ‘Good News’ is the story of Christ’s victory. The ‘Good News’ is that the victory has been won. A final command in the Gospels (the accounts of the ‘Good News’) is issued by Christ to his disciples to go out to all the world and tell the Good News. Israel’s prophetic tradition held the belief that God imparted his truth, his plan, his mystery, to his servants, the prophets (see Amos 3:7). Israel’s prophets are not to be understood as clairvoyants or those having ecstatic experiences that gave them a mysterious vision of the future. They were people of faith and insight who looked at how things are and pointed out the logical consequences of those conditions (‘Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.’) The revival of ‘prophecy’ in Christian tradition, was a revival of this role of critiquing society, the Church, present social and cultural traditions, addressing these conditions with the ‘Good News’ and pointing out the inconsistencies and failures of living God’s Good News, God’s plan for all creation. That prophetic voice has been prominent in Revelation – a will to self-sufficiency and power for power’s sake is bound to be met with defeat by a stronger power; it can’t maintain itself. But, in the face of this, there is ‘Good News.’ The world does not have to be a struggle for domination and power. There is another way to live, the way of Jesus Christ, a way that finds victory in submission, that celebrates strength in service to others.

16. *Labe to biblion... labe kai kataphage* – ‘take the scroll... take and eat (consume completely).’ In vv. 8-9 Harrington sees a re-commissioning of the prophet based on Ez 3:13. “John’s” mission will unfold in chapters 12-22. Eating the scroll symbolizes the prophet’s digesting of the message that he has to transmit. For both ‘John’ and Ezekiel before him, the ‘book/scroll’ tastes sweet in the mouth, but becomes bitter in the stomach when swallowed – when fully taken in.

In v 11, the role of the prophet is specified as addressing speaking God’s word concerning many peoples, nations, tongues and kings. The basic pattern of prophecy in biblical literature consists of oracles of judgment followed by oracles of salvation. Typically these oracles address the will of God concerning the people of Israel. What ‘John’ may find unpalatable is that the ‘oracles of judgment’ on Rome and all other worldly powers, which to him would taste sweet, are to be followed by the chance to repent, to change, to experience the salvation of God. This is specifically the outlook of Jonah at the mercy granted to Nineveh.

17. *Laois kai ethnesin kia glossais kai basilieusin pollois* – ‘peooples and nations and tongues and kings, many.’ This four-fold enumeration usually functions as a specification for the ‘inhabitants of the earth.’ Here, however, there is a significant change in the enumeration. ‘Tribes’ has been replaced with ‘kings.’ The implication is that the proclamation of the prophet does not concern merely the inhabitants of the earth, but their power structures, their kings. On the model of the similar imagery in Ezekiel, this scene of recommissioning is surprising and unexpected. Ezekiel was told to go and take his message to his own people. ‘John’ is commissioned to make his proclamation not just to the inhabitants of the earth, but to the very power structures he adamantly opposes.

The Book of Revelation proposes a radical Christianity that takes its stand against the false power structures of the world. It is fully expected, in the context of the Church in Asia in the late first century, that such a stand will produce suffering, even death for faithful Christians. Jn 19:37 paraphrases Zech 12:10, ‘They will look on them whom they have pierced.’ There is the suggestion, even the expectation that the powers that ‘defeated’ Christ will look on what they have done and be moved to change. This is also a possibility for the powers who persecute Christians who stand up for what is true about God and his ultimate power. Seeing what they have done, they may change. That may be hard for ‘John’ to swallow.
Commentary

The vision of the mighty angel with the open scroll and the recommissioning of the prophet that unfold in Chapter 10 are, in many ways, inscrutable. The chapter provides an interlude between the sounding of the sixth and seventh trumpets, just as the Sealing of the Faithful and the Song of Victory provided an interlude between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals. But is the imagery in this chapter positive or negative? Does it presage ultimate judgment and doom or God’s saving will and mercy? How are the sweetness and bitterness of the scroll to be understood?

Modelled on the plagues in Egypt, there is a logic and progression in the plagues that unfold upon the sounding of the trumpets. The fifth plague unleashes torment on men, the sixth death for a segment of the population. If the progression holds true, as it did in the Egyptian plagues, a wider death, an annihilation of the powers and peoples who oppose God’s will might be expected in the seventh. But the seventh plague is delayed and in the interlude there is time to reconsider what God is trying to accomplish and what actions on his part will ultimately serve his purpose.

Between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals, the faithful are sealed. This recalls the marking of the Israelite doorposts with blood in the Exodus story. In Exodus, the marking of the doorposts protected the Israelites from the ‘angel of death.’ The sealing of the faithful, however, did not exempt them from suffering; it assured those who endured to the end of victory. The Song of Victory corresponds to the Song of the Sea in Exodus. In Exodus, the song was a celebration after the people were freed from Egyptian power; the Song of Victory is an assurance that the Lamb has already won the victory in which the Church can share by patient endurance. For the Church, the interlude between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals was positive and encouraging.

A pronounced literary pattern of the Book of Revelation is repetition, repetition of patterns, repetition with variation. So, it is to be expected that this break in the progression of ‘plagues’ will likewise be positive and encouraging. But how will it vary? What new aspects of God’s will and plan will the reader be asked to consider? Why are the plagues stopped at this point and in what new direction will the story go after the interlude?

The cycle of the seven trumpets is broken by a new vision, ‘And I say another angel, a mighty one, coming down from the heavens.’ ‘John’ sees ‘another angel,’ not the seventh angel with a trumpet, clearly marking this vision as an interruption of the plague cycle. Again the reader needs to remind himself that he is not hearing the seer’s voice directly, but through the narrator whose voice was heard at the beginning of the book. The interruption of the plague cycle is addressed by that voice to us, the readers. We’re told to stop, wait, consider.

This angel is described as wrapped in clouds, with a rainbow on his head, a face shining as the sun, and feet like pillars of fire. The image of being wrapped in clouds, or ‘coming on the clouds,’ is taken from Daniel and is used in the apocalyptic discourses of the Gospels to describe the coming of the Son of Man at the consummation of God’s plan, the Parousia. In biblical literature, the image of the rainbow is regularly used to recall the covenant with Noah, when God ‘hung his bow’ in the sky, when he put away his weapons, when he promised that never again would he do battle with his people. The implication is that God does not want his people to be co-opted lackeys, but those who freely choose to respond to him, to accept his offer of benign sovereignty, his offer of hope and mercy and care. What is significant in the story of Noah is that, as yet, there is no chosen people, no people of Israel. God’s people are all the inhabitants of the world. The shining face recalls the radiance of Moses’ face when he came down
the mountain after meeting with God. He comes to tell the people the will of God for them, to make known the covenant, a personal relationship between God and his people, a relationship that they can freely embrace – or reject. ‘Feet like pillars of fire’ recall both the depiction of God and God’s messenger leading the people of Israel by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night (Ex 14:19, 24). It also is reminiscent of the messenger sent to Daniel (Dn 10:6). All of this speaks to an image of the ‘mighty angel’ as a spokesman of God’s glory and his will for salvation for all people.

The image of the ‘mighty angel,’ then, seems to imply a broadening of the perspective of just who is to be included in God’s saving plan.

The ‘mighty angel’ holds in his hand a ‘small scroll’ (biblaridion). The Greek word is the diminutive form of biblos, ‘book/scroll.’ In many cases, the two words can be used interchangeably, but there is still a contrast between this ‘scroll’ and the ‘sealed scroll.’ There was an implication, with the seven seals on the first scroll, that it contained the fullness of God’s truth and will and plan. Further, not even a ‘mighty angel’ could open its seals; it took the strength of the Lamb, the slaughtered Lamb. This scroll is open, perhaps smaller. It is more immediate, its message more readily available – whatever that message might be.

The angel takes his stance with one foot on the land and one on the sea. Most commentators agree that the symbolism of this stance is that the angel/messenger has a message for all the world. Having taken his stance, the angel roars out like a lion. This appears to be another example of the author’s use of multivalent imagery. In the Scroll Vision, one of the elders, functioning as an ‘angel interprets,’ announces that the Lion of Judah has won the victory and is worthy to open the seals (5:5). ‘Lion of Judah’ is both a kingly and messianic title. Yet when the see looks about for the ‘lion’ he sees, instead, a slaughtered Lamb. There is, perhaps, an intimation that in the victory of the Lamb, the Cross, the kingly messiah is about to inaugurate the kingdom of God. In itself, to ‘roar like a lion’ is an image of power and strength, the lion being the image of one of the four living creatures about the heavenly throne representing the epitome of the ‘wild animals’ of God’s creation. Finally, in the progression of the plagues, one third of humanity has been tormented and one third has been killed. The purpose of the plagues, in God’s design, is to display his presence and power in the world and to draw all humanity to recognize his control over creation, to draw humanity to recognize the God of creation and submit to his authority, and authority that wills justice and peace among the inhabitants of the earth. It is an authority that brooks no human drive to self-sufficiency, no attempts to act as if humans were gods unto themselves. Yet the previous plagues produced no repentance, no submission to a higher authority; God’s signs were ignored. The mighty angel, standing with one foot on the land and the other on the sea and roaring like a lion, conjures an image, perhaps, like the great Colossus of Rhodes. This towering figure, roaring like a lion, cannot be ignored. Everyone can see and hear it.

When the mighty angel roars, he is answered by the sounds and rumblings of the seven thunders. Within the Old Testament the sound of thunder is a common image for the voice of God, thundering over his creation and a symbol of his glory (see Ps 29:3). In prophetic literature, God’s voice thunders in judgment (see Jer 25:3). With Revelation’s penchant for using ‘seven’ as a symbol of completion and perfection, the ‘seven thunders’ that answer the mighty angel’s roar serve to symbolize the thundering of God’s response to the angel’s call, and an expectation is created that this thundering voice of God will speak his message of judgment on all the world, on all the inhabitants of the earth. Again, there is an expectation that things are coming to a head, that the completion/fulfillment of God’s judgment is about to occur.
The next section of the text is fraught with ambiguity, an ambiguity for both the ‘seer’ and for the reader of the text. Is God’s judgment about to be executed as expected? Is there to be a delay so that people might repent, or are all delays done? Is what is expected to happen really God’s plan, or will expectations again be shattered?

In his role as a prophet, ‘John’ hears God speaking in the thunder and prepares to write down what he hears. The expectation is that this ‘thunderous speaking’ is a word of judgment, a word that will force a final choice for or against the God of creation. At this moment a voice from heaven intervenes, a voice of divine command. ‘John’ is to seal away what he has heard; he is not to write it at all. Once again ambiguity reigns. Does this mean that the time for talk is over, that God intends to act in judgment? Does this mean that there will be further delays before the execution of God’s judgment? Does this mean that there may be a new word, a new direction in God’s design for his creation?

With those questions hanging, the focus of the imagery shifts back to the mighty angel. He raises his hand to the heavens in the typical stance of one taking an oath, but also bringing the last element of creation into his symbolic stance – the earth, the seas, and the heavens. He swears by the living God, the creator of the heavens and the earth and the seas, and by all creatures within the elements of the living God’s creation, that they will be no further delay, that the seventh trumpet is about to sound, that things are coming to completion. It would seem that the questions have been answered, yet the delay before the sounding of the seventh trumpet continues for nearly another full chapter!

Further, the mighty angel swears that when the seventh trumpet is sounded, the ‘mystery of God,’ the ‘hidden things of God’ that he revealed to his prophets will be brought to completion. The reader may expect that this reference of what was revealed to the prophets might mean that God is about to prosecute his lawsuit, that the oracles of judgment are about to be brought to completion. But what of the oracles of salvation? Is there to be a time of tribulation after which God will restore the fortunes of ‘Israel,’ the Church? Will God’s people be triumphant and rule in God’s name over Rome and the other ‘powers of the earth?’ Does God’s plan, his ‘mystery,’ involve something else that is ‘hidden’ from the seer and the readers?

With all the questions hanging in the air, and with an expectation that the seventh trumpet is about to sound perhaps to answer the questions and bring clarity to the reader, there is another delay. ‘John’ is recommissioned as a prophet. There are several Old Testament instances that suggest such a recommissioning of a prophet – Elijah, Jonah, Ezekiel. In every case, the ‘recommissioning’ is indicative of a new role, a new and different task for the prophet. The same heavenly voice that commanded the seer to seal away the ‘words’ of the seven thunders and not to write them, now commands him to take the open scroll from the hand of the mighty angel. This launches a command/execution pattern. Exactly as commanded, ‘John’ approaches the mighty angel and demands the scroll. Then the angel commands him to ‘eat’ the scroll, to consume it completely, noting that it would taste sweet in the prophet’s mouth, but would sour his stomach. Again he follows this command exactly, indicated by verbatim repetition, and the results are as predicted.

Command/execution patterns are frequent literary devices in biblical literature. They indicate the exact fulfillment of God’s will. In the recommissioning scene, then, ‘John’ is presented as being in total conformity to God’s will. (Note the exact repetition of the command and its execution in Jezebel’s command to men of worthlessness to falsely accuse Naboth and stone him so that Ahab can take possession of Naboth’s vineyard [1 Kg 21:1-16]. There, the exact repetition highlights the evil intentions of the participants, of self-serving royal power. The multiple repetitions become annoying as the
readers become accustomed to the evil. The repetition makes the evil lose its sting—a form of accommodation. Note also that when the command/execution pattern depicts the accomplishment of God’s will, the pattern, as here, is simple and direct. The differing uses of the pattern serve to contrast the simple, direct accomplishment of God’s will with the contorted deviations of what is right and just in the execution of human power.) The recommissioning scene is derived from Ezekiel’s commission in Ez 3:13, where Ezekiel is also commanded to eat a scroll. Ezekiel’s whole ministry is characterized by symbolic actions to illustrate the words of his message. One of the most famous examples is the command to Ezekiel to walk the streets of Jerusalem naked and wearing a yoke about his neck, symbolizing the Babylonian captivity. ‘John,’ like Ezekiel, is commanded to completely consume the scroll, symbolizing ‘digesting’ God’s word, fully ‘taking in’ God’s message. For both, the experience is both ‘sweet’ and ‘bitter.’ There is a ‘sweetness’ in totally embracing God’s word, in totally conforming oneself to God’s will. There is also a ‘bitterness’ in letting go of oneself to embrace God’s will, in accepting daunting responsibilities and relaying messages that one’s brothers and sisters may not want to hear, messages that put the prophet at odds with the powers of the world. Still, this is the prophetic task. Jeremiah was tormented by a fierce love for his God and a fierce love for his people, yet his response to God’s call set him at odds with his people, a painful experience for the prophet. Jonah was commanded to get up and go east to Nineveh, but he broke faith, got up and went west to escape his task. His task itself was a bitter pill for him to swallow because he know that God is a merciful God and his message to Nineveh would mean that the Assyrians, who destroyed the northern kingdom would likely find comfort and mercy from God. By contrast, ‘John’ is immediately and fully obedient to God and yet it was still a bitter experience for him.

In contrast to Ezekiel, who was commissioned to speak to the people of Israel, in both symbolic actions and prophetic words, ‘John,’ like Jonah, is commanded to be a prophet for many peoples, nations, tongues and kings. ‘Peoples and nations and tribes and tongues’ has recurred regularly in the Book of Revelation as a kind of synonym for ‘inhabitants of the earth,’ as opposed to the Church, God’s special people. Note that the repetition in this instance occurs with variation—kings. ‘John’ is commissioned to prophesy concerning, take up a ministry for, those ‘outside,’ those powers and peoples who oppose and seek to dominate others, even God’s holy ones. Note how this scene ends roughly where the vision began, with the vision of a mighty angel adorned with a rainbow on his head, a symbol of God’s will for all creation, with a commitment of God not to fight with his people, not to force his will upon them.

And now the reader seems to have an answer: There is a new direction in God’s design. He chooses to honor his covenant, to spare his created children. And he chooses a prophet to take his offer of love and mercy and forgiveness to his wayward children. He has multiplied his signs to try to bring them home and that has not worked. But the Lamb has been slaughtered and emerged victorious—‘They looked on him whom they had pierced (Jn 19:37, a paraphrase of Zech 12:10). There is the suggestion, even the expectation that the powers that ‘defeated’ Christ will look on what they have done and be moved to change. This is also a possibility for the powers who persecute Christians who stand up for what is true about God and his ultimate power. Seeing what they have done, they may change. That may be hard for ‘John’ to swallow. Can the Church in today’s world swallow this pill? Can the struggle for the equality and dignity of all people before God, the struggle to establish justice and peace and equity in God’s creation proceed by non-violent means? Can we embrace suffering for the sake of others as a means of advancing God’s kingdom? Can we find victory in suffering and submission? Is it possible for the larger world to see this as real power? Or will they only regard us as fools? Will immigrants and refugees merely take advantage of us? Will ISIS slaughter us in their thirst for domination? Do our own policies breed such fears and hardships?
And was given to me a measuring rod (reed) similar to a staff, saying:
Get up (rise up) and measure the temple of God and the altar and those worshipping in it. And the court outside the temple leave (cast, throw) out(side) and let you not measure it, for it has been given to the nations (gentiles) and the holy city they will trample (walk upon) forty and two months.

Textual Notes

1. *Edothe moi kalamos* – ‘was given to me a reed’ The use of the ‘divine passive’ again is indicative of God’s involvement in the ‘measuring.’ The image of ‘measuring the temple’ is derived from the visions of a restored Jerusalem in both Ezekiel (Ez 40:3) and Zechariah (Zech 2:1-2). This is the first action of the ‘seer’ after his recommissioning and further associates him with Ezekiel whose ministry was carried out in both word and symbolic action.

2. *Naon tou theou* – ‘temple of God.’ As was the case with Ezekiel, the symbolic nature of the measuring is carried in the fact that, for Ezekiel the First Temple lay in ruins, destroyed by the Babylonians, and for ‘John,’ the second temple had been destroyed by the Romans. In both cases, what is envisioned is a ‘restoration.’ Harrington observes that *naos* – ‘temple’ – refers to the whole temple precincts except for the outermost courtyard, the ‘Court of the Gentiles.’ ‘Measuring the worshippers within the temple is patently symbolic. The worshippers are included within the holy domain of God.’

3. *Edothe tois enthnesin* – ‘was given to the nations.’ Again the ‘divine passive’ indicates God’s hand in the actions and fate of the nations, the Gentiles. It would seem that this mention of the Gentiles has direct reference to the seer’s commission to prophesy concerning ‘many peoples, nations, tongues and kings.’ Harrington makes an interesting observation about the ‘Temple’ and the ‘outer court.’ Looking to what

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261 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
follows in Chapter 12, he concludes that ‘Temple’ symbolizes the Church in its inward being, analogous to
the ‘woman’ in 12:6, while the ‘outer court’ symbolizes the Church in its earthly, empirical existence,
12:17.\textsuperscript{262}

An alternate reading, based on ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ can be proposed. The ‘temple’ and those
‘worshipping’ within it symbolize the Church and its ‘holy ones,’ the righteous and ‘victorious.’ The ‘outer
court’ symbolizes the world and its power structures, infringing on and circumscribing the earthly
existence of the Church. This ‘outer circle’ has been given authority/power for 42 months – 3 ½ years – to
resist and dominate the existence of the Church, a limited time of trial and tribulation for the holy ones.
At the end of the limited time, there will be no more ‘outer court.’ As suggested in the vision of the Open
Scroll, the ‘nations/Gentiles’ will look on those whom they have pierced and be converted, incorporated
within the ‘inner circle.’ ‘Victory’ will be won, not by meeting violence with violence, but by witnessing to
the truth by patient endurance.

4. \textit{Ten polin ten hagian patesousin menas tesserakonta kai duo} – ‘the holy city they will trample (for) forty
two months.’ Harrington observes that the ‘forty two months’ matches exactly the duration of the
persecution of Antiochus IV mentioned in Dn 7:25 and functions as a symbol for a limited time of
persecution.\textsuperscript{263}

As the ‘Sealing of the Faithful,’ in the interlude between the sixth and seventh seals, marked those who
would be protected, it would seem that the ‘Measuring of the Temple’ marks those ‘inside’ and ‘outside.’
It also seems that, in the larger plan of God, those outside are empowered by God so as to effect their
conversion, bringing them within the purview of God’s design for all creation.

\textsuperscript{262} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{263} Ibid.
Immediately after his new commission to be a prophet to ‘many peoples, nations, tongues and kings,’ ‘John’ is commanded to measure the Temple. This is a direct association of the visionary of the Book of Revelation with Ezekiel, whose ministry to the Babylonian Exiles was a ministry of word and symbolic action. In the prophetic books of both Ezekiel and Zechariah, a vision of the measuring of the Temple functions as a promise of restoration, of the ultimate overthrow of the power of Babylon. The association of the current vision with the older prophetic texts is further cemented by the fact that, throughout Revelation, Babylon functions as a symbol of the evil power of Rome. In both the situation that stands behind the Book of Revelation and the social/historical context of the older writings of Ezekiel and Zechariah, the Jerusalem Temple lays in ruins, destroyed by the conqueror.

However, there are also differences. Ezekiel had been commissioned to carry out his ministry to the people of Israel, to the victims of the Exile. ‘John’ has now been commissioned to prophesy to the ‘inhabitants of the earth,’ and especially to the power structures of those ‘outside’ the Church. In the Old Testament examples of ‘measuring the temple,’ the prophets observe a heavenly being conducting the survey, while ‘John’ is commanded to measure the temple himself. He is not a passive observer, but actively involved it carrying out God’s design for all creation. Further, the command to ‘John’ includes that strange instruction to measure the people worshipping within the temple.

Old Testament faith rested on the conviction that the people of Israel were specially chosen by their God. Their ‘election’ rested on the three promises to the Patriarchs: 1) I will make you a great, numerous people/nation; 2) I will give you a good land, flowing with milk and honey; 3) I will be your God and you will be my people. In the Exile, each of those promises was abrogated. In the context of the Babylonian Exile, prophets like Ezekiel, Zechariah and Third Isaiah arose whose mission was to give hope to the Exiles that all was not lost, that God had not fully and finally abandoned his people. Their mission was to rekindle the hope that the people would regain their status as an independent nation, would return home to the land that God had given them, that they would rebuild the temple, the symbol of God’s abiding presence with his people and restore the sacrificial system of worship.

For the Jews of New Testament times, the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD was as cataclysmic as the Babylonian Exile. In its aftermath, the Pharisees became the dominant party in Judaism, the people of Israel became the ‘People of the Book,’ and the contents of the Hebrew Bible were definitively determined. By decree of the Council of Jamnia, Jews professing faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah were expelled from synagogue fellowship. And among some Jews to this day there is still the hope and expectation of restoring the fortunes of Jerusalem, rebuilding the Sacred Temple, and restoring the ancient system of sacrifices.

From the theological perspective of the New Testament, there is but one sacrifice that reconciles humanity to its Creator, one sacrifice that opens for the ‘holy ones’ the way to eternal life, the one sacrifice offered by Jesus Christ on the Cross. This is a once-for-all, never to be repeated sacrifice. The Eucharist is a ‘remembrance,’ not a new offering. It is a celebration that makes the one sacrifice of Jesus

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Christ present and effective again and again. In this regard, then, what ‘John’ measures in the vision is not the role of priests offering new sacrifices, but of people worshipping, people – the holy ones – participating in the ‘Victory of the Lamb.’ He is restricted from measuring the ‘outer court,’ that which is beyond pure worship, that which is beyond participation in the victory of the Lamb. It is of no consequence, whether it is seen as the situation of the Church within the social and cultural situation of the Roman Empire, or as all the supposed values and power structures of the inhabited world beyond the embrace of the community of the faithful within the Church.

This vision is at once hopeful and damning, ‘sweet’ and ‘bitter.’ The victory has been won; the holy ones have all that they need. What they have is something that can be offered to the world, an alternative world view, a deeper penetration into reality, the reality of humanity before a loving, creative God. But in living into the victory, in proclaiming an alternate, truer view of reality, they will face opposition. Force and violence is not the way to win over that opposition; but patient endurance and submission.

Again, a hopeful note is raised by the time limit set for the ‘nations’ to trample the Holy City, a symbol of the Church, not as a geographic location to call home or in which to find God’s special presence, but as a people, a community of believers in which the presence of God can be found wherever they are, in which the ‘Victory of the Lamb’ is evident by how the community lives and acts in the face of the wider world. This has been the radical Christianity proposed by ‘John’ throughout the book. But now, this is a message directed to the world, not to the community of believers. It is a message that says, ‘We will not compromise with you; we have something better. Come. See what we have and participate in the real victory with us. You will not dominate us; we’ll be here – when you’re ready, when all the power plays prove ineffective, illusory, dissatisfying. Come. Share the victory.’

In the vision of the Open Scroll and the symbolic action of the Measuring of the Temple, the word ‘evangelize’ has come into play and the direction of the story unfolding in Revelation has shifted away from the Seven Churches to the ‘inhabitants of the world.’ The message of ‘radical Christianity’ to the world appears to emerge as, “We will offer no resistance. If you give us participation within society, we will speak a voice for truth, for the good God wills for all his children, but if you ignore our voice, we will not resist you. If you build walls to shut out immigrants and refugees, we will welcome them into our homes, but we will not fight you. If you meet violence with violence and exert your supposed power by force over others, we will care for those you injure, but we will not fight you. If you amass great wealth at the expense of the poor and vulnerable, we will care for their needs, but we will not resist you. We will speak a message for the dignity of life and the value of all human beings, we will speak for the ignored and forgotten victims of abuse and human trafficking, but if you ignore us, or ridicule us, or persecute us, we will offer no resistance. If you strike us on the right cheek, we will turn to you the left, but we will not meet your violence with violence. And when you are hurt or victimized or ignored or persecuted, we will care for you – if you let us – but we will not resist you.”

Can Christianity survive if this ‘radicalized form’ is lived? Can imitating the ‘submission of the Lamb’ really advance the kingdom of God?
The Two Witnesses (11:3-14)

3And I will grant to my two witnesses and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred sixty days, those having been clothed in sackcloth.

4These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands before the Lord of the earth having stood. 5And if anyone wants to harm them, fire goes out from their mouth and devours their enemies (those hostile to them) and if anyone should desire to harm them, it is necessary that he be killed. 6These have the authority (power) to shut the heaven so that rain does not fall (in, during) the days of their prophecy, and authority (power) they have over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every plague as often as (if) they should desire (whenever they should desire).

7And when they should have finished their testimony, the beast coming up out of the abyss will make war with them and overcome them and he will kill them. 8And their dead body (will be) on the broad street of the great city which is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. 9And they are looking, (those) from (among) the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations, at the dead body of them (for) three days and one half and the their dead bodies they are not allowing to be placed in a grave (tomb). 10And those dwelling on the earth are rejoicing over them and enjoying themselves (making merry) and gifts they will send to each other because these two prophets tormented those dwelling on the earth.

11And after three and one half days the spirit of life from God entered into them and they stood upon their feet and a great fear fell upon those seeing them. 12And they heard a loud voice from the heaven saying: Come up here. And they went up (arose) to the heaven in the cloud and watched them their enemies (those hostile to them). 13And in that hour a great earthquake happened and one tenth of the city fell and were killed in the earthquake the names of seven thousand men and the rest became terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

14The second woe has passed. Behold, the third woe is coming quickly.
Textual Notes

1. *Doso tois dysin martysin mou kai prophetesousin* – ‘I will give to my two witnesses and they will prophesy.’ Recalling Antipas, the one witness/martyr mentioned in the letters (2:13), and the context of this passage in which the two witnesses will suffer death, Harrington concludes that the voice that is heard speaking is that of Christ.

*doso* is in the future tense and active voice. The verb has regularly been used in the ‘divine passive’ in situations when the one granting authority is understood to be God, avoiding anthropomorphisms. The active voice can be another indicator that the speaker is Christ, through whom we have a more immediate access to God and his ‘granting’ of office/authority is another movement forward in Revelation’s progressive association/identification of Christ and his Father, God. The future tense points to the struggles and trials of the Church about to occur.

Harrington also observes that *dysin martysin mou* -- ‘my two witnesses,’ alludes toDt 19:15

‘A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offence that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained.’

The mission granted to the two witnesses is ‘to prophesy,’ again in the future tense. The prophetic office is to be understood in a sense consistent with the general function of biblical prophecy – to critique current conditions and point to the logical consequences inherent in social and cultural world views that contradict God’s design for the good of all people. Again, the future tense points to the struggles and trials the Church is about to endure.

The introduction of the ‘two witnesses’ again breaks patterns of expectation. The vision of the Open Scroll carries a certain expectation that the seventh trumpet will sound and things will rush to a conclusion, but things are delayed again with the recommissioning of the ‘seer.’ The Measuring of the Temple, the first symbolic action of the newly recommissioned ‘seer’ looks to either anticipate the removal of the outside threat to the Church or the eventual inclusion of them within the embrace of God’s plan and the expectation is that the story will move ahead to resolve this issue. But again the story is delayed by the introduction of two witnesses, a completely new feature in the book.

2. *Hemeras chilias diakosias hexekonta* – ‘one thousand two hundred sixty days.’ In strict terms of time, this is equivalent to forty two months or three and a half years. This is the exact amount of time granted to the nations/Gentiles to trample the ‘Holy City,’ the Church. Harrington observes that this time reference is used again in 12:6 and 14 in reference to the ‘woman,’ a symbol of the Church. He concludes that this ‘time of the Gentiles’ is the ‘time of the Church on earth.’ The image unfolding here, then, associates the role of the Church with that of the two witnesses. In the time of tribulation to come, the Church is to witness to Christ by patient endurance and by speaking the word of God’s truth, his will for all the world in the face of the tribulations inflicted on her by the outside world.

3. *Peribeblemenoi sakkous* – ‘clothed in sackcloth.’ The participle uses the same form for either the middle or passive voice. The middle voice has the reflexive sense, ‘having clothed themselves,’ while the passive indicates that they ‘were clothed’ by some other agent. That is often the sense when it is noted that the ‘holy ones’ have been clothed in white garments – a reward for their patient endurance. Given the active voice of *doso,* it is more likely that the participle is, in this instance, to be taken as a middle voice – they have clothed themselves for the mission given to them.

Rogers and Rogers write that sackcloth refers to the fabric from which a sack is made, usually dark in color and of rough texture. It is especially suited to be worn as a mourning garment, both for the sorrow of death and mourning over sin, a sign of penitence. As latter day prophets the two witnesses wear the rough garb of their ancient predecessors (see Zech 13:4). Their message is to call to repentance.

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267 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
268 NRSV translation.
269 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
270 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
number of attempts have been made by commentators to identify the two witnesses with venerable figures from the past, including Elijah, Moses or Enoch. Harrington is probably much more on the mark in identifying them as representatives of the Church in its role of ‘witnessing to the Christ.’

4. *Hai duo elaiai kai hai duo lychniai* – ‘the two olive trees and the two lampstands.’ In the Inaugural Vision, the lampstands were identified as the ‘Seven Churches.’ It would be over-pressed to argue that ‘two lampstands’ represent only the faithful witnesses out of the seven Churches. Rather, given the allusion to Deuteronomy as well as the notices is Mt 18:16 and II Cor 13:1, and the fact that the lampstands are the heavenly counterparts to the earthly Church, the two lampstands represent the whole Church in its role as witness.

Harrington cites the prophecy of Zechariah (4:2-3, 11-14) as the source of the images of the olive trees and lampstands. He notes that in Zechariah, the lampstands represent Israel and the olive trees represent Zerubbabel, the Davidic prince/king and Joshua the high priest, the ‘two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth.’

Beyond this, however, the ‘dove with an olive branch’ emerged early in Christianity as a symbol of peace. Within the Bible, the first instance of the image is found in the story of Noah (Gn 8:11). As the waters of the great flood recede, Noah releases a dove who returns to the Ark bearing an olive branch. The flood represented a return to watery chaos, a return to non-creation. With the receding of the waters the order of creation is being restored; plants are emerging, plants on which men rely for food, fuel, ointment – the versatile olive tree. Remembering that the ‘mighty angel,’ whose appearance marked the beginning of the interlude between the sounding of the sixth and seventh trumpets, had a rainbow about his head, it can be suggested that the mission of the two witnesses, representing the Church, is to prophesy with a message of peace and order. In a chaotic world, they are to announce an alternate view, a rejection of chaotic drives for power and self-sufficiency and the possibility of a world dominated instead by the peace of God, the peace of the Lamb.

5. *Pur ekporeueitai ek tou stomatos auton kai katesthiei tous echthrous auton* – ‘fire goes out from their mouth and devours (totally consumes) their enemies.’ These words begin a series of images that evoke the Old Testament figures of Elijah and Moses. This image alludes to the rivalry between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal brought into the Northern Kingdom by Jezebel, the foreign wife of Ahab. Elijah challenges the 450 prophets to a contest to determine whose God was listening, whose God had true power. A sacrifice was arranged on an altar and the prophets of Baal called on their god to send fire from heaven to ignite the offering. Nothing happens. Elijah calls on God and fire comes down from heaven, consumes the offering and melts the stones of the altar (I Kgs 18:17-40). Even more to the point, in II Kgs 1:10, Elijah calls on God to send fire to consume his enemies. Harrington notes that this image also evokes the figure of Moses during the Korahite Rebellion recorded in the Book of Numbers. Moses calls on God who reigns fire on the rebellious one attempting to usurp the authority and priesthood of Aaron (Nm 16:35).

6. *Exousian kleiasai ton ouranon hina me hyetos breche* – ‘power to shut the heavens so that rain might not fall.’ This is another allusion to the mission of Elijah. He announces to Ahab that no rain shall fall on the land for three years and flees Israel for the Sidonian city of Zerephath – an area whose god was Baal. There, during the famine occasioned by the lack of rain, he stays with a poor widow whose flour and oil are not depleted during the whole time of the famine (I Kgs 17:1-24).

At this point it is worth noting that the miracle stories and signs throughout the stories of Elijah and Elisha in the Books of Kings are rooted in a time when the faith of the people of Israel was developing from a ‘practical monotheism’ into an ‘absolute monotheism.’ At an earlier point in the development of the faith of Israel, belief in other gods was a given. Baal was the god of the Canaanites, Ra the god of Egypt, Marduk the god of the peoples of Mesopotamia. By contrast, Israel believed that there God was more loving, more intimately involved with his people, entering into a covenant relationship with them. From a stance of ‘practical monotheism,’ Israel believed that its God was more powerful than the gods of other peoples. Gradually, they came to see that the gods of other nations were empty images, not living.

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271 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
deities, not gods at all. They came to see that there was only one God, the creator God, the Lord of all the universe – absolute monotheism. The stories of Elijah and Elisha are rooted in that period of transformation, of developing faith. The ‘absolute monotheism’ of Israel set the people apart from other nations and it is the uniqueness of the relationship of Israel with the one, living God that was inherited by Christianity, that set Judeo-Christian faith apart from the faith and world views of Rome and all other powers of the world. ‘John’ adopts and adapts these stories because they are relevant to the world of late first century Christianity existing within the dominant culture and power structure of Rome.

7. Exousian epi ton hydaton strephein auta eis haima – ‘power over the waters to turn them into blood.’ These words, along with the idea of having an ability to multiply plagues, are an obvious allusion to Moses and the Egyptian plague cycle. Within the biblical text of Exodus, the plagues are presented as signs of God’s power in the face of the supposed power of Egypt, utilized to achieve freedom for people. The final shaping of the text of the Pentateuch, the Former Prophets (Joshua – II Kings), and a good portion of the writing Prophets occurred in the context of the Babylonian Exile and the slavery in Egypt and the ‘signs’ unleashed by God to win their freedom were interpreted in the new context to argue for God’s consistency and hold out hope that God would effect a release of the people from Babylon as once he had when they were enslaved in Egypt. The Egyptian traditions are, again, congenial for the author of Revelation as he presents hope that God will act to free his people, the new Israel, the Church, from the clutches of Roman power.

Harrington also notes that in late Judaism, the figures of Moses and Elijah were expected to usher in the eschatological age. This expectation also served the author’s purposes.273

8. Hemeras propheteias auton… hotan telesosin martrion auton – ‘the days of their prophecy… when should be completed/fulfilled their witness. The time of the prophecy of the two witnesses corresponds to the ‘time of the Gentiles’ – 3 ½ years. At the end of this time, their ‘witness’ will be complete. There is both a sense of mercy, a limitation of the ‘time of the Gentiles,’ and a sense of urgency within this time frame. There is also a limited time to give witness, to stand against powers inimical to God, to effect a conversion.

9. To therion to anabainon ek tes abyssou – ‘the beast coming up from the abyss.’ From the perspective of the vision, at the end of the allotted time something more dire is to happen. The ‘beast’ coming up from the abyss will kill the witnesses. The ‘beast’ is introduced, but no further characterization of it is made. This is characteristic of the literary style of Revelation that proceeds by retrospectives and anticipations. The nature of the beast will later be explored, beginning in Chapter 13. The ‘abyss’ has already appeared in the text, the abode of the dead and of evil, opened by a ‘fallen angel’ to unleash the ‘army of locusts.’ ‘John’ fully expects that standing up to the power of Rome will unleash a persecution in which the faithful will die, martyrs – witnesses giving testimony to the truth – will become martyrs who witness to the faith by their deaths.

Harrington notes that the two witnesses are two of the seven lampstands; he does not expect that all the faithful in the Church will be killed.274 However, it is equally true that he does not expect two of the Seven Churches in the Province of Asia to be completely wiped out. On this, Harrington is being too literal. ‘Two witnesses’ conforms to the requirements of the law as stated in Deuteronomy. Within the symbolism used to describe the witnesses and their roles, two Old Testament characters figure prominently: Moses and Elijah. Two lampstands represent all the Churches in the role of witness demanded of the faithful; two olive trees represent those ‘anointed,’ those marked or ‘sealed’ to fulfill a specific purpose in God’s plan. Fulfilling the role of witnesses will provoke a confrontation with the ‘beast,’ whatever the ‘beast’ turns out to be. In the confrontation it is possible, though not likely, that all the faithful will be killed. The point is that the faithful, the ‘victorious’ must be willing to submit, just as Jesus did, in the belief and hope that their suffering will have meaning, will further God’s plan to establish his rule over all people, for the good of all.

10. To ptoma auton epi tes plateias tes poleos megales – ‘the corpse of them (will be) upon the (broad) street of the great city.’ Harrington notes that ptoma is in the singular with the personal pronoun modifier in

273 Ibid.
274 Ibid.
the plural. He suggests that the ‘single corpse’ is to be understood in a ‘corporate sense.’

There is a long biblical tradition of understanding God’s people in a ‘corporate sense.’ In this sense, the Church gives one witness to Christ and is to be understood as a singular witness. The two witnesses who will be killed by the beast are a single testimony to the truth as will be the ‘corporate’ body of those who give their lives in witness to the truth.

Harrington further suggests that the body/bodies lying in the street is a sign of disrespect and dishonor. He cites the burial of Jesus as an example – wrapped in a linen cloth and placed hastily in a tomb, but with no burial preparations (the reason why the woman go to the tomb after the Sabbath).

Perhaps a more cogent image of disrespect for bodies left lying in the street is to be found in II Kings 9:30-37, where Jezebel is thrown from a window into the street where the dogs eat her flesh. This image portrays a reversal, in which the slain witnesses are seen with the same disregard as the evil, foreign queen. But this further cements the association of the witnesses and their fate with that of Jesus himself, who was crucified as a common criminal. What appears in the face of worldly powers to be dishonor and rebelliousness is, in fact, a suffering and submission to further God’s will for the world – ‘a sign to be contradicted.’ (Lk 2:34)

11. *Kaleitai pneumatikos Sodoma kai Aigytos* – ‘called in the spirit Sodom and Egypt.’ Harrington notes that *pneumatikos* literally means ‘figuratively’ or ‘allegorically.’ He suggests that the author has gone out of his way to underline the symbolic character of the ‘great city,’ which can only be Rome. Alternately, Rogers and Rogers hold that the word primarily means ‘spiritually’ and not ‘allegorically.’ They suggest that the idea might be to suggest how ‘the spirit of God’ interprets or sees things.

In Genesis, the people of Israel, descendants of Abraham, the twelve families of the twelve sons of Israel, are wandering shepherds. There is an image of God in the Patriarchal narratives as a God of history, a God who leads his people into an unknowable future. This sets up a radical contrasts between the people of Israel and the city-dwellers. In emerging civilization in the Ancient Near East, the gods of the city-states were gods of nature, dying and rising gods whose capriciousness had to be placated by people to ward off natural disasters, particularly floods and drought. In Genesis, Sodom was the epitome of all the evil inherent in the drive for self-sufficiency inherent in ‘city’ life. It is an easy move to see in Sodom a symbol for the evils inherent in the culture and social structures of the Roman Empire. And already in Revelation, Egypt has functioned as a symbol of the willfulness and arrogance of human kings who resist the ‘signs’ sent by God to bring them to the truth of what human society should be before an omnipotent, living, creator God. It is God who leads people into an unknowable future, not the designs and plans of human potentates.

12. *Hopou kai ho kyrios auton estaurothe* – ‘where their Lord was crucified.’ Harrington writes that this is an obvious reference to Jerusalem, but a figurative one. For him it is noteworthy that in Is 1:10 and 3:9 Jerusalem is called ‘Sodom,’ and in Wis 19:4, Sodom is linked to Egypt. In I Cor 2:6-8, Paul asserts that Jesus was crucified by ‘the powers of the world.’ He follows Caird in suggesting that the city was heir to the vice of Sodom and the tyranny of Egypt, as well as a city of blind disobedience to the will of God. All of this reflects a Jerusalem under the governance of cultural values of Rome, a situation in which the accommodation of Jewish leaders to the power of Rome was evident.

13. *Kai blepousin ek ton laon kai phylon kai glosson ethnon to ptoma auton* – ‘and look upon them (those) from the people and tribes and tongues and nations the body of them.’ Once again the singular *ptoma,* ‘corpse,’ is used with the plural personal pronoun *auton,* ‘of them.’ As suggested above, this indicates the ‘corporate’ nature of bearing witness. The four-fold enumeration of the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ is used again and in its usual form. ‘Kings’ are not mentioned. What becomes explicit here is what was suggested earlier – a reference to ‘they will look on him whom they have pierced.’ The usual listing of the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ can be suggestive of people in general who see the result of unmitigated and
uncontrolled exercise of power. Can the witness of the Church begin to cause all people to see the folly of abusive and self-perpetuating power structures? Can it begin to erode the base on which such power structures are grounded?

With Harrington, it can also be noted that this listing of ‘inhabitants of the earth’ is regularly used in contradistinction to the Church, suggesting again that the ‘great city’ refers to Rome and its corruption of power. 280

14. Hemeras treis kai hemisy – ‘three and a half days.’ Recalling the 3 ½ years that are both the ‘time of the Gentiles’ and the ‘time of the witnesses,’ 3 ½ days is a limited time of ‘triumph.’ It is also an allusion to the 3 days of Jesus in the tomb, though ½ a day longer. The suffering of the witnesses is presented, then, in association with the suffering of Christ, a participation in it, though not exactly the same. His sacrifice was once-for-all, the final victory. The suffering of the witnesses is a participation in the victory already won.

15. Ta ptomata auton ouk aphioussin tethenai eis mnema – ‘the corpses of them they will not allow to be put in a tomb.’ This action represents the ultimate act of degradation, disrespect and dishonoring. Note, however, the faulty perspective of those who appear to triumph. Ptomata is the plural, indicating individual dead bodies. Those looking on see individual corpses, not ‘corporate’ witnesses. They see individuals, not communion and community.

16. Chairousin ep’ autois kai euphrainontai kai dora pempsousin allelois – ‘they are rejoicing over them and making merry and sending gifts to each other.’ Specifically, those acting are ‘the inhabitants of the earth,’ the cultures and societies and power structures apart from God’s people, the Church. There is an air of gloating, a ghoulish look at the values of the larger world in the face of the suffering of others. This again is reminiscent of the fate of Jesus Christ. Harrington writes that Jn 16:20 speaks of the joy of the world, kosmos, at the death of Jesus. In John’s Gospel, kosmos, in the pejorative sense, is equivalent to ‘inhabitants of the earth’ in Revelation. 281

17. Hoti houtoi hoi duo prophetai ebasanisan tous katoikountas epi tes ges – ‘because these two prophets have tormented those dwelling upon the earth.’ For all the apparent defeat and gloating over the death of the two witnesses, they have left their mark; they have made an in-roads. Harrington suggests that the wording suggests an allusion to Elijah in I Kgs 18:17 and 21:20. He is decried as ‘the tormentor of Israel.’ He speaks a message the king and people don’t want to hear. This is the view that the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ take of the two witnesses. They have removed an annoyance, an inconvenience, but an annoyance that has made them uncomfortable, and inconvenience that has questioned their values and beliefs. He also notes the characterization of the ‘just man’ in the Book of Wisdom (2:12-20). ‘The just man is a living condemnation of all our way of thinking; the very sight of him is an affliction to us.’ 282

18. Pneuma zoes ek tou theou eisenthen eis autois – the breath of life from God entered into them.’ As ruah in Hebrew, pneuma in Greek has the primary meaning of ‘breath,’ ‘spirit’ in the sense of ‘inspiration’ and ‘expiration’ – breathing in and out. This ‘breath of life’ comes from God (Gn 2:7 – ‘Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.’) Harrington writes that the author of Revelation likely has in mind Ezekiel’s vision of the ‘Dry Bones.’ (Ez 37:10 – ‘So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood upon their feet.’) But beyond the ‘resurrection’ in Ezekiel, a breathing of new life into the Babylonian Exiles, the passage echoes the ‘Slaughtered Lamb’ standing before the throne of God (5:6) and the ‘Firstborn of the dead’ from the Inaugural Vision (1:5). This marks a turning point. The ‘beast’ will not have the last word over the witnesses, any more than the dragon will have over their Lord (see 12:5). 284

19. Phobos megas epepesin epi tous theourantas autous – ‘a great fear fell upon those seeing them.’ As in the resurrection scene in Matthew (Mt 28:4), the gloating of those seeing the dead witnesses quickly

280 Ibid.
281 Ibid.
282 Ibid.
283 NRSV translation.
284 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
turns to fear. But it can also be suggested that this ‘fear’ is not just the response of the ‘inhabitants of the earth.’ The original ending of Mark has the women finding the tomb of Jesus empty and running away in fear. With that, the Gospel ends. If he has been raised as he said, then all he said was true and the bulk of Mark’s Gospel concerns the relationship between Jesus and his followers, what it means to be a disciple. In Mark, Jesus is very clear: a disciple must be willing to do what Jesus did, must be willing to continue his mission, even if, as for Jesus, it means suffering.

20. Ekousan phones megales ek tou ouranou... anabate hode – ‘they heard a great/loud voice from heaven... Come up here!’ It is significant that the ‘seer,’ who regularly records what he ‘sees’ and ‘hears,’ in this instance reports what the witnesses ‘heard.’ ‘A loud voice from heaven’ is always an intimation of the divine. In this case, it is surely the voice of Christ. At the beginning of the vision of the Two Witnesses, the voice heard states the authority he gives to ‘my witnesses.’ Throughout Revelation, giving testimony indicates bearing witness to Christ. The ‘breath of life’ breathed into the witnesses recalls the slaughtered Lamb standing before the throne of God and the reference to Christ as the ‘first-born of the dead’ in the Inaugural Vision. The vision is Christocentric so that it is logical to hear the voice of Christ in the command issued to the two witnesses to ‘Come up here!’ They are called to share the victory of the Lamb.

21. Anebesan eis ton ouranon en te nephele – ‘they went up to the heaven in the cloud.’ Harrington finds multiple biblical allusions for this ascension scene. As it was for their Lord, the resurrection of the witnesses is followed by their ascension, and like the Lord, ‘they went up to heaven in a cloud, as the Ascension of Christ was described in Acts 1:9. Moses and Elijah have figured prominently in this. II Kgs 2:11 records the ‘ascension’ of Elijah, being taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. Also, according to Jewish tradition, as recorded in Josephus, Moses was removed from the sight of the Israelites in a cloud.285

22. Etheoresan autous hoi echthroi auton – ‘they watched/looked on them, their enemies.’ Those who looked on the death of the witnesses, gloating over them, now look on with fear. The value of the suffering of the witnesses, the value of their death, like that of Christ himself, is the realization that death has not ended them, but only made them more powerful.

23. Egeneto seismos megas – ‘a great earthquake occurred.’ The ‘great earthquake’ recalls the earthquake unleashed by the opening of the sixth seal, with its accompanying apocalyptic signs in the sky (6:12). It’s result was utter terror. Harrington notes the earthquake in Ez 38:19-20 as an example of earthquakes as a familiar symbol of divine punishment. In this case, however, and unlike the earthquake of 6:12, the ‘punishment’ is mitigated – only one tenth of the city falls. He follows Caird in seeing a ‘symbolic value’ to the earthquake: the death and vindication of the witnesses is itself the earthquake shock by which the great city is overthrown. The sense is that ‘they,’ ‘the enemies’ watched them ascend and felt the shock wave of the realization that the witnesses’ death was not a defeat, that it was a ‘victory’ that flies in the face of the expectations of the world and its power structures.286

24. Onomate anthropon chiliades hepta – ‘seven thousand names of men.’ Harrington again observes the symbolic function of ‘seven thousand,’ derived from the story of Elijah (I Kgs 19:18). In the Elijah story, the ‘seven thousand’ were faithful witnesses. Ironically, ‘John’ depicts the deaths of ‘seven thousand’ false witnesses – those who looked on and gloated over the death of the Two Witnesses. Both the visible triumph of the Two Witnesses, their ascension, and this ‘mitigated punishment’ were meant to bring people to their senses, to accomplish the purpose of all of God’s signs.

25. Loipoi emphoboi egenonto kai edokan doxan to theo tou ouranou – ‘the rest became terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.’ There is an ambiguity in emphoboi. Is it abject terror? Or is it repentance, a change of heart? Harrington notes that the mention of ‘the beast’ already points ahead in the story. Looking ahead to 14:7 and 15:4, and reading this passage backwards in the light of the later verses, it appears that the witnesses, through their patient endurance, through their suffering have provided a definite sign of God’s goodness and power; their witness has occasioned a change of heart.

Harrington notes that the phrase ‘give glory to the God of heaven’ is a common Old Testament expression for repentance and a change of heart.287

285 Ibid.
286 Ibid.
287 Ibid.
Commentary

Patterns within the book of Revelation provide indicators for perceiving the development of thought within the whole visionary schema. In the interlude between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals, the episode of Sealing the Faithful was followed by the Song of Victory. The faithful who were sealed were not assured that they would be exempt from the trials of life in the present world, a world whose cultural patterns and power structures posed a challenge to the benign supremacy of God and his Christ. Rather the sealing followed immediately by the Song of Victory promised a share in Christ’s victory to those sealed, to those who by their patient endurance would be clothed in white garments and made sharers in the victory already won on the Cross.

A similar pattern emerges in the interlude between the sounding of the sixth and seventh trumpets. This interlude specifies the role of those sealed and the means by which they will share in the victory. In the vision of the Open Scroll, ‘John’ is recommissioned, set aside, sealed as it were, for a specific task, to be a prophet for many peoples and nations and tongues and kings. The role of a biblical prophet is to critique false ways of believing, to point out the logical consequences of false ways of living, of living against the will and plan of God, of living in ways that make humans gods unto themselves. The vision of the Two Witnesses broadens that idea of ‘commissioning’ to include the whole Church. It is the role of the Church to witness to God’s truth, to point out false beliefs and false ways of living. And in this role, it is to be expected that the Church will suffer in the same manner as her Lord, that she, too, will experience apparent defeat at the hands of an unbelieving and unrepentant world, and that she, too, will share in the victory of the Lamb. This is what it means to be among God’s sealed faithful. This is what true victory entails.

The line of argumentation presented in the Book of Revelation is sometimes polemic, sometimes apologetic. In the Vision of the Two Witnesses the imagery and argumentation is at once both polemic and apologetic. The trials and suffering the witnesses are to endure clearly come at the hands of Rome, the symbol for all later readers of the wanton use of power for power’s sake, for the sake of domination, for the sake of maintaining a life and life-style that allows world powers to flaunt the design of God for his creation. In that, the vision is polemical. Yet the vision is also filled with Old Testament allusions and especially cites the figures of Moses and Elijah as true exemplars of God’s prophetic witnesses. In Jewish tradition, it was expected that the figures of Moses and Elijah would usher in the eschatological age. The vision, it would appear, speaks not only to strengthen the Seven Churches, but to invite the synagogue community to see in Jesus Christ and his witnesses the fulfillment of their hopes for establishing God’s plan in the world. The vision speaks to the context of the Church in a world where she is opposed by those with whom she shares a common vision, common roots, common traditions, to win them over to assert the truth of God’s plan in an environment that denigrates Jew and Christian alike.

The vision begins with the words of Christ, continuing his words to the ‘seer’ from the recommissioning of v 11. The new commission marked a new direction in the ministry of the ‘seer.’ From now on, his message is not to be addressed to the Seven Churches, but to the peoples and power structures of the world. This was followed by the ‘measuring of the temple,’ where it was suggested that the elimination of the outer court, the ‘Court of the Gentiles’ hinted at a culmination of God’s plan in which there would no longer be ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ that all of creation would acknowledge the living, creator God. Now Christ designates his two witnesses who will share in the prophetic mission of ‘John.’
They are to prophesy for one thousand, two hundred and sixty days. In the vision of the Open Scroll, it was noted that the ‘time of the Gentiles’ to trample the ‘Holy City’ was forty two months. This time frame is derived from the Book of Daniel in which the persecution at the hands of Antiochus IV lasted three and a half years. By breaking the three and a half years into forty two months, the single block of time from the imagery in Daniel is segmented into discrete periods of abuse and oppression – not a single block of time, but month after month after month. The witnesses are to carry out their prophetic mission to those trampling the ‘Holy City.’ The time of their prophecy is again three and a half years. But in confronting the false beliefs and false ways of living of the dominant cultures and governing bodies of the world, in the patient endurance needed to carry out their mission and face the opposition of a hostile world, the time frame is broken into days – they must endure day after day after day.

That they are clothed in sackcloth reflects ancient traditions in which a number of Israel’s prophets are depicted as wearing sackcloth, a sign of mourning, especially mourning over the guilt of sin. That they are so clothed further supports the idea that their prophetic mission is a call to repentance – a call now issued to all the world.

The next words heard explain exactly ‘who’ the two witnesses are. The first significant aspect of the designation ‘two witnesses’ rests on Dt 19:15. Israelite law requires that any case must be decided on at least two or three witnesses. This precept of the law stands behind Mt 18:15-17.

> If another member of the Church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the members refuses to listen to them, tell it to the Church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the Church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.288

The two witnesses give testimony both to the ‘sins’ of the unrepentant world and to the truth of the claims of Jesus Christ.

But specifically, these ‘two witnesses’ are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the throne of God. The two olives trees are a new element in the imagery of Revelation. The imagery is derived from the prophecy of Zechariah in which the two olive trees represent Zerubbabel, the Davidic prince/king and Joshua, the high priest. At the most basic level of symbolism, those who are anointed, and this includes priests and kings, have a special role to play in God’s plan. Beyond this, it is to be noted that the olive branch is an ancient symbol of peace. In the story of Noah, Noah releases a dove from the ark that returns with an olive branch, indicating that the flood waters are receding. Peace is being restored to creation, the watery chaos is receding, and in the end, God hangs his bow in the heavens, puts away his weapons. The prophetic ministry of the ‘witnesses’ is to bring about peace, to reconcile the factions of the world, to eliminate the ‘outsiders’ as represented in the measuring of the temple.

The two witnesses are also two lampstands and, in the Inaugural Vision, the lampstands represented the Church. Some commentators want to make a point that the two lampstands represent only some of the church, that not all will die in the persecution expected to result from speaking out against Rome. Against this view, it can be maintained that the two lampstands represent the whole church in its role as

288 NRSV translation
prophetic witness. This is an example of the fluid use ‘John’ can make of his images. So, who are the ‘two witnesses?’ They are the faithful of the Church who, following the author’s call to radical Christianity, share in his prophetic role to prophesy to the nations.

The symbolism employed in describing the ‘Two Witnesses’ is highly suggestive of the rite of Baptism as it is now celebrated in the Church. After the pouring of water, the person being baptized is anointed with Chrism using the words: ‘The God of power and the Father or our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin and brought you to new life through water and the Holy Spirit. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation, so that, united with his people, you may remain for ever a member of Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and King.’

The sacramental rites of the Church have undergone a long history of development and it is impossible to say that the anointing and these words were used in the Rite of Baptism in the late first century. What is likely is that the Christology of the New Testament, which celebrates Christ as priest, prophet and king, and imagery such as that used in the description of the ‘Two Witnesses’ influenced the theology of the Church and its three-fold role of teaching, sanctifying and ruling. This understanding of the Church along with New Testament Christology and the understanding of Baptism as being Baptized into Christ, likely influenced the development of the Rite of Baptism. In the light of the radical Christianity proposed by the Book of Revelation, how are we to understand and live our baptismal life? How is the Church, and how are its members, to be priests, prophets and kings in today’s world? How do we teach, sanctify and rule? How open is the culture of American life to receiving what we have to offer to the life of our society by exercising our baptismal roles?

A cursory reading of vv 5-6 seems to impart a vicious and vengeful message, a promise of meeting violence with violence. That reading, however, ignores the rich allusiveness of the text. It is at this point in the characterization of what it means to be a prophetic witness that the images of Elijah and Moses come to dominate.

The image of fire coming from the mouth of the witnesses to consume those who wish to harm them finds correspondences in the story of Elijah. First, in II Kgs 18:17-40 there is the story of the contest between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal. A sacrifice is laid out on an altar and the false prophets are invited to call on their ‘god’ to send fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice. With Elijah taunting them, they cry out to Baal and nothing happens. Then Elijah, quietly, speaks to the God of Israel and fire comes from the heavens, consumes the sacrificial offering and melts the stones of the altar. Afterwards, Elijah commands the Israelites to kill the false prophets. The story is told from the perspective of the Deuteronomic Historian. Within Deuteronomy and the Historical Books, God is presented as demonstrating his power and sovereignty by such acts of power that prove the foreign ‘gods’ to be nothing. The killing of the 450 prophets is consistent with the ‘Law of the Ban’ the regulations for warfare spelled out in Dt 20:1-20. In fact, within the Deuteronomic History, the ‘Law of the Ban’ served a symbolic function – spelled out in violent images. Israel is to avoid anything and anyone who can lead them away from faithfulness to their God. The problem addressed in the contest story was one of syncretism, the same type of accommodation with foreign powers and false gods that plagued the Churches of the Province of Asia. Secondly, in II Kgs 1:10, Elijah calls on God to send fire to consume his enemies. The basic point of the stories is that the prophet can call on and rely on God to protect him so that he is able to fulfill his God-given ministry.

\[289\] Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults
Again the ‘power to shut up the heavens so that no rain might fall’ is an allusion to Elijah (I Kgs 17:1-24). This story originates at a time when the faith of Israel was moving from a practical monotheism (‘Our God’s bigger than your god’) to absolute monotheism (‘Your god is nothing’). In his running battle with Ahab, Elijah announces a three year drought and famine, and flees to Zerephath in Sidon, the homeland of Jezebel and the provenance of Baal. There he is fed by a poor widow and her jar of flour and flask of oil are never depleted throughout the three year drought. The point of alluding to the story is to convey the message: ‘Even if you put your trust in a false God, it is the God of Judeo-Christianity who holds sway, who is really powerful, who really protects his people. The story is also congenial with the author’s storyline in that the famine is of limited duration – three years, a rough equivalent to the three and a half year ‘time of the Gentiles,’ the three and a half year ‘time of the prophetic witnesses.’

The final image in these verses centers on Moses and the plagues in Egypt – turning water into blood and multiplying signs. As has already been noted, the purpose of the ‘plagues’ was to effect a change of heart in Pharaoh and the people of Egypt.

In the end, the images of Elijah and Moses serve a number of functions within the vision. They represent an assurance of God’s protection for the ‘witnesses’ as they carry out their prophetic role in working to effect a change of heart among the powers of the world. They represent a ‘victory’ over false beliefs and false ways of living that stand against God’s plan for his world. They represent the reality that speaking God’s word in the world will lead to inevitable confrontation with the world’s powers. And they represent a limited ministry/mission and shared responsibility. In the end, Elijah is taken to heaven in a fiery chariot and his mantle falls on his apprentice, Elisha. In the end, Moses is given a glimpse of the Promised Land to which he has led the people of Israel, but the task of leading them into the land and apportioning it among the tribes, falls to Joshua. In the vision of the ‘witnesses,’ their prophetic mission is critical, but they are not indispensable. The role of ‘prophetic witness’ falls to the entire Church – everyone has a part to play.

‘John’ has been fairly consistent in setting up expectations and then shattering them. Now he notes that the ministry of the ‘witnesses’ will reach a completion. The Greek word implies ‘reach an end,’ ‘fulfill a purpose.’ If their mission has been completed, fulfilled its purpose, the expectation is that the powers of the world will have a change of heart, that power for power’s sake, power that makes its wielders believe that they are ‘gods,’ are self-sufficient, will be overcome. That expectation is shattered when a ‘beast’ from the abyss arises and ‘overcomes’ and kills the witnesses. ‘Overcome,’ ‘be victorious’ has been consistently used throughout Revelation to describe the patient endurance of God’s faithful, yet it is the ‘beast’ who ‘overcomes.’ Will the fidelity of the ‘witnesses,’ the Church amount to nothing?

Revelation unfolds in a series of retrospectives, where previously introduced concepts and images receive fuller treatment, and anticipations that will be dealt with in greater detail later in the text. The appearance of the ‘beast’ is one such anticipation. A full treatment of who and what this ‘beast’ is will be withheld until Chapter 13. In a retrospective view, the ‘beast’ ascends from the ‘abyss.’ The ‘abyss’ appeared in the text as the abode of the dead and of evil, opened by a ‘fallen angel’ to unleash the ‘army of locusts.’ ‘John’ fully expects that standing up to the power of Rome will unleash a persecution in which the faithful will die, martyrs – witnesses giving testimony to the truth – will become martyrs who witness to the faith by their deaths.

The image of apparent defeat continues with the degradation and defilement of the corpse of the witnesses. It is significant that the word for ‘corpse’ used in the text is singular in form. The singular form suggests the collective or corporate nature of the witnesses, the collective and corporate nature of
the Church in its mission to the world. The idea of God’s people as a ‘corporate personality’ is familiar from the Old Testament and is fully consistent, even from earliest times, with a theology and understanding of the nature of the Church. The members of the Church are baptized into Christ, made one in him; their ‘oneness’ is forged by sharing the Eucharist which has never been understood as an individual act of personal piety and unity with Christ but a corporate, communal action making the whole Church one, an embodiment of Christ to be present in and of service to the world. It is the Church that suffers at the hands of the world; it is the Church that, by patient endurance, will share in Christ’s victory in ‘overcoming’ the world.

To what degree does our community of faith see our Eucharistic celebrations and reception of communion as personal and private? To what degree does our community celebrate Eucharist as a forging of unity out of what we interact with and relate to the larger world? Do we, as one, live a shared mission that continues the mission of Christ in bringing Good News to all the world?

The picture of the ‘corpse’ of the witnesses lying in the broad street is an image of degradation and dishonor. But this image serves to associate the ‘witnesses’ with Jesus himself who was hastily wrapped in a linen cloth and entombed, with none of the due respect to the body that involved ceremonial washings and anointings. He was simply dumped in a burial place. Given the allusions to the Elijah story, a particularly strong image of disrespect for bodies left lying in the street is to be found in II Kings 9:30-37, in which Jezebel is thrown from a window into the street where the dogs eat her flesh. This image portrays a reversal, in which the slain witnesses are seen with the same disregard as the evil, foreign queen. But this further cements the association of the witnesses and their fate with that of Jesus himself, who was crucified as a common criminal. What appears in the face of worldly powers to be dishonor and degradation is, in fact, a suffering and submission to further God’s will for the world – ‘a sign to be contradicted.’ (Lk 2:34)

The ‘great city’ is an obvious reference to Rome, but the description of the city is yet another example of the author’s use of multivalent images. The ‘great city’ is called ‘Sodom’ and ‘Egypt’ and is designated as the place where Christ was crucified, which physically and geographically was Jerusalem.

In Genesis, Sodom is presented as the epitome of the evils of civilization, of city life. Before the establishment of the monarchy, the people of Israel lived primarily as semi-nomadic shepherds. They lived on the fringes of the Canaanite city-states. Their life and culture influenced their image of God. Their God was a God of history, a God who led the wandering shepherds into an unknowable future. This cultural perspective set the people of Israel apart from their Canaanite neighbors, who conceived of ‘god’ as a ‘god’ of nature, a dying and rising god. Their beliefs mimicked the pattern of nature in which the earth died in the winter and was reborn in the spring. They also saw the ‘gods of nature’ as capricious gods in the same way that their lives and well-being, dependent on settled life and farming, were shaped by the whims of nature, storms and droughts, the effects of violent winds. The ‘religious practices’ of city dwellers centered on appeasing the ‘gods,’ attempting to gain some measure of control over their whims, achieving a sense of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. By contrast, the people of Israel were called on to trust their God as a caring God who would lead them where they needed to be and care for them along the way.

Egypt, in the ancient world, was one of the cradles of civilization, a center where human rule, human hubris reached the heights of dominance over others through empire building. There is evidence that Egyptian civilization was one of the first in which human rulers were celebrated as divine or semi-divine personages, to be appeased and placated as much as their so-called ‘gods of nature.’
In Sodom and Egypt, the evils of Roman rule and the Roman Imperial cult are held up to ridicule. The Roman way of life is false, its belief system ludicrous. Yet, it was that way of life, that belief system, and the drive to protect it at all costs that led the Empire to enforce its values on those it dominated and to meet any threat to its status and stability, even any criticism of the status quo, with violence and rigid suppression. It lead Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea/Jerusalem to condemn Christ to death as a criminal. Though the location of Christ’s death was geographically in Jerusalem, Jerusalem was a city dominated by Rome, part of the power structure of the Empire. To ‘John’ geography did not matter. It was Rome, the heart of the Empire that crucified Christ as a common criminal and it is Rome, ‘the great city,’ that will persecute and suppress the prophetic witness of the Church.

The degradation of the witnesses turns into ghoulish and childish gloating over apparently winning the day. They gloat and make merry for three and a half days, a limited period of time that corresponds to the three and a half years of the ‘time of the Gentiles’ and the ‘time of prophetic witnessing.’ Those gloating are the ‘inhabitants of the earth,’ carried again in the four-fold designation, ‘peoples, tribes, tongues and nations.’ Where Christ was not buried properly, the witnesses are not allowed to be buried at all. In the eyes of the world, the ‘witnesses,’ the Church is defeated. Note, too, that those gloating over the witnesses do not allow their ‘corpses’ to be buried. The plural form is used. From the perspective of the world, the Church is not recognized, the community is not recognized, but only individuals who can be dominated. But the gruesome image is, itself, a contradiction. Those who gloat, those who celebrate a ‘way of life,’ are exposed as bringers of death, as those who find joy in death.

The final, supposed slur on the witnesses is that they had ‘tormented’ those who now gloat over them. The wording suggests an allusion to Elijah in I Kgs 18:17 and 21:20. Elijah is decried as ‘the tormentor/troubler of Israel.’ He speaks a message the king and people don’t want to hear. This is the view that the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ take of the two witnesses. They gloat because they have removed an annoyance, an inconvenience, but an annoyance that has made them uncomfortable, and inconvenience that has questioned their values and beliefs. Eventually Elijah won out and this suggests that the apparent defeat of the witnesses may not be the final word, that some ‘victory’ may still be snatched from the defeat. And this will be true, but probably not what is expected.

In marked contrast to the death dealing power of the ‘beast’ and the gruesome gloating of the world defaming and degrading the fallen witnesses, after three and a half days, the life-giving spirit of God enters the witnesses and they stand on their feet – a clear recollection of the ‘slaughtered Lamb’ standing before the throne of God. A number of commentators point out the affinity between the restoration of life in the witnesses and the vision of the ‘Dry Bones’ in Ezekiel. In Ezekiel, the ‘dry bones’ symbolize the lifeless situation of the Israelites in the Babylonian Exile. At his prophecy, they are ‘reanimated,’ given new life and hope of restoration. Still more than Ezekiel’s image, the life-giving breath of God has been active since the dawn of creation. In Gn 2:7, God forms ‘man’ out of the dust of the earth and breathes into his nostrils the breath of life. In contrast to the death dealing power of the ‘divine emperor,’ the God of the Church is a God of life and the prophetic message of the two witnesses includes that offer of life for all the inhabitants of the world, a spark of divine life that is their if they can but change their hearts, change their view of reality and the values that their view of reality imply.

If the three and a half year mission of the witnesses seemingly ends in defeat, their vindication, their reward of eternal life for their faithfulness and patient endurance, may be the sign of ‘overcoming’ the world. This is suggested by the ‘fear’ that falls on those who had gloat over them, but now see them
standing in life. This ‘fear’ can be abject terror, or it can be the first sign of repentance, of seeing what they have really done. ‘Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’ Will that be the case here?

The vindication of the witnesses continues with a summoning of them to join their Lord in the heavens. From the reader’s point of view, a very subtle shift occurs in the text at this point, a shift that speaks directly to the reader. Typically, ‘John’ is the one who sees the visions and hears the heavenly voices. He conveys to his audience what he sees and hears (‘I saw...’ ‘I heard...’). At this point, he changes his presentation. He does not report what ‘he has heard,’ but what ‘they heard.’ ‘John’ has gone to great lengths to deploy imagery that indicates that the role of prophetic witness isn’t some special calling outside the Church but the very mission of the Church itself. ‘John’ has a role as a ‘seer.’ God’s word and will is mediated to the Church through him. For a Church that is faithful to God, is diligent in its prophetic witness, for a Church that endures patiently no matter what the cost, there will no longer be any need of a mediating voice. For those who ‘overcome’ there is direct access to and unity with the Lord of all times and places, with the ‘victorious Lamb.’

In response to the summons, they go up, with exact verbal repetition. This is another example of the command/execution pattern with the exact fulfillment of the command, an exact acceptance of their vindication. What is noteworthy in the response of the witnesses is that they ascend to the heavens in a cloud. This is a clear allusion to Christ’s ascension as it is portrayed in Acts 1:9. Less obvious, but still pertinent is the notice in II Kgs 2:11 that Elijah was carried off to the heavens in a fiery chariot, transported there by a whirlwind. And finally, in Jewish tradition, as recorded by Josephus, Moses, who in carrying out his mission of receiving God’s word and bringing it to his people was covered by a cloud that descended on Mt. Sinai, was removed from the sight of the people by a cloud at the end of his mission. Two aspects of these allusions are significant. First, the witnesses are associated with both Christ and notable figures from the Old Testament who played key roles in relaying God’s word and making it active in the lives of God’s people. As the Church shares in the mission and ministry of ‘revealing’ God and his word to the world, so it shares in the ‘victory’ of God’s faithful servants. Secondly, especially in the stories of Elijah and Moses as they are developed in the Deuteronomic History, each person called by God has a part to play in forwarding God’s plan, in revealing him to an unbelieving world. But, as critical as their mission might be, they are not indispensable. Moses has fulfilled his role and does not lead the people into the promised land; that task falls to Joshua. Elijah has had a pivotal role in combatting the syncretism of the Northern Kingdom during the reign of Ahab, but must pass his office on to his apprentice, Elisha – a task he grudgingly completes. In the ascension scenes in the Gospels and Acts, Jesus returns to his Father, commissioning his disciples – the Church – to carry on his mission. There is a note of hopefulness here in the suggestion that the mission of Jesus Christ will continued in the Church through ongoing generations of ‘witnesses.’ But there is also a sobering realization: that mission will need to be carried out through subsequent generations; the mission to ‘overcome’ the world is ongoing – a direct address to all later readers.

And still, the world looks on. The vision goes on to describe a great earthquake in which one tenth of the ‘great city’ falls and 7000 names die out. Once again, on the surface, this is a violent image. Such is the nature of apocalyptic symbolism. But, in contrast to the great earthquake unleashed by the opening of the sixth seal (6:12), an earthquake that impacted the whole inhabited world, this earthquake only destroys one tenth of the ‘great city.’ In biblical imagery, earthquakes regularly function as signs of God’s displeasure and an execution of his just punishment, as in Ez 38:19-20. But here, that punishment is mitigated, lessened. Moses and Elijah have occupied prominent symbolic positions throughout the vision of the ‘Two Witnesses.’ The seven thousand who die in the earthquake recall, again, the Elijah story, but with a twist. In I Kgs 19:18, the Lord says to Elijah, ‘Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all
the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.’

This promise to Elijah follows immediately after the prophets recognition of the Lord, not in the powerful forces of nature, but in that ‘still small voice.’ The words are part of God’s instruction to Elijah to designate Elisha as his successor. The ironic twist comes in the fact that the seven thousand are now those who have followed the false gods, the false divine emperor, and refuse to abandon their idolatries.

The final words of the vision of the ‘Two Witnesses’ at last gives a resounding glimmer of hope. (How oxymoronic of me.) Seven thousand names are wiped out. That focus on ‘names,’ in Revelation often suggests those ‘names’ included in the Book of Life, an image already used in the text. (Note especially the Letter to Sardis, 3:5, where those who endure patiently and ‘overcome’ will not have their names wiped out of the Book of Life). This would seem to indicate not that the seven thousand of the ‘great city’ are physically killed, but that their names are erased from the Book of Life, that they will experience the ‘second death’ of eternal separation of God of which the book will later speak.

On a positive note, the seven thousand in the ‘great city,’ in actuality, represents a small minority of the population. ‘The Rest’ see and are terrified and give glory to the God of heaven.’ Wilfrid Harrington, following Caird, offers a cogent comment here: ‘The death and vindication of the martyrs is itself the earthquake shock by which the great city is overthrown.’ For ‘the rest,’ (a majority of the population?) what they see shakes them up, leads them to be terrified and give glory to God. This is the purpose of the signs, the plagues. Moreover, ‘to give glory to God’ is a phrase used regularly in the Old Testament to indicate a change of heart, repentance. The suffering of the witnesses, the suffering of the Church produces the desired outcome, the ‘overcoming’ and conversion of the world.

The second ‘woe,’ the sounding of the sixth trumpet is now complete. It’s completion is accomplished in the vision of the Open Scroll, the re-commissioning of the ‘seer,’ and the descriptive vision of the mission of the Church in the vision of the Two Witnesses. Yet the job is not done, a third ‘woe’ awaits, the sounding of the seventh trumpet. But, as the four angels stationed at the four corners of the world awaiting the opening of the seventh seal simply fade from the story, so too the ‘third ‘woe’ will never be developed.

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290 NRSV translation.
291 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
The Seventh Trumpet (11:15-19)

15And the seventh angel sounded the trumpet and loud voices happened in the heaven, saying: It has happened (been established), the kingdom of the universe (cosmos) of our Lord and of his Christ (anointed one), and he will rule (be king) to the ages of ages. 16And the twenty four elders, those before God, sitting upon their thrones, fell on their faces and worshipped (did homage to) God saying: We give thanks to you, Lord, God, All Powerful, the one being and he who was, that you have taken your great power and have ruled (have become king). 17And the nations were angered and came your wrath and the time of the dead to be judged and to give reward (payment, wages) to your servants (slaves, bondsmen), the prophets and the holy ones and those fearing your name, small and great, and to destroy those destroying the earth.

19And was opened the temple, the one in the heaven, and was seen (appeared) the ark of his covenant in his temple and there happened (occurred) flashes of lightning and rumblings, and thunder claps and an earthquake and great hail.
Textual Notes

1. *Egenonto phonai megalai en to ourano* – ‘there occurred loud voices in the heaven.’ While the reader has been promised the ‘third woe,’ what he encounters instead is the sound of loud voices from the heaven. These voices signal another heavenly liturgy. Harrington notes the contrast between the ‘loud voices’ and the liturgical silence of 8:1, when the seventh seal is opened. He finds a correspondence between this liturgy and that of 7:9-12, the ‘Song of Victory’ in the interlude between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals.\(^{292}\)

2. *Egeneto he basileia tou kosmou tou kyriou hemon kai tou christou autou* – ‘has become the kingdom of the world our Lord’s and his Christ’s.’ Harrington observes that in Jn 14:30, the ‘kingdom of the world’ is ruled by Satan. Still, in the Farewell Discourse in John’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, ‘I have overcome the world’ (Jn 16:33).\(^{293}\) What is encountered here, especially poignant after the graphic imagery of the ‘Two Witnesses,’ is another affirmation that the ‘victory’ has been won, that God and his Christ (anointed one, Messiah) are, in fact, the rulers of the world.

3. *Basileusei* – ‘he will rule.’ The future, indicative, active of the verb is singular, though the Lord and his Christ have been acclaimed as possessors of the ‘kingdom.’ The implication is that there is one rule ‘shared’ between the Lord and his Christ. This is another step in the assimilation of Christ to God. Their reign is forever, an eternal rule.

4. *Kai hoi eikosi terasses presbyteroi... prosekyrones to theo legontes eucharistoumen soi kyrie ho theos ho pantokrator ho on kai ho en* – ‘And the twenty four elders… worshipped (bent the knee to) God saying: We give thanks to you, Lord, the God and all powerful one, who was and who is.’ As is typical of heavenly liturgies in Revelation, a ‘heavenly’ acclamation is followed by the worship and echoing acclamation of the elders. Their acclamation is a clear example of repetition with variation, in which the variation provides the key to meaning. ‘Lord,’ and ‘God’ and ‘All Powerful One’ are often repeated titles for the one sitting upon the throne. Up to this point in the book, a three-fold set of attributes have been applied to God and the Lamb – ‘the one who was, and who is, and who is coming.’ A number of manuscripts include ‘who is coming,’ but the Nestle-Alland text and the best manuscript traditions do not include this third attribute.\(^{294}\) The implication is that God and the Lamb have already come; they have taken possession of the kingdom of the world. The ‘victory’ is won.

5. *Ebasileusas* – ‘you ruled/have ruled.’ The aorist tense of the verb is usually understood as a simple past tense, ‘you ruled.’ It can also have the sense of ‘you established your rule,’ ‘you began to reign.’ That is likely the sense of the verb in this context. This supports the omission of ‘who is coming,’ in the acclamation of praise.

6. *Ta ethne orgisthesan kai elthen he orge sou* – ‘the nations were enraged and came your rage.’ The phrasing utilizes a clever play on words in which the ‘violent outrage’ (verb form) of the Gentiles is met by the ‘rage/wrath’ (cognate noun) of God. This repetition and play on words reflects a Pauline theme that ‘sin is its own punishment,’ that all actions have consequences, that, basically, ‘you reap what you sow.’ Harrington observes that the wording of this ‘judgment scene’ corresponds precisely to Ps 2:1. The ‘nations rising up in wrath’ are precisely those depicted in Psalm 2. This preliminary judgment scene anticipates the ‘final judgment’ of 20:11-15.\(^{295}\)

7. *Diaphtheirai tous diaphtheironas ten gen* – ‘to (thoroughly) destroy those (thoroughly) destroying the earth.’ The ending of the elders’ acclamation again employs a play on words, an exact meeting out of justice in kind – to ‘destroy’ the ‘destroyers.’ This creates an ‘envelope’ structure for this whole segment of the text, whereby the violent outrage of the nations is met by the rage of God at the beginning and the destroyers are destroyed in the end. Note the chiastic pattern:

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\(^{292}\) Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

\(^{293}\) *Ibid.*


\(^{295}\) Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
a. sin of the nations (violent outrage)
   b. concomitant action of God (rage)
   c. reward of the just
   b'. just action of God (to destroy)
   a'. for the concomitant sin of the nations (destroying the earth)

The verb used in this case is a compound verb, *dia + phtēiro*. *Phtēiro* has the sense of ‘to ruin’ or ‘destroy.’ *Dia* adds a sense of intensification — ‘thoroughly’ or ‘completely.’ The heart of the whole structure is the judgment and reward of the just. The acclamation pulls together many of the images used for the just, for those who ‘overcome’ the world throughout the book of Revelation: servants, prophets, holy ones, those who fear God’s name, the small and the great. The ‘small’ and the ‘great’ indicate that the ‘just/faithful ones’ are not determined by the criteria of the world — nobles, rulers, the rich and powerful as opposed to the weak, the poor, the vulnerable. They are those who live their roles within God’s plan, those who ‘overcome’ the world and its standards.

Specifically on the use of ‘destroyers of the earth,’ Harrington recalls that the king of the demonic beasts is Abaddon/Apollynin — the ‘destroyer’ from 9:11. The ultimate ‘destroyers’ will prove to be the beast and the dragon and in the end, they will be destroyed (see 19:17-21 and 20:7-10).

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204
Commentary

As was the case with the opening of the seventh seal, the sounding of the seventh trumpet signals a heavenly liturgy. The liturgy ends with a theophany, an earthquake, thunder and lightning – signs in nature of God’s power and presence. This pattern of a culminating ‘theophany’ will also occur in the pouring out of the seventh bowl. In all three cases, then, the culminating ‘sign’ is a ‘theophany,’ an expression of the power of God over all creation, over the kingdom of the earth, a kingdom over which the sovereignty of God and his anointed one have been established.

Loud voices from heaven are heard. These voices are not identified, but it is to be assumed that they are ‘heavenly creatures,’ angels or the living creatures, since, as is regularly the case, the acclamation of these loud voices is met with the affirming acclamation of the twenty four elders.

The acclamation of the loud voices offers praise to God for having established his ‘kingdom.’ Throughout Revelation ‘nations’ and ‘kingdoms of the earth’ represent those earthly powers in which the arrogance of mankind in usurping the prerogatives of God is contrasted with the faithfulness and patient endurance of the Church. The Church suffers at the hands of peoples and nations and tribes and tongues. The voices praise God because the establishment of his ‘kingdom’ is not a mere ‘overcoming’ of the ‘kings of the earth.’ God’s kingdom is a kingdom of the cosmos, of the entire created universe; and it is an everlasting kingdom, unlike the earthly kingdoms that come and go.

The acclamation of the twenty four elders sounds a familiar doxology. The first noteworthy element of the acclamation is that it is a ‘thanksgiving.’ By the late first century it is reasonable to suppose that 
vcharistein, which in Greek merely means ‘to give thanks,’ had already become a technical term in Christianity. It referred to the celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist has always stood in contrast to both Jewish and Pagan sacrifices. These are human sacrifices meant to honor and appease the ‘gods.’ The Eucharist is a memorial of the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, accomplished once-for-all. It is a remembrance of, a making present again and again, Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross, the ‘victory’ of the Lamb that has ‘overcome’ the world. When the elders proclaim, ‘We eucharistize you,’ they are making a claim about themselves and the Church as much as they are praising and thanking God. They proclaim, ‘We are made one in the sacrifice of the Lamb. We share in the ‘victory’ by which you have ‘overcome’ the world.’ This acclamation is made in the context of the current situation of the Church, the current condition of the world. No matter how things seem, the ‘victory’ has been won.

The acclamation develops using customary attributes of God – ‘Lord’ and ‘God.’ The elders’ acclamation has a polemic tone. There is but one ‘Lord and God’ no matter how much Domitian might style himself as ‘dominus et deus.’ He is ‘pantokrator,’ ‘all powerful.’ In this acclamation that praises and thanks God for the one sacrifice that has overcome the world and established the rule of God and his Christ, pantokrakor is a significant word. In the Septuagint it is the word regularly used to render the Hebrew expression ‘hwh sabboath, ‘Lord of hosts,’ ‘Lord of the armies.’ Kingdoms rise and fall by military might, but the ‘Lord of hosts’ overcomes all and he has done so by the blood of the slaughtered Lamb.

Another noteworthy element in the elders’ acclamation is the use of ‘who was and who is.’ Typically this phrase includes a third term, ‘who is coming.’ The phrase points to the eternity of God. The missing third term re-enforces the idea that God’s rule over the cosmos has been established. There is no longer a wait for ‘his coming.’ He is here and has established his reign. There is an ‘everlasting now’ to God’s rule.
There is a subtle shift between the acclamation of the loud voices and that of the twenty four elders. The voices acclaimed *egeneto he basileia*. *Egeneto* means ‘to happen,’ ‘to occur,’ ‘to become’ ‘to be established.’ The ‘Kingdom of the cosmos has been established.’ The elders proclaim *ebasileusas,* ‘you ruled, acted as king.’ The aorist, or past tense of the verb means, most simply, ‘to rule, be king.’ On the one hand, this implies a past action, God is king and has been king. Alternately, the past tense can imply the action of taking up one’s rule, establishing one’s kingship. This fits with the acclamation of the ‘voices.’ It is likely that ‘John’ is playing on the nuances of meaning. In the one sacrifice of the Lamb, the world has been ‘overcome.’ The reign of God has been established and continues now and for all eternity. The reign of God is/has been established by the action of God ‘taking up’ his power. At the dawn of creation, God handed the world over to humanity: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ (Gen 1:28)

And from the very beginning, that didn’t work out so well, with humanity breaching boundaries at will and attempting to rule, not as vassals of the sovereign Lord, but by dominating other humans as if they themselves were ‘gods.’ From that first moment of creation, God’s plan and will for his world has involved trying to undo what went wrong in his creation. That has now been accomplished. He has taken back his power, not by force, not by domination, but by the blood of the slaughtered Lamb.

Note the elaborate chiastic (concentric) structure of v. 18.

A. In response to God’s will for the world the nations were outraged *(orgisthesan)*
B. And the concomitant action of God, his wrath/rage came *(orge)*
C. So the time of judgment has come – reward for the faithful
B. God’s concomitant action on the nations *(diaphtheirai)*
A. For their actions against God’s will for creation – destroying the earth *(diaphtheiron)*

In any chiastic structure, the heart of the structure is the key focus of what is being expressed. The center of this structure focuses on the reward of the faithful, those who have endured patiently. These are God’s servants, the prophets, the holy ones, those who ‘fear/stand in awe of’ God’s name, both the great and small. The criteria for judgment turns of faithfulness to God, no matter what one’s station in life is. In God’s eyes there is no distinction between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the vulnerable, earthly rulers and those ruled. These share in the ‘victory’ of the Lamb. But the outrage of the nations at God daring to take up his power and oppose their abuses, is met by God’s own rage/outrage over arrogance and willful domination for personal power, personal wealth, personal status. The resulting judgment of God on the nations, on the power structures of the world, is commensurate with their abuses. He will thoroughly destroy the destroyers. (Note that the verb *diaphtheirein* is a compound word, *dia + phtoirein*, ‘to thoroughly destroy/ruin,’ ‘to destroy/ruin completely.’

Note also the implicit meaning carried by the structure itself. The faithful of the Church are circumscribed, engulfed in the rage and destruction of the nations, the powers of the world. But, more immediately, they are surrounded by God’s saving power that buffers them from the dominating forces of the world and acts on those forces to treat them exactly as they have treated God’s world.

With this hopeful conclusion to the elders’ acclamation, the ‘seer’ observes of vision of the heavenly temple thrown open for all to see. This corresponds with the ‘witnesses’ directly hearing the heavenly
voice summing them to ascend to heaven. That ‘all’ can see this vision is carried by the fact that the Ark of the Covenant is visible. The Ark was Israel’s symbol of God’s presence with them. While the heavenly assembly seems to be privileged with some type of direction access to the presence of God on his throne, humanity, in Jewish tradition, is shielded from such presence (‘Who can look on the face of God and live?’ [see Ex 33:20]).

(Harrington offers a comment that is worth noting. The Ark disappeared in the destruction of Solomon’s Temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. A Jewish legend reflected in II Macc 2:4-8, represents Jeremiah as having hidden both the ark and the altar of incense against the day of Israel’s restoration. He declared that the hiding place was to remain unknown until God gathers his people together and the glory of the Lord will appear. The ‘restoration’ has been accomplished in the victory of Christ, who has fully mediated and revealed God’s presence to those who believe. If the legend is in the mind of ‘John’ it would appear to accomplish two things: 1) the glory of God has appeared, he has established his rule; 2) the Ark in the heavenly temple gives assurance of God’s presence, symbolically, to the Church on earth, protecting the Church from the overpowering presence of God until the Church shares fully in Christ’s victory in eternal life.)

As was the case in the heavenly liturgy that was narrated with the opening of the seventh seal, so here, the liturgy ends in a theophany – earthquake and rumblings, thunder and lightning, torrents of hail. Since such theophanies are so prevalent in Revelation, a word on the nature of what is intended by the theophanic symbol is in order. In the ancient world, especially in Judaism and Christianity, there was a belief that God was intimately connected with the lives of his people. There was also a belief, both corporately and individually, that actions have consequences. If God is involved in our lives, then he will be involved in carrying out those consequences. In a pre-scientific age, the forces of nature, the patterns of the stars and planets, the course of the world were in God’s control. Natural disasters, then, were easily seen as signs of God’s displeasure. In a modern, scientific world, what we have inherited from the ancients is still the truth that actions have consequences. Good actions lead to good results; bad actions produce bad consequences. Freed from the ancient belief of the retributive action of God in manipulating the forces of nature, we are freed from the false assumptions that when bad things happen, they are the result of sin or that when people are comfortable, powerful, or wealthy, it is simply God’s reward for their merit. Good people experience hardship and evil people seem to thrive. We have also inherited the conviction that God is involved in our lives, that he cares for us, that he wants us to live well and faithfully. We will live with the consequences of our choices and actions – for good or bad. The victory is won, but we can accept it or not.

In the end, with the sounding of the seventh trumpet, no clear third ‘woe’ is unleashed. In the setting of the heavenly liturgy, the reader is to find an affirmation that God’s kingdom, his will for the world, has been established and that we will be part of his reign by patient endurance and living faithfully. God’s power rules the world, but that power can be like the shock wave that caused people to glorify God when they saw what had been done to the witnesses and how what was done to them was not the end of the story. For the Church in our day, how obvious is the power and rule of God in our world? How protected to we feel in the face of worldly opposition to Christian values? Is hoping for eternal life with God if we are faithful merely a pipe dream to help us endure the pressures of modern life and culture? Can we really affirm God’s presence and power in our lives in the midst of our world?

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298 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
The Woman and the Dragon (12:1-6)

12:1And a great sign was seen (appeared) in the heaven, a woman having been clothed in the sun and the moon (was) under her feet and upon her head (was) a crown of twelve stars, 2and having in the womb (stomach) and she cries out (screams), being in labor and being in great pain to give birth. 3And was seen (appeared) another sign in the heaven and, behold, a large dragon, fiery red, having seven heads and ten horns and upon its heads (were) seven diadems (royal crowns), 4and its tail drags (sweeps) a third of the stars of the heaven and he hurled them to the earth, and the dragon had taken his stand before the woman, she being about to give birth, so that when she should give birth her child he could devour. 5And she gave birth to (brought forth) a son, a male child, who is about to shepherd all the nations with an iron rod (staff) and her child was caught up (taken away) to God and to his throne. 6And the woman fled into the wilderness where she has there a place having been prepared by God that there they should nourish her (equivalent to passive – that she should be nourished) for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.
Textual Notes

1. *Semeion mega opthe en to ourano* – ‘a great sign was seen in the heaven.’ The new vision is presented as a *semeion* a ‘sign.’ This term figures prominently in the second half of Revelation, appearing in 12:1, 13:13-14, 15:1, 16:14, and 19:20). ‘Sign’ is the term used in John’s Gospel to describe miracle stories, of which there are seven. The Gospel also presents seven possible responses to Jesus, from outright rejection to full and loving commitment. While the ‘John’ of revelation is certainly not the author of the Fourth Gospel, there are affinities in thought patterns to suggest that both works belong to the same ‘school of thought,’ characterized as Johannine Literature. In the Gospel, the ‘signs’ are possible occasions of faith, of seeing God’s hand at work in the world through Jesus and responding in kind. Sometimes they produce faith, at other times outright rejection. From this point on, then, the ‘visionary signs’ are to be viewed as possible occasions of faith.

*ophthe*, a passive form of the verb ‘to see,’ is unexpected. Up to this point, visions have been introduced with ‘I saw…’ In one sense, the passive shifts focus from the ‘seer’ to what is seen. What is seen is a ‘sign,’ a possible occasion of faith for those to whom the ‘sign’ is visible. This shift has been anticipated in the call to ascend to the heavens heard by the ‘witnesses’ and the vision of the ‘open heavenly temple.’

In another sense, the characterization of the ‘vision’ as a ‘sign’ and the somewhat ambiguous notion that this ‘sign was seen’ point to a new direction in the thought of the book and in the mission and ministry of ‘John.’ He has been recommissioned as a prophet to/concerning many peoples and nations and tongues and kings. It can be suggested that with this new vision, presented in a new way, the new ministry of ‘John’ has begun.

2. *Gyne perebeblemene ton hellion* – ‘a woman clothed in the sun.’ Harrington observes that the appearance of the ‘woman’ at his point in the book anticipates her appearance in 19:7-8 and 21:9-10, where she is characterized as the ‘bride’ and the ‘new Jerusalem.’ As such she is presented in contrast to the ‘harlot,’ a symbol of Rome, in 17:14 and 18:16. 299

*perebeblemene* is again ambiguous, the same form used for both the passive and middle voices of the perfect participle of the verb. It can mean ‘having been clothed/wrapped about,’ a use of a divine passive, or ‘having clothed herself,’ an indication that she has accepted her role, whatever that role will turn out to be.

3. *Hellion... selene... asterai...* - ‘sun... moon... stars.’ Rogers and Rogers, focusing especially on the ‘crown of twelve stars,’ observe that the most likely interpretation for the ‘woman’ among the many that have been put forward, is that she represents the nation of Israel. They note the frequent use of a female in the Old Testament to symbolize Zion, Jerusalem and all Israel. 300 Alternately, Harrington observes that the sun, moon and stars are common symbols for the attributes of the Mother Goddess in Ancient Near Eastern mythology, a goddess like Artemis who was worshipped in the cities of Asia. He suggests, following the polemic tendencies of Revelation, that the ‘woman’ symbolizes the true ‘Queen of Heaven’ in contrast to the false, pagan beliefs and practices. 301

It is likely that the image of the ‘woman,’ like so many in Revelation is multivalent. She is the ‘bride,’ the Church, the ‘new Jerusalem,’ the ‘new Israel,’ the new people of God. As ‘victorious’ Church, she is invited to share in the rule of Christ over the universe, the ‘Queen of Heaven,’ not in the sense of a ‘divine Goddess’ but as a vassal to her heavenly, divine Lord. As such, she stands in opposition to both the pagan ‘Mother Goddess’ and to the power of Rome that exerts its rule and domination of the earth as if it were a god unto itself. And, it would appear, she is ‘Eve’ transformed, the reconciliation of humanity to its God in the original plan for all creation.

4. *En gastri echousa* – ‘in the stomach/womb having…’ The woman is pregnant and in the throes of labor. Harrington cites three Old Testament allusions that correspond to this image, Gn 3:16, Is 66:7-8 and Mic 4:10. 302

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299 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
300 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
301 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
302 Ibid.
Gn 3:16 comes from the judgment of God pronounced over the first couple because of their violation of the limits he imposed upon them: To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you.’

The stories of the Primeval History in Genesis (chs 1-11) are properly classified as myths in the strict, literary sense of the word. A myth is a story told to bring together things that are opposite, stories that create a world-view. Specifically, humans are most like God, share most in the creative act of God in bearing children; yet, childbirth is painful. The explanation for this is that something went wrong in God’s original plan for creation; humans over-reached their limits. As such, humans still share in the creative function of God, they still generate new life and desire to do so, to share in the pleasurable act of creation despite the fact that giving birth to children causes so much pain. Further, as a result of humans crossing limits, ha adam, the man, will rule over woman. One aspect of humanity will dominate another. This was never part of God’s original plan. Sexism, racism, abuse of the poor and vulnerable – anything that separates humanity into ‘class’ distinctions was never part of God’s plan. Will the ‘child’ born by this woman reconcile opposites in a new way, a way more in conformity with God’s original plan?

Is 66:7-8 comes from the final section of the book that is dated to the time of Restoration after the Babylonian Exile. The text reads: ‘Before she was in labor, she gave birth, before her pain came upon her she delivered a son. Who has heard of such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be delivered in one moment? Yet as soon as Zion was in labor she delivered her children.’

Here the woman is imagined as Zion, the Holy Mountain where God meets with his people. From this woman/mountain comes the ‘birth of a new nation,’ a restored nation, a nation faithful to its God. As an image of the Restoration, the woman represents God’s mercy and forgiveness as nothing short of re-birth, as a new beginning. In sharing the ‘Good News,’ this is exactly what the Church has to promise. Note, here, that this is a painless birth, a suggestion that, in the Restoration, God’s original plan is getting back on course. Though the ‘woman’ of Revelation experiences the pains of labor, this allusion to a new Zion may be an anticipation of a Restoration still to be experienced by the Church, but inaugurated by the labor pains of this ‘woman.’

Like the original Isaiah, Micah was a Jerusalemite prophet in the days before the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Mentions of Babylon the prophetic book most likely reflect the final stages of editing in the context of the Exile. Micah, 4:10, reads: ‘Write and groan, O daughter Zion, like a woman in labor; for now you shall go forth from the city and camp in the open country; you shall go to Babylon. There you shall be rescued, there the Lord will redeem you from the hands of your enemies.’

The image of the ‘daughter of Zion’ groaning in labor pains is suggestive. ‘Daughter of XXX’ is a typical way of referring to the villages that surround a fortified city. It is God who will protect and restore this base of the population, not the earthly powers that reside within the city walls. The image suggests a period of suffering and dislocation that will be ‘overcome’ by God, not by meeting violence with violence, not by human efforts in war or diplomacy or rebellion. This is pertinent to the outlook of the author of Revelation in that he fully foresees a time of tribulation for the Church if she resists the ‘power of Rome,’ a tribulation and apparent defeat that has been ‘overcome’ on the Cross of Jesus Christ, a ‘victory’ to be shared by those who endure patiently, who trust and believe – and remain faithful to – their loving, merciful God.

A subtle and significant aspect of the description of the ‘woman’ is that the ‘crown of twelve stars’ is a ‘stephanos,’ not a ‘diadem.’ Stephanos regularly refers to festive adornment, a ‘crown of victory,’ not a ‘royal crown.’ This is the crown awarded to the ‘faithful,’ the ‘holy ones,’ to those who play their part in realizing God’s plan. This woman, even as ‘Queen of Heaven,’ is subordinate to God with a significant role to play in his plan.

5. Opthe allo semeion... kai idou – ‘was seen another sign... and, Behold!’ The second aspect of the vision is also introduced by the passive of the verb ‘to see.’ Again, the focus is on what is seen and not the ‘seer,’ and again the implication is that what ‘is seen’ in the heavens is not restricted to the ‘seer.’ ‘Behold!’ is
suggestive of something new, something surprising or unexpected, some heightened insight. In contrast to the elegant woman in the throes of labor, a large fiery dragon is seen.

6. *Drakon pyros megas* – ‘a large dragon of fire.’ Rogers and Rogers write that *drakon* is a familiar word from ancient magical texts. Both Josephus and the LXX use the term to describe the snake that Moses’ staff turned into and the snake that the Egyptian magicians produced. It also occurs in Is 27:1 for Leviathan, the chaos sea monster, who will be killed by God when He delivers His people. In the logic of Revelation, the dragon represents the ‘old serpent,’ the one who is identified with the devil and Satan.304 In this regard, Harrington sees a connection between the dragon and the serpent of Gn 3, and understands the function of the dragon in the light of Wis 2:24 (‘but through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it.’)305 The ‘fiery redness’ of the dragon is understood to represent blood, bloodshed and murder. (see 6:4 and Jn 8:44).306

7. *Echon kephalas hepta kai kerata deka kai epi tas kephalas autou hepta diadema* – ‘having seven heads and ten horns and upon his heads seven diadems/royal crowns.’ Harrington notes that many-headed monsters are mentioned in Ps 74:13-15 in which God demonstrates his mastery and control over the forces of chaos. The image of the ‘ten horns’ is likely derived from the image of the fourth beast of Dn 7.7. He further notes that the limited crowns of the dragon, one crown for each head, anticipates a clear contrast with the rider of the white horse in 19:12 and 16. The many crowns on the head of the horseman are an indication that the Christ is the true ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’307 Beyond these observations, it can be noted that the dragon possesses seven ‘crowned heads.’ As usual in Revelation, ‘seven’ is the number of completion, perfection. It could be suggested, in a limited way, that the image presents the dragon as ‘ruler’ of the Seven Churches in the province of Asia – where the ‘Seven Churches represent the entire Church. However, especially with Rome in mind, it is likely that the seven ‘crowned heads’ represent Rome’s dominance throughout the Empire. Again, it is to be noted that the word used for the dragon’s crowns is *diadema*, not *stephanos*. The *diadem* is typically used to represent a ‘royal crown,’ a symbol of sovereignty, of dominance. This creates an immediate contrast between the ‘woman’ and the ‘dragon.’

The ‘horns’ of the dragon are an obvious image. The horns of wild beasts are used to gore, so the image focuses on the brutal, death dealing power of the dragon. That there are ten horns, most simply, indicates the massive death dealing power of the dragon. However, in biblical literature, the number ten typically alludes to two concepts or events: 1) the ten commandments, a summary of the law, the Torah (a word which primarily means ‘teaching’); and 2) the ten plagues in Egypt. Especially in Moses’ sermons in Deuteronomy, he places before the people a choice between life and death – choosing to enter into a covenant with God and embrace his will, his teaching leads to life; choosing to reject God and his covenant leads to death. The ten, death dealing horns of the dragon (= Rome; =any dominating world power) are a clear antithesis to God’s life giving ‘teaching.’ The ten plagues are understood as God’s signs to accomplish his life giving will. Faced with these signs, people have a choice. The ten horns of the dragon are simply brutal weapons to enforce power with no choice on the part of the ones dominated. The power of Rome, the power of all self-serving, self-perpetuating world powers, is a clear antithesis to God’s creative, life-sustaining power.

8. *He oura autou syrei to triton ton asteron tou ouranou kai ebalen autous eis ten gen* – ‘His tail drags/sweeps one third of the stars of the heaven and he hurls/casts them to the earth.’ In this phrase Harrington finds a loose rendering of Dn 8:10 – ‘It [the little horn = Antiochus IV] grew great even to the host of heaven; and some of the host of the stars it cast down to the ground, and trampled upon them.’308 Destruction of ‘one third’ has played prominently in Revelation, both with the heavenly agents of God’s signs and with the images of demonic forces – the locusts from the abyss and the dominant power of Rome. What is different here is that the ‘destruction of one third’ is played out in the heavens. The

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304 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
305 NRSV translation.
306 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
‘woman’ and the ‘dragon’ are both ‘seen’ in the heavens. It appears that the battle for the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ is becoming a ‘cosmic’ battle, and this will become evident in 12:7-12, bracketed by the two ‘visions’ of the ‘dragon’ and the ‘woman.’

9. **Ho drakon hesteken enopion tes gynaikos** – ‘the dragon has taken his stand before the woman.’

Harrington observes that the image of the dragon and the woman face to face is a reflection of the woman and the serpent in Genesis 3.309

In Genesis, the woman is named ‘Eve,’ derived from a causative form of the verb ‘to be.’ She is celebrated as the ‘Mother’ of the whole human race. Earlier it was noted that McCarthy understands ‘hwh,’ the unutterable name of God, to likewise be a causative form of the verb ‘to be.’ In the case of the God of Israel, he is the cause of all things that are. Within the Old Testament, female images for the creative and nurturing attributes of God abound. God is named ‘el shaddai,’ usually rendered as ‘God Almighty,’ or ‘God of the Heavens.’ *Shad,* in Hebrew, however, is the word used for the ‘female breast.’ *El Shaddai* implies, then, that God’s strength, his almighty power, is to be associated with nurturing, caring for his children. Within the Old Testament, the only character in the text ever to be described as ‘compassionate,’ *rachum,* is God. *Racham,* the noun for ‘compassion,’ is also the word used for the ‘womb.’ In the face to face confrontation of the dragon and the woman, the creative, nurturing aspects of God himself are confronted by the death dealing nature of the dragon, associated with the ‘serpent,’ and symbolizing Rome.

*Hesteken* is the perfect, indicative, active form of the verb. The simple past tense, aorist, means ‘he stood.’ The perfect tense indicates a past action with implications for the present, ‘he has stood.’ More properly, the perfect can, and should be, rendered ‘he has taken a stand.’ This implies a continuing act of defiance, a continuing confrontation. Noting the ‘female attributes’ of God discussed above, this stance suggests the polar opposite of creation, of bringing and nurturing life. This is a stance of chaos, destruction and death, a possible retrospective recollection of the ‘destroyers of the earth’ in 11:18.

Once again multivalent imagery comes into play. If the dragon is both a symbol of evil personified, as a demonic force, it is also a symbol of Rome, a demonic use of human power that stands firmly against the values of the Church. As such, the ‘woman,’ the ‘Queen of Heaven’ and a source of life and the nurturing of life represents the Church against which the force and power of Rome are arrayed. While it is impossible to say that the image of ‘Holy Mother, the Church’ stands behind this image, it is certainly possible to suggest that such an image as this leads to the development of the image of the Church as the ‘Mother’ of the community of believers.

10. **Kataphage** – ‘he might devour completely.’ Harrington finds the source for this image in Jeremiah 51:34 ([The inhabitants of Zion] say, ‘Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon has devoured me, he has crushed me… he swallowed me like a monster.’)310

In one sense, the image fits the pattern of apocalyptic literature to be written ‘backwards.’ In a ‘vision’ the destruction of Jerusalem ‘was foretold.’ It happened, but was followed by restoration. The Church can expect tribulation in the days to come and then God’s restoration. Given the suggestion of the first coming of the Messiah in the next verse, it is also possible to see allusions to the ‘Slaughter of the Innocents’ as an attempt by Herod, the ‘ruler’ and ‘king’ of Judea to eliminate a possible rival to his power; it can also suggest the crucifixion of Christ, an attempt by Rome to stifle, consume, a threat to its authority and dominance, a futile attempt since by the crucifixion of Christ, the ‘victory’ has been won.

11. **Eteken huion arsen hos mellei poimainein panta ta ethne en rhabdo sidera** – ‘She brought forth (gave birth to) a male son who is about to shepherd all the nations with an iron rod/staff.’ There are obvious Messianic overtones to this phrase. Specifically it alludes to Ps 2:9, one of the Messianic Psalms. The Messianic overtones of the phrase are also seen in a comparison with Is 66:7. The phrase looks backwards in the text to the closing line of the Song of Victory before the opening of the seventh seal, 7:17. In that verse, the ‘rule’ of the Lamb is presented as a ‘shepherding.’ Authority over the nations, ‘to shepherd them with an iron staff’ is also the reward of the one who ‘overcomes by patient endurance’ in the Letter to Thyatira, 2:27. There, it was suggested that the oxymoronic phrase, ‘shepherd with an iron

309 Ibid.
310 Ibid.
staff’ was a kind of ‘tough love,’ a firm hand that keeps the sheep together, prevents their skittish scattering, and keeps them on the ‘right path.’

12. *Herpash to teknon autes pros ton theon* – ‘was caught up (taken away) her child to God.’ Harrington sees here a reference to the ascension of Christ as described in Acts 1:9 and 2:33-35. It is the triumph of Christ that will bring an end to the dragon.  

13. *Kai he gyne ephygen eis ten eremon* – ‘and the woman fled into the wilderness.’ The wilderness is an ambivalent biblical symbol. On the one hand, it is a place of retreat and refuge. Both Moses (Ex 2:15) and Elijah (1 Kgs 17:2-3, 19:3-4) seek refuge in the wilderness. The ‘Wilderness of Sinai’ is particularly instructive. In the wilderness, away from the surrounding civilizations and power structures, and not yet in their own homeland where they will establish a monarchy, Israel is on a ‘retreat,’ experiencing a ‘sacred time’ in which the Chosen People as the nation of Israel is born, in which the special relationship with their God is established. This is the image to informs the 40 day fast of Jesus after his baptism. At the same time, the wilderness is a hostile place, a place filled with danger. From the perspective of Mt. Zion, the site of the Temple and an image of sacred space, the wilderness represents all that is outside the protection of the God who chooses to dwell with his people.

14. *Topon etoimasmenon… trephosin auten hereras chilias diakosias hexekonta* – ‘a place having been prepared… they might nourish her one thousand two hundred sixty days.’ Harrington notes that ‘nourishment in the wilderness’ is clearly an allusion to the manna and is also reminiscent of the care given to Elijah in I Kgs 17:4. The ‘place having been prepared,’ could have been expressed here with the familiar ‘divine passive.’ The perfect tense indicates a past action having implications for the present, and God is explicitly named as the agent of the action. This place was there waiting for the woman – a symbol of the Church. In the coming tribulation, God’s protection is already in place. It can also be noted here that the ‘time of protection’ corresponds to both the ‘time of the Gentiles’ and the ‘time of the witnesses.’ Once again the ‘time’ is expressed in days, an indication of the grueling time of trial to come.

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311 Ibid.
313 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
Commentary

The structure of Chapter 12 is unique in the Book of Revelation. It takes the form of a bracketing structure in which the episodes with the ‘woman’ and the ‘dragon’ surround the vision of the ‘Victory in Heaven.’ It is also unique in that the ‘I saw...’ or ‘I heard...’ of the ‘seer’ comes only in the aftermath of the ‘Victory in Heaven,’ where a voice explains to him the meaning and results of that ‘victory.’ The vision of the ‘Woman and the Dragon,’ by contrast, is introduced by ‘A great sign was seen in the heaven.’ As was the case with the vision of God’s Temple in the Heaven, this suggests that the ‘vision’ is not restricted to the ‘seer,’ but open to others to see.

A new element that emerges is the Vision of the Woman and the Dragon is that the vision is characterized as a ‘sign.’ This will be the dominant characterization of visions throughout the rest of the book (12:1, 3; 13:13-14; 15:1; 16:14; 19:20). ‘Sign,’ semeion, is the rubric under which the miracles stories in the Fourth Gospel are presented. It is noteworthy that in this Gospel, as opposed to the Synoptics in which miracle stories abound, there are only seven ‘signs.’ These ‘signs’ are always presented as occasions of faith, opportunities to respond to Jesus and his message, his revelation of the Father. The Gospel also lays out seven possible responses to Jesus and his ‘signs,’ ranging from outright rejection to a full and loving commitment. The ‘visionary signs’ throughout the remainder of Revelation function in much the same way – but there is an openness to them. They are no longer the personal visions of the ‘seer,’ but are ‘signs’ for the whole Church and for all the inhabitants of the earth.

What appears to be open to ‘the inhabitants of the earth’ to see is explained in the words of the ‘seer.’ This marks a shift in his mission that corresponds to his recommissioning as a prophet to/concerning many peoples and nations and tongues and kings. The remainder of the book, then, is addressed not only to the Churches, but to all the inhabitants of the earth, posing a basic questions to those inside of and standing in opposition to the Church: Can you see? Can you accept and understand the word and will and plan of God? Chapter 12 begins the new ministry of ‘John.’

The opening bracket, vv. 1-6, presents the initial confrontation between the ‘woman’ and the ‘dragon.’ The symbolism deployed is once again multi-layered. First of all, a ‘great sign’ appears/is seen in the heaven. This vision is ‘open,’ not restricted to the ‘seer.’ The ‘divine passive’ is used to describe the raiment of a ‘woman.’ She has been clothed in the sun whose bright light symbolizes righteousness, wisdom, truth. Below her feet is the moon and on her head is a crown, a stephanos of twelve stars. The crown, as the word has been used in Revelation, is a wreath of ‘victory.’ ‘Twelve’ is the number of the tribes of Israel, the whole people of God; it alludes also to the ‘twelve apostles’ the founders of the Church and likewise represents the whole Church, the ‘new’ people of God. In the Inaugural Vision, the seven stars in Christ’s right hand were interpreted as the ‘angels’ of the Seven Churches (1:20). The reference was specifically to the ‘whole Church’ in Asia, the Churches to whom the book was addressed. ‘Seven’ also carried the implication of the ‘whole Church’ as it was expanding. The ‘twelve’ stars firmly establishes the ‘universal’ outlook of the book, its address to all Christians everywhere.

Within the context of the late first century Roman Empire, the figure of a woman clothed in the lights of the heavens was a symbol of the ‘mother goddess,’ goddesses such as Artemis. The ‘woman’ depicted here stands in contrast to the ‘mother goddess.’ She wears the ‘crown of victory’ and, as such, has been clothed in righteousness by God himself. On one level, then, the image of the woman is a polemic contrast to elements of the Imperial Cult.
The image of the woman continues with the notice that she is pregnant and experiencing the pains of labor. Reference to the pains of labor immediately calls to mind the story of creation in Genesis 3. Here it is to be noted that the stories in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the Primeval History, are myths, in the proper, literary sense of the word. A ‘myth’ is a story told to bring together things that are opposite, stories that create a world view. In Genesis, God creates a good and ordered world, a world full of riches which humanity is created to enjoy and care for. But to enjoy the goods of creation takes hard work. There is sickness and suffering in God’s good world. There is the reality of sorrow and death. Mankind is commanded to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it and have dominion over it. We are most like our Creator in the generation of new life, but bringing forth new life happens in the midst of great pain. What resolves these opposites is the human tendency to obliterate boundaries, to eat the forbidden fruit, to build a tower to the heavens to acclaim human self-sufficiency, to presume intimacy with the ‘gods’ as if on equal terms, to murder a brother to assure one’s own place of favor.

The insight of the stories of the Primeval History is that humanity is the high point of God’s creation, that men and women are meant to enjoy and care for the good things of the earth, that they are meant to enjoy each other and generate new life. The pain and hardship endured in living God’s plan, however, is the result of our own human tendencies, tendencies that God, in choosing and relating to a special people sets out to overcome.

Later in Revelation, the ‘woman’ will appear as the bride of the Lamb and the new ‘heavenly Jerusalem,’ that is, as an image of the Church (19:7-8, 21:9-10). This image is related to ‘Eve,’ the ‘Mother of all the Living’ (Gen 3:20), as the ‘Bride of the Lamb,’ the ‘New Jerusalem’ is the ‘Mother of the Church.’ Yet, the ‘birth’ of the Church, the creation of new life in bringing new believers into the fold happens only in the context of pain, of ‘overcoming by patient endurance.’ In Jewish tradition, the ‘pangs of childbirth’ are also listed among the signs of the dawning of the Messianic Age.

In v. 3 another ‘sign’ is introduced. This ‘sign’ is introduced by ‘Behold!’ This word is always indicative of surprise, of something unexpected, or of a heightened perception of reality. In this case, the appearance of the ‘dragon’ will serve to shed light on the meaning and function of the symbolism of the ‘woman.’ A number of commentators have noted that drakon is used in the Septuagint to render hanahas, the Hebrew word for ‘serpent’ (Gn 3:1). It is also used for tannin, the ‘snake’ the staff of Moses becomes when he casts it on the ground (Ex 7:9) and for ‘Leviathan,’ the watery chaos monster in Is 27:1. The dragon’s fiery redness represents blood, bloodshed, violence and murder.

The dragon possesses seven ‘crowned heads.’ As usual in Revelation, ‘seven’ is the number of completion, perfection. With Rome in mind, it is likely that the seven ‘crowned heads’ represent Rome’s dominance throughout the Empire, complete domination of the ‘world.’ It is also to be noted that the word used for the dragon’s crowns is diadem, not stephanos. The diadem is typically used to represent a ‘royal crown,’ a symbol of sovereignty, of dominance. This creates an immediate contrast between the ‘woman’ and the ‘dragon.’

The ‘horns’ of the dragon are an obvious image. The horns of wild beasts are used to gore, so the image focuses on the brutal, death dealing power of the dragon. That there are ten horns, most simply, indicates the massive death dealing power of the dragon. However, in biblical literature, the number ten typically alludes to two concepts or events: 1) the ten commandments, a summary of the law, the Torah (a word which primarily means ‘teaching’); and 2) the ten plagues in Egypt. Especially in Moses’ sermons in Deuteronomy, he places before the people a choice between life and death – choosing to enter into a covenant with God and embrace his will, his teaching leads to life; choosing to reject God and his covenant leads to death. The ten, death dealing horns of the dragon (= Rome; =any dominating
world power) are a clear antithesis to God’s life giving ‘teaching.’ The ten plagues are understood as God’s ‘signs’ to accomplish his life giving will. Faced with these signs, people have a choice. The ten horns of the dragon are simply brutal weapons to enforce power with no choice on the part of the ones dominated. The power of Rome, the power of all self-serving, self-perpetuating world powers, is a clear antithesis to God’s creative, life-sustaining power.

With his tail, the dragon sweeps one third of the stars from the heavens and hurls them to the earth. This image is derived from Dn 8:10, an image applied to Antiochus IV. Destruction of ‘one third’ has played prominently in Revelation, both with the heavenly agents of God’s ‘signs’ and with the images of demonic forces – the locusts from the abyss and the dominant power of Rome. What is different here is that the ‘destruction of one third’ is played out in the heavens. The ‘woman’ and the ‘dragon’ are both ‘seen’ in the heavens. It appears that the battle for the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ is becoming a ‘cosmic’ battle, and this will become evident in 12:7-12, bracketed by the two ‘visions’ of the ‘dragon’ and the ‘woman.’

In the end, the dragon takes his stand against the woman. This is, properly, the meaning of the verb, ‘to stand,’ in the perfect tense. The perfect tense of a verb implies a past action with continuing implications in the present. What is portrayed is a confrontation between the ‘dragon’ and the ‘woman,’ a face-to-face confrontation that is reminiscent of the face-to-face encounter of the woman and the serpent in Genesis 3. The ‘Queen of Heaven’ wearing the ‘crown of victory’ is pitted against the forces of evil and chaos, wearing the false ‘royal crowns.’ The purpose of the confrontation, from the dragon’s point of view, is that he might destroy, totally consume, the woman’s child at the moment of its birth. Many commentators point to Jer 51:34 as the source of this image. In that passage, Nebuchadnezzar/Babylon is seen as the monster-like ‘devourer’ of Zion, the rocky fastness where God chooses to dwell with his people. It is an easy jump to see this image pointing to Domitian/Rome set to devour the New Jerusalem, the Church. The image of the confrontation is again polemical.

The woman gives birth to a male child who is about to take rule over the nations of the earth. There are obvious Messianic overtones to the text at this point, an allusion to the ‘first’ coming of the Messiah. Specifically there is an allusion to Ps 2:9 (‘You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.’)\(^\text{314}\), one of the Messianic Psalms. The Messianic overtones of the text are also seen in a comparison with Is 66:7 (‘Before she was in labor she gave birth; before her pain came upon her she delivered a son.’)\(^\text{315}\) In late Judaism, as has been noted, the ‘pangs of childbirth are listed among the ‘signs’ of the dawning Messianic age. The passage from Isaiah also points to ‘Messianic Hopes’ in the restoration of Jerusalem and the nation. The mixed image of the pains of the ‘woman’ in labor and the painless birth of a ‘New/Restored’ Israel suggest that the original condition of humanity has been reversed in this birth of a male child, that the Messianic age is here. There is pain and freedom from pain. All of this is suggestive of the theological viewpoint of Revelation: the ‘victory’ has been one; the Church, through its patient endurance of trials and sufferings, shares in that ‘victory.’

There is a retrospective recollection of the closing line in the Song of Victory before the opening of the seventh seal, 7:17. In that verse, the ‘rule’ of the Lamb is presented as a ‘shepherding.’ Authority over the nations, ‘to shepherd them with an iron staff’ is also the reward of the one who ‘overcomes by patient endurance’ in the Letter to Thyatira, 2:27. There, it was suggested that the oxymoronic phrase, ‘shepherd with an iron staff’ was a kind of ‘tough love,’ a firm hand that keeps the sheep together,

\(^{314}\) NRSV translation.
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prevents their skittish scattering, and keeps them on the ‘right path.’ This is a role that the ‘victorious,’ the Church shares in with the Lamb.

Immediately, upon his birth, the child is taken up to the throne of God in heaven, a clear allusion to the ascension of Christ as described in Acts 1:9 and 2:33-35. In a sense, this points to the current situation of the Church. The Lamb has won his ‘victory’ and has returned to his Father. The Church now awaits the return of the Lamb, the Christ so that she can fully share in that ‘victory.’ In the interim there is a struggle, a basic struggle between good and evil, between the will and word of God and the forces of evil arrayed against the one sitting on the throne and his Christ.

The final image of the vision sees the ‘great sign in the heaven,’ the ‘woman,’ flee from the dragon to a placed prepared for her on earth. ‘Having been prepared’ is another example of the ‘divine passive,’ an indication of God’s plan to protect her. The specific word is a perfect participle, a tense that indicates a past action with implications for the present. Everything is proceeding according to plan – God’s plan. He has already prepared a place for the ‘woman,’ and it is clear that, in this case, the ‘woman’ symbolizes the Church, to which she has given birth through the child she has borne. The place prepared for the woman is in the wilderness, a biblically mixed image. The wilderness is a place outside the habitation of man, a place fraught with danger. However, in the Old Testament, Mt. Zion, the ‘Temple Mount’ is always a symbol of sacred space, the place where Israel meets her God. Mt. Sinai is always a symbol of sacred time, a formative time, a time of preparation. Mt. Sinai is in the wilderness, outside the control of the surrounding world powers, outside of politics and power structures and economic policies. In the wilderness, the people of Israel, as a covenanted nation was born. In the wilderness Elijah found refuge. In the wilderness Jesus prepared for his public mission. In all three cases, those in the wilderness were tended by a loving God, fed by him. Now the ‘woman’ finds refuge in the wilderness too, and like those before her she is fed and sustained by God. She finds refuge and is sustained for one thousand two hundred sixty days – the ‘time of the Gentiles,’ the ‘time of the witnesses,’ the ‘time of tribulation’ for the Church. This is Sacred Time. It is time that has eternal implications.

The vision of the Woman and the Dragon, portrays a scene of confrontation, a struggle between life and death, a struggle between good and evil. For all humanity and throughout all of human history, the human imagination has been captivated by the struggle between what is perceived to be good and evil. How many books and movies deal with the theme of the struggle between good and evil? Why is the human mind so captivated by this theme – the minds of believers and non-believers alike? What do these stories say about our lives as human beings? What do they say about the nature of human societies? How does the struggle between good and evil as presented in Revelation compare with familiar stories, books and films? What insights can be gained from the Book of Revelation about living with and ‘overcoming’ evil in our world?
Victory in Heaven (12:7-12)

7 And war occurred in the heaven, Michael and his angels to wage war with the dragon and the dragon and his angels waged war (fought back), and not was he strong (he did not prevail – the dragon) and not was there found a place for him any longer in the heaven. 8 And he was cast out, the great dragon, the serpent, the ancient one being called Devil and Satan, the Deceiver of the whole inhabited world, he was cast down to the earth and his angels with him were cast down.

9 And I heard a loud voice in the heaven saying: Now has happened salvation and power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his anointed one (his Christ), because the accuser (one bringing legal charges) of our brothers has been cast out, the one accusing them before our God day and night. 10 And they defeated him (overcame him) because of the blood of the lamb and because of the word of their testimony and they did not love their soul (life) even unto death.

11 Because of this, rejoice you heavens and you pitching tents (dwelling) in them. Woe to the earth and the sea because the devil has come down to you, having great, burning anger, having known that short is the time he has.

Textual Notes

1. *Egeneto polemos en to ourano* – ‘war occurred in the heaven.’ Apocalyptic writings are characterized by a dualistic outlook, a division of the realms of creation into the earthly realm and the heavenly realm. The ‘heavenly realm’ exerts its influence on the ‘earthly realm.’ In that sense, a struggle between good and evil on earth is understood as a reflection of a larger conflict, a cosmic struggle between good and evil. In such a conflict, the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ can – and do – choose sides. The vision of the Victory in Heaven, in which the dragon is expelled from the heavenly realms, and following immediately upon the flight of the ‘woman’ and her refuge in the wilderness on earth, serves to move the battle from its cosmic dimensions to the day to day struggles between good and evil on earth.
2. Michael kai hoi angeloi autou – ‘Michael and his angels.’ Michael is one of the four archangels of Jewish tradition. His name, in Hebrew, means ‘Who is like God?’ Harrington notes that Michael appears in Dn 10:21 and 12:1 as the captain of the angelic hosts (army) and champion of God’s people. He is also mentioned in v 9 of the Letter of Jude. Harrington further observes that in Jewish tradition, Michael is the second most powerful figure after God. In the ‘war’ with the dragon, the initiative belongs to God. Michael and his angels fight as angelic representatives of the power of goodness in the struggle with evil.  

In later Rabbinic writings and works of Jewish mysticism, Michael has many roles: he is Israel’s advocate; the angelic presence who wrestled with Jacob; the instructor of Moses; the continuous guardian of the Chosen People; in some text he assumes the role of a ‘high priests,’ offering atonement for Israel; and in some contexts in his role as high priests, it is the purified ‘souls’ of the Chosen People that he offers to God – obviously a very later addition to the tradition.

3. Ho drakon… kai hoi angeloi autous – ‘the dragon… and his angels.’ Harrington writes that the dragon and his angels, and the vision of the battle between angelic forces for good and evil, is not a reference to ‘fallen angels.’ He concludes that this ‘battle’ marks the end of the adversarial role of Satan, the ‘accuser of our brothers.’

This begs the question: Who or what are the fallen angels who have already made an appearance in the Book of Revelation in the sounding of the fifth trumpet and the opening of the abyss? It appears that the concept of ‘fallen angels’ arose out of Jewish apocalyptic literature and was developed in later Rabbinic writings. Emil Hirsch writes that the conception of fallen angels—angels who, for willful, rebellious conduct against God, or through weakness under temptation, thereby forfeiting their angelic dignity, were degraded and condemned to a life of mischief or shame on earth or in a place of punishment—is wide-spread. Indications of this belief, behind which probably lies the symbolizing of an astronomical phenomenon, the shooting stars, are met with as early as Is 14:12 and Job 38:31-32. But it is in apocalyptic writings that this notion assumes crystallized definiteness and is brought into relations with the theological problem of the origin and nature of evil and sin. That Satan fell from heaven with the velocity of lightning is a New Testament conception (Luke 10:18, Rv 12:7-10). Originally Satan was one of God’s angels, Lucifer, who, lusting for worldly power, was degraded. Samael, originally the chief of the angels around God’s throne, becomes the angel of death and the ‘chieftain of all the Satans’ (adversaries, accusers). But it is especially Samhazai and Azael of whom the fall is narrated in the Rabbinic Targums and Midrashic writings.

4. Oude topos heurethe auton eti en to ourano – ‘no longer was there yet found their place in the heaven.’

While it is Michael and his angels who wage the war against the dragon, the instrumentality of God, his involvement in the whole process, is indicated by the ‘divine passive’ – ‘there was not found.’ While there is a correspondence between this ‘battle’ and the concept of ‘fallen angels,’ Harrington notes that these ‘angels’ still have a place in heaven and that this is the ‘old heaven,’ not the ‘new heaven’ that will appear in 21:1.

What appears to be unfolding in the narrative of Revelation is the consequences of the ‘cosmic’ battle between good and evil, played out in the heavens, for the Church and the inhabitants of the earth in the earthly realm. The ‘woman’ has already taken refuge in the wilderness, in a place previously prepared for her by God. Now the dragon and his angels will be cast down to the earth and for a limited time good and evil will be in confrontation on earth until the full effects of the ‘victory’ already won by the Lamb can take hold. The victory in heaven anticipates the victory on earth, not a new victory, but a ‘mopping up’ exercise in the victory already one.

As a side note, it can be suggested here that the role of the Church is very similar to the role of Israel in the ‘Holy War’ stories of the Conquest Traditions. It is God who wins the victory; Israel’s role is to make
noise and clean up afterwards. This also appears to be the role of Michael and his angels in the case of the Victory in Heaven.

5. \textit{Eblethe ho drakon ho megas ho ophis ho archaios ho kaloumenos ho diabolos kai ho satanas} – ‘was thrown down the dragon, the great one, the serpent, the ancient one, the one called the devil and Satan.’ Note, again, the use of the ‘divine passive’ in the verbs ‘to throw/cast down/out’ and ‘was called/named.’ Specifically, God wins the battle, but through his angelic army. As the battle moves from heaven to earth, the implication is that God will win his victory, but again through his ‘army,’ the ‘witnesses’ of the Church. If the universal reign of God and his Christ is to be established, the members of the Church and the Church as a whole will have a role to play in it. The letters addressed the shortcomings of the Churches, those actions that inhibited the Churches from carrying out their role of ‘witness,’ of those who ‘overcome’ the false values of the world.

That the dragon ‘was called/named’ the devil and Satan is, by reason of the ‘divine passive,’ a naming of the dragon from God’s perspective. Bauer’s dictionary defines \textit{diabolos}, an adjective regularly used substantively – as a noun – as a ‘slandererer,’ a ‘false accuser’ in a specifically legal sense. It is noted that the word was used as early as the LXX to render the Hebrew word, \textit{satana}.\footnote{Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker, \textit{op. cit.}} It appears, in New Testament usage, that the word became a personification of evil and was used in the sense of ‘the tempter.’ Still, ‘temptation’ by the devil comes in the form of a falsification or misrepresentation of reality, originally seen as the role of the serpent in Genesis. There, the ‘temptation’ of the serpent falsely misrepresented a human limitation, eating the forbidden fruit, as a false possibility, ‘Eat it and you will be like God.’ In the temptations of Christ in the wilderness after his baptism, the three temptations are false representations of God’s word, false uses of power, riches, status to circumvent God’s will and plan.

It is likewise to be noted that \textit{ha satan}, in Hebrew, originally meant the ‘adversary,’ the ‘prosecution’ in legal cases. This figure appears in the narrative framework of Job, challenging God’s statement that there is no one more righteous than Job in all the earth, setting in motion a series of trials to test Job’s faithfulness to his God. The figure of \textit{ha satan} appears in the same way in Zech 3:1-5, as an adversary and accuser. The Old Testament image of \textit{ha satan} is not so much demonic as a ‘trouble-maker,’ an ‘inciter.’ He stirs up human trials and incites humans to see only themselves and their personal afflictions and so, wrapped up in themselves, turn away from God.

Harrington observes that by identifying the ‘dragon’ with ‘Satan,’ ‘the devil,’ ‘the ancient serpent,’ the intention is to symbolize all the forces arrayed against God, from Eden on, whatever they may be called.\footnote{Wilfrid Harrington, \textit{op. cit.}}

6. \textit{Ho planon ten oikoumenen holen eblethe eis ten} – ‘he deceiving the whole inhabited (world) was thrown down to the earth. Whatever the dragon is called, in the end he is a ‘liar,’ a ‘deceiver.’ His role in the cosmic struggle between good and evil is to ‘deceive’ the inhabitants of the earth, to sow the seeds of false beliefs, hubris, false power.

Note that the verb \textit{eblethe/eblethesan}, in the ‘divine passive’ is used three times in v 9. This is another example of what Robert Alter calls ‘repetition with variation.’\footnote{Robert Alter, \textit{op. cit.}} In particular, this is an example of ‘stepped repetition,’ repetition that adds nuanced meaning with each successive use of the verb. By the power and will of God, the dragon – with many names – is first ‘cast out’ of heaven; in the second use of the verb, whose role is summed up in the single word, ‘deceiver’ he is not just ‘cast out’ of heaven, but ‘cast down’ to the earth. With this, the two sides of the heavenly confrontation, the ‘woman’ and the ‘dragon’ are now on earth, where the cosmic battle will play out to its final resolution. It is this confrontation, this conflict, that the author of Revelation sees as the ‘time of tribulation’ for the Church. And finally, at the end of the verse, all his ‘angels’ are ‘cast out/down’ with him. The Victory in Heaven does not simply overcome the deceiver, the ‘commander’ of the ‘army of evil,’ but the whole ‘army.’ This is the first step in creating a ‘New Heaven,’ a step to be completed in the creation of a corresponding ‘New Earth.’
Ekousa phonen megalen en to ourano legousan – ‘I heard a loud voice in the heaven saying…’ Harrington notes that the hymn of vv 10-12 serves as a commentary on the preceding victory. Specifically, the hymn makes clear that the victory is not Michael’s, but God’s.  

With v. 10 ekousa – ‘I heard…’ returns. The vision of the Woman and the Dragon, and the battle scene of vv 7-9 were introduced with passives – ‘And a great sign was seen…’ ‘And war happened/occurred…’ The implication was that the ‘visions’ were available to more than just the ‘seer.’ The ‘inhabitants of the earth could see the signs, but did they understand them? This questions is particularly pertinent in the ‘defeat’ of the dragon. Does the world, and the Church in the world, understand the meaning of this? Do they understand that the battle has to continue? To fully understand what is happening, the Church – and the reader – are directed back to dependence on the ‘seer,’ for whom a heavenly voice interprets the ‘signs.’ (And everything is heard through the voice of the omniscient narrator of the opening verses of the book.)

Kategoron adelphon hemon – ‘the accuser of our brothers.’ The heavenly hymn is similar to the doxologies in all the heavenly liturgies. God is praised for the salvation and power that are his attributes and for the fact that his kingdom and the authority of his anointed one have been established. This is another indication of the fact that the ‘apocalyptic victory,’ the definitive action of God that changes everything has already taken place. In this case, the ‘victory of the Lamb,’ the victory of Christ on the Cross leads to the expulsion of Satan from the heavenly realms. That the ‘accuser of our brothers’ has been cast out, a fourth repetition of the word, adds the nuance that this ‘expulsion’ now leads to praise of God.

Harrington writes that the phrase ‘accuser of our brothers’ is an allusion to both Job 1:6 and Zech 3:1-2 and he notes that the phrase also resonates with Lk 22:31: ‘Simon, Simon, behold Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat.’ Satan demanded to have Simon in the same fashion that he had sought to ruin Job. The text reflects the ‘prosecuting counsel’ role of Satan current in the Old Testament and in Jewish tradition. The victory of Christ has brought this role to an end. Job and Zechariah testify to the role of ‘the Satan’ – to challenge the sincerity and the truth of human obedience to God. Satan has no further access to God. He concludes that ‘brothers’ are to be understood as some of the ‘rest of the offspring’ of the woman who will be mentioned in v 17.

Overcome him… blood of the lamb… word of their testimony/witness.’ In v 11 the focus shifts from God and the heavenly victory to the participation of the faithful, the righteous in that victory. ‘They’ are the ‘accused brothers,’ and ‘they have overcome him’ ‘Overcome, be victorious’ always looks to ‘patient endurance’ in times of trial and tribulation. Here is a retrospective look to the ending of the first letter, 2:7 – ‘He having an ear, let him hear what (that which) the Spirit is saying to the churches: To the victorious (the one who endures) I will give to him to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.’ (see notes 16-17, p. 40.) Harrington writes that ‘our brothers’ are those ‘who have come out of the great tribulation’ and ‘have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb,’ 7:14. They have ‘conquered/overcome’ Satan ‘by the blood of the Lamb. His victory is their victory too (see 5:9-10, 7:9-17). The assimilation of the martyrs/witnesses to Jesus is particularly clear here and in 20:4-6.

Ouk egapesan ten psyche – ‘they did not love life.’ In Christian literature, psyche often refers to the ‘soul.’ Its primary meaning, however, is ‘life on earth in its external, physical aspects.’ That is the sense of the word in this context. Harrington finds in this phrase a clear allusion to Jn 12:25. ‘Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.’

Euphraineste… ouai… echon thymon megan… oligon kairon – ‘rejoice… Woe!… having great rage/anger… time is short.’ ‘Rejoicing’ and ‘Woe’ are reminiscent of the blessings and curses familiar from Old Testament covenant formularies – descriptions of covenant-making. These are modeled on the ancient
‘suzerain treaties’ in which ‘blessing’ always leads to life and ‘cursing’ always leads to death. The ‘blessing’ and ‘curse’ are dependent on faithfulness to the terms of the covenant, in Jewish tradition, the Torah. These ideas were adapted in Israel’s Wisdom traditions and conveyed in the images of the ‘two ways,’ the way of life and the way of death, the way of blessing and the way of curse. Such notions are also prevalent in the Psalms. These ideas stand behind the ‘Beatitudes’ in Matthew’s Gospel and, especially, the re-working of the ‘Beatitudes’ in Luke, where they are presented as a series of ‘blessings’ and ‘woes.’ Harrington observes that those in heaven are called on to rejoice because heaven is, at last, free of the oppressive presence of Satan. Yet, there is ‘woe’ on the earth because the dragon has been cast down there – an anticipation of the establishment of the ‘kingdom of the beast’ in 13:1-10. Harrington raises the question as to whether this is to be considered the ‘third woe’ from the sequence of the last three trumpets, though this is never made clear in the text. He further notes that the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ will gladly follow and worship the beast (13:4), but this is their path to ultimate destruction (14:9-11), a plague more terrible than any other. The dragon, expelled from the heaven, is in a rage both from the humiliating defeat (note how quickly he is dispatched) and because he knows his time is short. In both 12:6 and in 12:14, the three and a half year time frame is repeated. Note that in 12:6, the time of the ‘woman,’ a symbol of the Church is given in days, attesting to the day-to-day struggle and hardship of the Church over this time. Still it is a limited time. This time is re-stated in terms of the vision in Daniel in v 14, again in reference to the woman, the Church. This repetition ‘encapsulates’ the dragon, his influence, the havoc he can wreak to a limited time, the time of the struggle of the Church until that power and influence is finally removed.

Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
The vision of the Victory in Heaven is a continuation of the ‘open vision’ of the confrontation between the ‘woman’ and the ‘dragon.’ Though there are multiple layers of meaning surrounding the symbolism of the ‘woman’ and the ‘dragon,’ in the end the ‘woman’ stands as a representative of the Church and the ‘dragon’ as a symbol of the forces of evil arrayed against God, his anointed one, and his community of believers – the Church. The dragon is personified as ‘the devil,’ ‘the Satan’ of Old Testament writings. The heavenly battle represents the ‘cosmic’ struggle between good and evil, a battle in which the heavenly forces of God have been victorious. The repercussions of this ‘battle’ are to be played out on the earth – and the time of the struggle, the time of tribulation for the Church and for the ‘evil’ to hold power and influence is limited.

A familiar Old Testament title for God is *Yahweh Sabaoth,* ‘Lord of Hosts,’ ‘Lord of the Armies.’ The title functions frequently in Israel’s ‘Holy War’ and ‘Conquest’ traditions. What is most significant in the use of the title is that God is celebrated not as the Lord of the armies of Israel, but as Lord of the heavenly hosts. It is God who wins the battles, God who delivers Israel out of the hands of its enemies, God who gives Israel the Promised Land. The basic role of Israel’s army is to make noise and clean up afterwards. This is how the battle between Michael and his angels against the dragon and his angels is to be understood. And there are still ramifications for the Church, an appropriation of the victory to be made on earth, a clean-up operation.

There is a polemic nature to the Book of Revelation, the laying out of a conflict over where ‘real power,’ ‘real divinity’ lies. In the situation of the Church in Asia, the conflict exists, and in the view of the author, is about to intensify, between the Church and the Roman Empire, a power presented as evil, a power symbolized with ‘diabolical’ images. What is noteworthy, then, in the vision of the Victory in Heaven is how easily it is accomplished, how quickly the battle is narrated. There was a war in heaven. It was between Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels. The dragon’s forces were not strong enough to prevail. The dragon and his forces were expelled from heaven. All is accomplished in three verse with no details narrated. There was a battle and its outcome was a foregone conclusion. In this there is hope, both for the Church in the original context of the writing of the book and for the Church of all times and places.

For all its brevity, the ‘war’ is narrated with literary artistry. This is accomplished by repetition with variation, in this case, a ‘stepped repetition’ of the verb ‘to thrown down/out.’ There are four instances of the verb in the brief passage, three in rapid succession in v 9 and a final repetition in doxology of v 10. In each use of the verb, a stepped-up nuance of meaning is deployed.

In the first case, the dragon, identified as the serpent, a recollection of Genesis and the confrontation between a ‘serpent’ and a ‘woman’ at the dawn of creation; as the ‘ancient one,’ the ‘ancient serpent,’ a recollection of creation imagery in which God brings order out of chaos by defeating Leviathan, the watery chaos monster, often represented as a serpent; as the devil, the satan, the deceiver, as a lying adversary and accuser of mankind before God. He is cast down, cast out. He is defeated.

The dragon is understood as a personification of evil and is identified by a number of titles and attributes. ‘Deceiver’ seems to sum them all up. This again calls to mind the role of the serpent in Genesis 3, telling the woman to eat of the forbidden fruit in order to become ‘like God.’ In his action, the serpent/deceiver is doing exactly that; God commanded the couple not to eat of the fruit of the tree in the center of the garden, an image associated with the temples of Artemis alluded to in the letters to
the Seven Churches, and yet he is acting as if he were God in telling the woman to cross that boundary, to break God’s injunction. In this regard, it is significant that the commander of the heavenly hosts is Michael. In Hebrew, the name means ‘Who is like God?’ It’s a rhetorical question whose implied answer is ‘Nobody!’ Michael is subordinate to Yahweh Saboath; the dragon is acting independently and deceives humanity into thinking that it can act independently, too. But the dragon is defeated.

In the next instance, he is cast down to the earth. As a result of his defeat, he is expelled from heaven; he no longer has access to God, can no longer function as an ‘adversary’ and ‘accuser’ before God.

In the third instance of the word, it is not only the dragon who is expelled, but all of his angels, his ‘army.’ This is no mere case of ‘assassinating’ the commander but leaving the combatants in place. The dragon and all his forces are defeated and expelled from heaven. The ‘victory’ is complete.

And finally, in the ‘heavenly liturgy’ that celebrates the victory, it is the expulsion of the dragon and his army that is the cause for rejoicing and giving praise to God who, in fact, has won the battle.

In v 10 a change in perspective occurs. The ‘open vision’ yields to a heavenly voice heard only by the ‘seer’ and reported by him to the readers of the book. The ‘voice’ functions as an ‘angel interpreps,’ an interpreting voice common in apocalyptic literature. But, in the light of the recommissioning of the ‘seer’ to be a prophet to many peoples, nations, tongues and kings, the role of the prophetic seer has changed. He announces to the whole world that there is joy/rejoicing in the heavens because of the defeat of the dragon. The doxology proclaims that ‘salvation and power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his anointed one have been established. Note that these are regal/royal attributes. Soter, ‘savior,’ was a common title adopted by kings. They were the protectors of their subjects. They ruled with ‘power,’ absolute authority to enforce their will on others. They sought to make their ‘kingdoms’ empires, extending their unfettered power and rule over ‘the inhabitants of the earth.’ They extended their will to dominate through designated/anointed governors and regents. The meaning of the battle and heavenly victory is that those who want to act as if they were God has been proven false, God’s true will and authority has been established.

The transition from the heavens to the earth continues with the words, ‘The accuser of our brothers has been cast out.’ The role of ‘adversary’ or ‘accuser’ recalls the ‘the satan,’ the literal meaning of the word in Hebrew. In both Job and Zechariah, this adversary functions an evil agent who tests and challenges the obedience and faithfulness of God’s people before God. That role is now destroyed. The ‘brothers’ are identified as the ‘victors,’ those who by patient endurance ‘have washed their garments in the blood of the Lamb’ (7:14). They are assimilated to the Christ by sharing in his suffering. Not even fear of death has deterred them from witnessing to the ‘victory’ of Christ. This aspect of ‘witnessing’ recalls the Gospel admonition: ‘He who loses his life will save it, he who saves his life will lose it.’ (see especially, Jn 12:25).

The final words of the ‘heavenly liturgy’ are reminiscent of Psalms of Thanksgiving on the occasion of an offering at which the one offering the sacrifice of thanks invites those gathered to be thankful with him, to celebrate God’s goodness, while sometimes issue a warning/curse for those who cause others pain or ignore rightful service to the only God of creation.

In the end, the dragon is seen as humiliated and smarting over his defeat, angered, but also encapsulated in but a limited amount of time to cause trouble on earth – the time of the ‘woman’ in 12:6 and 12:14.
Is it really possible for the community of believers today to look on the sufferings of the homeless, the destitute, the victims of violence, oppressive governments, or human trafficking and celebrate God’s victory over evil? Is it possible to hold that the time of suffering is limited, that it works for the good of all mankind? How is it possible to embrace a life of witnessing to the Gospel when it involves ‘washing ourselves in the blood of the Lamb?’ How is it possible to believe a loving God would ask this of us? Is it possible, with Job, to assert that God is not the cause of human suffering, not even the permissive cause, that suffering, that evil is simply a part of the world in which we live and that ‘patient endurance’ has a value? In the face of evil is non-violent resistance a viable option? Does it accomplish anything other than risking reprisals and further suffering on those who resist? How do we attempt to deal with such questions without resorting to pious platitudes, words to assert God’s goodness and that speak more of a fear of becoming angry with and challenging God than a real conviction that He is involved with us and cares? How do we deal with evil in the world without making some type of compromise or accommodation with it to defend ourselves against becoming targets of that evil? Is our world and the condition of the Church in modern times all that different from the Church at the end of the first century?
The Dragon and the Woman (12:13-18)

13 And when the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued (persecuted) the woman who gave birth to the male child. 14 And were given to the woman the two wings of the great eagle that she might fly into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished (cared for) there, for a time and for times and a half time, from the face of the serpent. 15 And the serpent spewed (hurled, cast) water out of his mouth after the woman like a river that he might make her swept away by a river. 16 And the earth helped the woman and opened the earth its mouth and swallowed up the river which the dragon spewed out of his mouth. 17 And the dragon was enraged with the woman and went forth to make war with the rest of her seed, those observing the commandments of God and having the testimony of Jesus.

18 And he was stationed upon the sand of the sea.

Textual Notes

1. Hote eidon ho drakon hoti eblethe eis ten gen – ‘when the dragon saw that he had been cast down to the earth...’ There is another shift of perspective here. The reader is invited to look at things from the dragon’s perspective – ‘when he saw.’ Eblethe can again be viewed as a ‘divine passive.’ He lost. He’s not God. The arrogance of evil is suggested in the wording. There is a sense of ‘surprise’ on the part of the dragon. There was a four-fold repetition of ‘be cast down/out of’ and it still hasn’t dawned on him that he’s been defeated.

2. Edioxen ten gynaika – ‘he pursued/persecuted the woman.’ Harrington notes that what was implied in 12:6 is described in detail in vv 13-16. Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.

331 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
woman is, it also shows pettiness, a spoiled child being denied what he wants and throwing a temper tantrum. The scene, for all its horror is also ludicrous, the dragon an object of ridicule.

3. *Edothesan te gynaiki hai dyo pteryges tou aetou…* - ‘were given to the woman the two wings of the eagle.’ Harrington observes that the image alludes to the Exodus story,332 (Ex 19:4 ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself’; Dt 32:11-12 ‘As an eagle stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, as it spreads its wings, takes them up and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him; no foreign god was with him; Is 40:31 ‘but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.’)333

A polemic contrast can also be seen in the ‘wings of an eagle’ given to the woman. First, there is another ‘divine passive,’ God has supplied her with a means of escape, the same God responsible for ‘casting down’ the dragon. Secondly, eagles are the symbols used on the standards of the Roman Legions. They represent the power of Imperial Rome. Yet it is the very wings of the eagle that protect the ‘woman,’ the Church, from the power of evil, the power of Rome.

4. *Kairon kai kairous kai hemisy kairou* – ‘a time and times and half a time.’ This is the image of three and a half years derived from Daniel as an expression for a limited time of tribulation. This is both the time of the Gentiles (forty two months) and the time of the witnesses (one thousand two hundred sixty days) – 11:2-3; it is also the time for the ‘woman’ the Church, to be protected and sustained, the time again given in days – 12:6. By contrast to the original time allotted for protecting the woman, given in days that is indicative of prolonged, day-to-day struggles, after the heavenly defeat of the dragon, this time of protection is expressed in the generic terms that don’t dwell on the ‘daily grind’ but on the general limitation of the tribulations. Again, it is to be noted that the earthly ‘time of the dragon’ is completely circumscribed and contained within the period of protection for the Church.

5. *Ebalen ho ophis ek tou stomatos autou opiso tes gynaikos hydor* – ‘cast/spewed out the serpent from its mouth after the woman water.’ There have been five instances of a ‘divine passive’ in reference to the dragon and his minions being ‘cast out’ of heaven, the last being the final, ludicrous realization on the part of the dragon that they had been expelled from heaven. Now, in the active voice, the dragon, with a verb from a similar root, ‘casts/spews out’ water after the woman. Theophanic images of God’s power involve fire, thunder, lightning, hail storms. In response, the dragon spits. To his credit, he spits ‘a river’ of water to carry the woman away in a ‘flood’ that he ‘might make.’ The indicative mood of his spitting quickly devolves into a subjunctive of what he ‘might’ make, what he ‘wishes’ to make. The actor in this scene is the ‘serpent,’ often used to represent Leviathan and Rahab, the watery monster of chaos overcome by God in the act of creation. This is a feeble attempt to unleash the forces of chaos, of un-creation to get vengeance on God and his witnesses, the Church, represented by the ‘woman.’

6. *Eboethesen he ge te gynaikì* – ‘the earth helped the woman.’ If memory serves, the only ‘character’ in the Old Testament ever designated as a ‘helper’ is God. That the ‘earth’ helped the woman can then be a suggestion of God’s help through the earth, which, in the act of creation, God separated out of watery chaos. It is on a place on the earth, in the wilderness, that God had prepared a place of refuge for the woman. The earth’s ‘help’ is to be seen as part of God’s preparedness, a preparedness to help the Church during the time of tribulation.

7. *Enoixen he ge to stoma autes kai katepien to patomon* – ‘the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up (completely consumed) the river.’ The verb ‘to open’ is the same word used for opening the seals. The opening of the seals unleashed plagues on the earth. It was also used for opening/unlocking the abyss and unleashing the locusts. In those cases, the actions of ‘opening’ were at cross purposes, the opening of the seals unleashing God’s signs to effect a change of heart, the opening of the abyss to unleash terror and fight against the will and plan of God. In this case, the earth opens its mouth, a clear contrast to the dragon opening his mouth. The purpose is to swallow up the flood water, the symbol of watery chaos and un-creation. The verb ‘to swallow up/consume completely’ has also appeared previously in the book to indicate the full, destructive force of signs and counter-signs. But the victory in heaven has been won and

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333 *NRSV* translations.
a turning point has been reached. Now God’s help through the earth is not to ‘consume the inhabitants of the earth,’ but to provide ‘help’ and protection.

A chiastic structure can be observed in the sequence of verbs:

A. ‘spewed out’ the serpent from its mouth water
   B. ‘helped’ the earth
   C. ‘and opened its mouth
   B’. ‘consumed’ the river
A’. ‘spewed out’ the dragon from its mouth the river

At the heart of the structure, a three-fold sequence of verbs counterbalances the single action of the serpent/dragon. There is a transition from ‘serpent’ at the beginning, the symbol of the ancient chaos monster, to the ‘dragon’ of the vision, something apparently much less powerful. The central verb at the heart of the structure is ‘to open,’ matching the opening of the seals with which the whole sequence of God’s signs began. The opening in this case is specified by the surrounding verbs – it is a ‘help’ that takes the form of swallowing up, consuming, the evil intent of the serpent/dragon. For all the violent images in Revelation, the intent of God is to stand against evil, to help the Church and the inhabitants of the earth by swallowing up all that could hurt them, keep them from embracing and living faithfully a relationship with him.

Beyond this, Harrington notes that the earth opened up to swallow the rebels in Nm 16:30, 26:10, and Dt 11:6. The earth is the good creation of God and is on the side of God’s people. 334

8. Orgiste ho drakon epi te gynaiki – ‘was enraged the dragon with the woman.’ The verb ‘to be enraged’ appeared in the scene of the sounding of the seventh trumpet (11:18). There, the rage of the nations (verb) was met by the orge, the ‘wrath’ of God (noun). This play on words began a chiastic structure in which the evil of the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ became the occasion for the time of judgment in which evil was repaid in kind and the just received their due reward. (see notes 6 and 7, p. 207). The use of the verb in this context suggests the futility of the dragon’s rage. Bested by God and thwarted in his attempt to destroy the ‘woman,’ the Church as a whole, he sets out to wage war with the individual members of the Church, the ‘seed’ of the woman. This, too, as the war in the heaven, is expected to be a lost cause, an exercise in futility.

9. Poiesai polemon meta ton loipon tou spermatos autes – ‘to make war with the rest of her seed.’
   ‘Enraged,’ the dragon is determined to ‘make war.’ But, as 11:18 makes clear, evil falls by its own devices, rage is met with rage, and this dragon has already lost the ultimate ‘battle,’ the ‘war’ with Michael and his angels. A certain sense of lampooning continues. The dragon appears as he did when he ‘saw’ that he had been cast down to the earth, stunned as if he had just become aware that he had lost his fight to best God. There is a sense of Einstein’s maxim: ‘Insanity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting a different result.’ It is to be noted, with Harrington, that Revelation does not glorify war or violence as a way of imposing one’s will. Especially in the image of the locusts arising from the abyss, the Book decries the inhumanity of warfare. What the book regularly reflects is a long tradition of understanding that actions have consequences, that we ‘reap what we sow.’ 335 So what is imagined here is the futility of waging war to accomplish one’s goals.

loipon, ‘the rest,’ has been used in the book to suggest the idea of the ‘faithful remnant.’ It is from ‘the rest,’ over and over again, that God’s plan begins to work itself out in small and unexpected ways – the image of the ‘mustard seed’ in the Synoptic Gospels. spermatos is regularly used to translate the Hebrew word zera – ‘sperm,’ ‘seed.’ In general, the word takes on the meaning of ‘offspring.’ The nuance of using this word in place of teknon, ‘child,’ is that it carries the implication of generation. This type of phrasing confirms the process of canonical shaping of the book to address all generations of Christians in all times and places.

334 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
335 Ibid.
10. *Terounton tas entolas... echonton ten martyrian* – ‘keeping/observing the commandments... having/holding the testimony/witness...’ The ‘rest’ are those who are faithful, who hold to the testimony of Jesus Christ, who are the faithful witnesses who, like Jesus, ‘overcome’ the trials and tribulations of the world.

11. *Estathe epi ten ammon tes thalasses* – ‘he took his stand on the sand of the sea.’ The image of the dragon taking his stand on the sand of the sea recalls the image of the angel in the vision of the Open Scroll (10:7-10). The two images are contrastive. The angel ‘took his stand’ with one foot on the land, one on the sea, and his right hand raised to heaven. In his stance, he united all elements of creation – heaven, earth and sea. The dragon, on the other hand, stands on the shore, the edge of the sea. The focus is the sea, the element of threatening watery chaos. He does not raise his hand in the stance of taking an oath by the one who resides in the heaven; he has been expelled from there. He stands at the border of the earth and sea; the earth has just thwarted his intention to sweep away the woman. All that is left to him is the sea, the image of chaos that can threaten the realm of the earth. He stands in contrast to God’s angel who holds the open scroll, and Michael’s army of angels has already defeated his. In the continuing sense of lampooning the arrogance and defiance of the dragon, the following cartoon, if some vulgarity can be tolerated, adequately captures the image of the dragon at this point.
Commentary

The vision of the Victory in Heaven raises hard questions for the reader. In the face of evil, oppression, violence, attacks on the basic dignity of all humans, can we believe that God has actually triumphed? Can we believe that good for all humanity results from patient endurance? The second image of the Woman and the Dragon seeks to answer these questions, seeks to offer a realistic look at violence and evil, at the exercise of power for power’s sake, for the sake of dominance. It employs ‘dark’ humor to lampoon the self-serving powers of the world, give hope to those confronted with the absurdity of dictatorial pretensions, hubris, and arrogance.

The first verb in this section is *eidon*, ‘he saw.’ The whole section, then, proceeds to present the dragon, the symbol of Imperial Rome, the symbol of power structures established on the values of this world, as completely ‘unseeing.’ After a string of five verbs noting that he and his army of angels had been routed in the heavenly war and cast out of heaven, it finally dawns on him that he’s now on earth. Well, duh! His immediate response is petulant, to go after the ‘woman,’ to seek revenge against forces beyond his control.

With another ‘divine passive,’ the woman is provided with the wings of an eagle to carry her away from the threat to the place that had been prepared for her to find refuge and sustenance. God is caring for her. The dark humor in the presentation of this ‘unseeing’ personification of evil is carried forward in the image of eagle wings. There are a number of Old Testament references to God’s protection of his people represented by bearing them up on the wings of an eagle. What is darkly humorous in the image, however, is that the eagle is the symbol of Rome, the image on the standards of the Roman legions. The supposed ‘power’ of the dragon is turned against it to protect the woman he wants to destroy. At her place of refuge, the woman finds protection and refuge for a time, and times, and a half a time – the image of the time of influence allotted to Antiochus IV in the Book of Daniel, three and a half years. In 12:6, the time frame was presented in days, suggesting the long, day to day suffering and endurance of the Church during the ‘limited time’ of tribulation. Now the time frame is restated in its most inclusive statement, three and a half years, not one thousand two hundred sixty days. After the Victory in Heaven and with the protection and sustenance provided by God, the time of suffering and endurance is more manageable, more bearable.

The dragon’s intention to harm the ‘woman,’ the Church, is to sweep her away – all at once. He opens his mouth and spews out water like a river. Though the word is from a slightly different root, it is roughly synonymous with the word for ‘casting/hurling out/down’ that has been used five times to describe the expulsion of the dragon and his angels from heaven. Again, dark humor prevails. In contrast to the power of God that has expelled him and his forces from heaven, he spits. To his credit, he spits a river of water, but still, his ‘powerful act of retaliation’ is to spit. Of particular significance at this point in the text is the identification of the ‘dragon’ as the ‘serpent,’ a recollection of the confrontation of the ‘woman’ and the ‘deceiver’ in Genesis. Likewise, in the LXX, ‘serpent’ is frequently used to render Leviathan and Rahab, the water monsters of chaos, already subdued by God at the very dawn of creation. The dragon/serpent attempts to unleash watery chaos to achieve his goal – again not ‘seeing’ that these forces have already been subdued and defeated by God.

A chiastic structure can be observed in the sequence of verbs used at this point in the text:

A. ‘spewed out’ the serpent from its mouth water
   B. ‘helped’ the earth
C. ‘and opened its mouth
B’. ‘consumed’ the river
A’. ‘spewed out’ the dragon from its mouth the river

At the heart of the structure, a three-fold sequence of verbs counterbalances the single action of the serpent/dragon. There is a transition from ‘serpent’ at the beginning, the symbol of the ancient chaos monster, to the ‘dragon’ of the vision, something apparently much less powerful. The central verb at the heart of the structure is ‘to open,’ matching the opening of the seals with which the whole sequence of God’s signs began. The opening in this case is specified by the surrounding verbs – it is a ‘help’ that takes the form of swallowing up, consuming, the evil intent of the serpent/dragon. In the Old Testament, the only ‘character’ ever identified as a ‘helper’ is God. Further, the verb for ‘consume’ ‘thoroughly destroy’ has been encountered earlier in the text to describe the effects of God’s signs and the evil unleashed by forces of evil. For all the violent images in Revelation, the intent of God is to stand against evil, to help the Church and the inhabitants of the earth by swallowing up all that could hurt them, keep them from embracing and living faithfully a relationship with him.

Thwarted by the earth, the counterpart of the sea as the two realms of creation below the heavens, the throne of God, the dragon was enraged at the woman. The verb ‘to be enraged’ appeared in the scene of the sounding of the seventh trumpet (11:18). There, the rage of the nations (verb) was met by the ‘wrath’ of God (noun). This play on words began a chiastic structure in which the evil of the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ became the occasion for the time of judgment in which evil was repaid in kind and the just received their due reward. (see notes 6 and 7, p. 207). The use of the verb in this context suggests the futility of the dragon’s rage. Bested by God and thwarted in his attempt to destroy the ‘woman,’ the Church as a whole, he sets out to wage war with the individual members of the Church, the ‘seed’ of the woman. This, too, as the war in the heaven, is expected to be a lost cause, an exercise in futility. But, as 11:18 makes clear, evil falls by its own devices, rage is met with rage, and this dragon has already lost the ultimate ‘battle,’ the ‘war’ with Michael and his angels. A certain sense of lampooning continues. The dragon appears as he did when he ‘saw’ that he had been cast down to the earth, stunned as if he had just become aware that he had lost his fight to best God. Still, he plans to go to war again, with the ‘rest of the seed of the woman.’ The rest’ in Revelation has been suggestive of the ‘faithful remnant.’ Rather than stating his intention to wage war with the ‘rest of her children,’ the text says that he is going after the ‘rest of her seed/sperm. The ‘rest’ implies that what starts small can grow and have great results, the meaning of the parable of the ‘mustard seed.’ ‘Seed’ suggests ‘generation,’ ongoing life and the creation of life. There will be no end to the ‘enemies’ this dragon will face. In the ongoing dark humor, note Einstein’s maxim: ‘Insanity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting a different result.’ The dragon just does not ‘see.’

The vision of the Woman and the Dragon draws to a close with the dragon taking his stand on the sands of the sea, caught between land and sea, belonging to neither. He attempted to unleash watery chaos, but was ineffective, the earth swallowed up what he spewed out. A final note of irony and dark humor can be seen in the contrastive images of the dragon taking his stand on the sands of the sea and the angel from the vision of the Open Scroll taking his stand with one foot on the land, one on the sea and his right hand raised to the heavens in the stance of one taking an oath. His stance brings together all the elements of creation, while the stance of the dragon has him excluded from heaven and caught between the two elements of creation below the heavens. And caught, as he is, he still does not recognize the futility of taking the ‘battle,’ already lost, to the individual members of the Church, the ‘rest of her seed.’
A close reading of the Victory in Heaven could leave the reader with a naïve, pie-in-the-sky sense of unrealistic hope that the evil that surrounds us in the world could be thwarted, that patient endurance was an effective tool to stand for God and against the forces of evil and oppression. The image of the petulant and enraged, unseeing dragon, on the other hand, is reminiscent of the prophecy of Amos. Amos, in the truest sense of prophecy, was commissioned to critique the abuses of power and wealth of the kings and nobility of the northern kingdom. They feed their insatiable greed by preying on the common people and could not see that they were depleting what they relied on for their wealth and comfort, that the whole system was doomed to fail. With dark humor, the image of the dragon in Rev 12:13-18 makes the same statement. Is there truth to the conviction that evil will fall by its own devices? Is there hope in patient endurance as a statement against policies and structures that will inevitably fail? Does the image of the dragon ring more true than the image of the Victory in Heaven? Is there realistic hope for a world in which so much violence is done against the vulnerable, against those without power? Can we affirm that God is with us, involved in our world, guiding us towards a just kingdom?
The First Beast (13:1-10)

13:1 And I saw, coming up out of the sea, a beast having ten horns and seven heads and on its horns (were) ten diadems (royal crowns) and upon its heads (were) names of blasphemy. 2 And the beast, which I saw, was similar to a leopard and its feet like (those) of a bear and its mouth like the mouth of a lion and the dragon gave to it its power and its throne and great authority. 3 And one from its heads (was) like one having been killed (slaughtered) to death and its wound (blow, striking, plague = fatal wound) of death was healed and was caused to marvel the whole earth at the beast. 4 And they worshipped (did homage to) the dragon because he gave authority to the beast and they worshipped (did homage to) the beast, saying: Who (is) like the beast and who is able to wage war with it?

5 And was given to it a mouth speaking great things and blasphemy and was given to it power to act for forty-two months. 6 And he opened his mouth to blasphemies against God, to blaspheme his name and his tabernacle, those dwelling in the heaven. 7 And it was granted (given) to him to make war with the holy ones (saints) and to overcome (defeat) them and authority was given to him over every tribe and people and tongue and nation. 8 And all dwelling upon the earth will pay homage (worship) it, of whom has not been written his name in the book of life of the lamb from the founding of the world (cosmos, universe)

9 If anyone has an ear, let him hear. 10 If anyone is (is to be) in captivity, into captivity he goes; if anyone with a sword (is) to be killed, him with a sword (is) to be killed. Here (In this) is the endurance and faith of the holy ones.
Textual Notes

1. *Eidon ek tes thelasses therion anabainon* – ‘I saw rising up from the sea a beast…’ The shift of the visions from heaven to earth is indicated by the fact that the object of this vision, the beast, is seen ‘rising from the sea,’ not ‘coming down from the heaven.’ The victory in heaven has been won; attention now shifts to the earth.

Harrington observes that the ‘sea’ is a hostile element, a fitting home of evil. He notes similar uses of the ‘sea’ in this sense in Dn 7:2-8, IV Ezra 11:1, 12:11, I Enoch 60:7-10, and II Baruch 29:4.336 This is consistent with observations that the sea represents the watery chaos of un-creation.

Rogers and Rogers write that the ‘sea’ is an apt symbol of the agitated surface of unregenerate humanity and especially of the seething cauldron of national and social life, out of which the great historical movements of the world arise. The term may also be understood as the ‘abyss,’ the source of satanic forces. They note that *therion* has the basic meaning of ‘wild animal,’ hunted creatures harmful and odious to mankind. Symbolically, the word describes the qualities of the dangerous person who is vicious, cruel, cunning, to be feared and unpredictable in his actions. This is the monstrous person in whom the political power of the world is finally concentrated as represented in Dn 7 and II Thess 2:3 – ‘the man of sin’.337

2. *Exhon kerata deka kai kepales hepta… deka diademata* – ‘having ten horns and seven heads… ten diadems.’ There is both a similarity between the dragon and the beast and a dissimilarity, a contrast. Both are depicted as having seven heard and ten horns; but the dragon has seven diadems, ‘royal crowns, on its heads, while the diadems of the beast adorn its horns.

Harrington observes that the many headed beast, like the many headed dragon, is reminiscent of the many headed Leviathan of Ps 74:14. He notes that the diadems are ‘royal crowns,’ symbols of kingly authority and power, similar to the ten horns of Daniel’s fourth beast representing ten kings, Dn 7:24. The seven heads stand for the fullness of power – a totalitarian state. He concludes that the ‘beasts’ of this vision are to be identified with the power of the Roman Empire and anticipate the further development of Rev 17:9-14.338

3. *Onomata blasphemias* – ‘names of blasphemy.’ Harrington notes that the ‘names of blasphemy’ refer to the titles adopted by Roman Emperors, titles by which they appropriate to themselves divine attributes: kyrios – ‘lord,’ sebastos/augustus – ‘worthy of reverence,’ divus – ‘divine,’ dominus et deus – ‘lord and god.’339 The primary meaning of ‘blasphemy’ is ‘to speak evil of someone.’ Human beings appropriating divine titles and attributes to themselves is ‘blasphemous’ in the sense that it is a diminution of God, an evil spoken of him by claiming his rights, prerogatives and powers for a lesser being, equating a lower being with the divine.

4. *Pardalei… arkou… leontos…* - ‘leopard/panther… bear… lion…’ Focusing on Old Testament allusions, especially allusions to Daniel, Harrington see in these feral beasts an allusion to Daniel’s fourth beast (Dn 7:7) described in terms of the first three (Dn 7:4-6). He also notes that in IV Ezra, Rome is directly identified as the fourth beast in Daniel’s vision.340

Acknowledging the dependence of this image on Daniel, but focusing more on the specific symbolism associated with each of the feral creatures who make up this beast, Rogers and Rogers note that the leopard/panther indicates agility, cat-like vigilance, craft, and fierce cruelty, while the feet of the bear indicate the slow strength and power to crush. The lion blends massive strength with feline dexterity, as a power follows up a stealthy and perhaps unobserved policy of repression with the sudden terrors of a hostile edict.341

336 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
337 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
338 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
339 *ibid.*
340 *ibid.*
341 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
5. *Edoken ho drakon... dynamin... thronon... exousian megalen* – ‘the dragon gave... power... a throne... great authority.’ In the doxologies and visions of Revelation, the throne belongs to God who is praised for his power and authority. God shares his throne, power and authority with the ‘Lamb’ and the ‘Lamb’ shares them with those who ‘overcome by patient endurance.’ Regularly, such sharing is expressed with a ‘divine passive’ – *edothe.* Again the contrast between the dragon, the beast ‘who would be king,’ and God is transparent. His ‘giving’ requires a verb in the active voice; he has to get his hands dirty. He is something less than the divine. As the beast (Rome) is something less than his satanic overlord (the Dragon), so the dragon is something less than and opposed to the sovereign will of God.

6. *Mian ek ton kephalon... esphragmenen eis thanaton... plege tou thanatou... etherapeuthe* – ‘one of the heads... having been slain/slaughtered to death... the wound/striking of death... was healed.’ Rogers and Rogers note that the description of the beast here resumes the narrative from v 1. *Esphragmenen* recalls the description of the ‘slaughtered Lamb’ standing before the throne of God. The mortal wound and its healing indicates a ‘political’ death and resurrection. With regards to this image, Harrington writes that Nero’s suicide in 68 AD was followed by a year of civil war which threatened the existence of the empire; with Vespasian, the ‘beast’ came to life again. Vespasian’s rise to power came in the midst of the ‘Jewish War,’ 66-70 AD, in which Rome destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. Humphries identifies the destruction of Jerusalem as the third ‘crisis’ impacting the formation of the Bible. In the aftermath of the war, the Pharisees were the only surviving party of Jewish leadership; they defined the ‘canon’ of Hebrew Scripture and expelled all Christians from synagogue fellowship. Though Paul’s letters pre-date the war, it was in the context of the war and its aftermath that the Gospels were written, that Paul’s letters were circulated more widely in Christian communities, and that the Pastorals, the Catholic Epistles, and the Book of Revelation were written. The aftermath of the war was also the occasion for a ‘new diaspora’ of both Jews and Christians – away from Jerusalem and throughout the wider Roman world – for our purposes, especially in the Province of Asia.

7. *Ethaumasthe hole he ge opiso tou theriou* – ‘the whole world marveled after the beast.’ Harrington makes the pertinent observation that there is a seductive attraction to power. Everybody wants to be on the winning side. He notes that this seductive appeal of Rome will be dealt with in chs 17-18.

8. *Prosekynesan to drakonti... prosekynesan to therio* – ‘they worshipped the dragon... they worshipped the beast.’ The perverseness of evil, its seductiveness is portrayed in a kind of ‘trickle-down’ theory. It has already been noted that the dragon’s ‘giving’ of power and authority to the beast is a kind of obscene parody of the ‘divine.’ Worshipping the ‘beast’ is nothing more that acknowledging the power and authority of the ‘source of evil’ from which the authority of perverse worldly power derives, the dragon, *ha satan.*

In ‘The Unity of the Love of God and Love of Neighbor,’ a pivotal article in Karl Rahner’s thought, Rahner argued that love of God and love of neighbor are, essentially, the same thing. A gross oversimplification of his thesis is that it is impossible to love God without, at least implicitly, loving his creation, loving all that flows from him. Love of God implies love of neighbor. Likewise, it is impossible to love other people, the high point of God’s creation without, at least implicitly, loving their source, God. Love of other people implies loving God. By the rules of logic, if A implies B and B implies A, then A equals B.

The author of Revelation seems to be aware of this logic. The seductive force of perverse worldly power draws people to it, to embrace it, and in doing so, to embrace its source, the source of evil – a drive that makes individuals and humanity as a whole a god, a selfish, self-serving god, a perversion of all that is for the good of all, that acknowledges a dependence on a higher power, that dares to love. (see Mt 6:21, Lk 12:34 – ‘For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be.’)

342 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*  
343 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*  
344 W. Lee Humphries, *op. cit.*  
345 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*  
9. *Legontes tis homoios to therio* – ‘saying: Who is like the beast?’ Harrington points to a ‘double’ parody in these words. In Ex 15:11, in the Song of the Sea, the question is raised: ‘Who is like you, O Lord?’ The God praised in the song has just bested the power of Egypt, in Revelation a representation of the perverse power of Rome. The question also recalls the Victory in Heaven won by Michael and his angels. The name, ‘Michael,’ means, ‘Who is like God?’ The beast gets his authority and power from the dragon who had been bested by Michael. All his claims to power and divinity are obscene and ludicrous.

10. *Tis dyatai polemesai met’ autou* – ‘Who is able to wage war with it?’ The similar rhetorical question would seem to imply the invincible power of Rome, the reality of the world of Church and the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ that seems to counter the optimistic and seemingly unrealistic image of the Victory in Heaven. Still, the ‘dark humor’ of 12:13-18, along with the parody of divine pretensions on the part of the dragon in ‘granting’ power and authority to the beast, offsets the bleak outlook of the invincibility of Rome – or any other perverse world power. There can be hope in patient endurance; there can be ‘victory’ in patient endurance. Perverse power will, of necessity, fall by its own devices.

11. *Edote* – ‘was given/granted.’ The use of the ‘divine passive’ in granting the beast ‘a mouth to speak blasphemies and authority to act’ is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, it could be a continuation of the parody of the ‘divine pretensions’ of the dragon, expressing the ‘authority’ he gives to the beast in the same manner in which the direct action of God in the narrative has been portrayed. However, and more likely, it is another instance of God’s involvement in allowing the perverse powers of evil to act – here again for a circumscribed period of time, ‘forty two months.’ First of all, why would the dragon limit the time his subordinate has to act? Secondly, a theme or motif that has been developing in the ongoing story is God’s limitation of evil in a way that suggests God’s will to allow his creation freedom to serve him or not and also the conviction that actions have consequences, that, on its own, perverse and evil power will collapse, will be destroyed by its own perversions and pretensions – reminiscent of the prophecy of Amos.

Harrington notes that ‘speaking great things,’ implying proud and arrogant boasts, and ‘blasphemies’ is an allusion to Dn 7:8, 20. The blasphemous claims of the Roman emperors echo those of Antiochus IV – the ‘little horn’ in Daniel.

12. *Kai enoiken to stoma autou eis blaphemias pros ton theon* – ‘and he opened his mouth to/in blasphemies against God.’ There is a similarity in the granting of ‘authority’ to the beast and its immediate exercise of that power – to utter blasphemies – that echoes the command/execution narrative pattern in biblical literature. The use of the ‘divine passive’ in granting authority indicates God’s involvement in the affairs of the world, but in a way that indicates that embracing evil, the free choice ‘granted’ by God, catches the powers of the earth up in the very evil they embrace. It is as if God is saying, ‘Here is what you have chosen. Live with it.’

13. *Blasphemesai to onoma autou kai ten skenen autou* – ‘to blaspheme his name and his tent/tabernacle/temple.’ The basic meaning of *blasphemesai*, ‘to blaspheme,’ is ‘to speak evil of,’ ‘to denounce/defame/denigrate,’ ‘to corrupt.’ *Skene* is regularly used to translate the Hebrew word, *mishkan*, ‘tent.’ In the Old Testament, *mishkan* refers primarily to the desert sanctuary, the tent/tabernacle of the wilderness wanderings. Typically, the *mishkan* is characterized as the ‘tent of meeting,’ the place where God meets with his people along the way. The pattern of construction of the wilderness tent is the pattern for the construction of Solomon’s temple. (It is likely that the actual construction of the temple was read backwards to supply the blueprint of the *mishkan* in the Exodus narrative.) In Hebrew, the word for ‘temple’ is *hekal*, a word that is also used for ‘palace,’ the dwellings of earthly kings. This term is rendered in Greek with *naos* – ‘temple,’ and *palaia* – ‘palace,’ or *basilica* – ‘a place of justice and/or public assembly.’

It seems that a subtle contrast is suggested in the words used in the text at this point. The grandeur of ancient civilizations attaches to the monuments they built – great temples for gods, lavish palaces for rulers, amphitheaters and hippodromes and basilicas for public assemblies, entertainments and athletic

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347 NRSV translation.
348 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
games. By contrast, the ‘dwelling place’ of God is a skene, a ‘tent.’ It is easy to ridicule a ‘tent’ in the face of such grandeur. It is easy to ridicule the name of the God who chooses such meager dwellings. This ridicule, however, is but a sign of the distorted values of the world, the ‘kingdoms of the earth.’ What Israel and Christianity celebrate is a God who ‘meets with them,’ shares with them their small dwellings, is involved in their lives, not distant, capricious gods housed in huge monuments, not kings living sumptuously in palaces, away from their people and their people’s concerns.

14. *Tous en to ourano skenountas* – ‘those tenting/dwelling in the heaven.’ This phrase is appositional; it explains the meaning of *skene*. The ‘tent,’ the ‘dwelling place’ of God is the assembly of those dwelling in the heaven – the heavenly creatures including ‘those who have overcome.’ Throughout Revelation there has been a subtle association of those suffering tribulation, those enduring patiently with those ‘who have overcome.’ There is a continuity between those ‘overcoming’ and those ‘who have overcome.’ To blaspheme God and his dwelling, then, is to blaspheme the faithful in his Church. From the perspective of Revelation, this is doomed to failure. The corrupt system that preys on the faithful has to fall by its own devices, by its own corruption. In the face of this, ‘John’ cries: ‘Hold on!’

15. *Edoth e auto poiesai polemon… kai nikesai…* - ‘was given to it to make war... and to overcome...’ In v 7, the ‘divine passives’ continue. In the way of the world, power is exerted through violence, domination established by war. From the perspective of Revelation any such use of power for the sake of domination is evil – and evil has its time. Specifically, the beast has the power – not the right – to make war on the ‘holy ones’ and to defeat them – in worldly terms. *Nikesai,* ‘to overcome, defeat, be victorious’ is exactly the same word used for the ‘victory’ of the Lamb and of his ‘holy ones.’ What appears as victory is defeat and what appears as defeat is victory. Harrington notes that, as in Dn 7:6, 21, ‘conquering, overcoming’ involves killing. The Lamb and his followers are ‘victorious’ by dying (5:5, 12:11). ‘John’ is clear in his expectation that resisting the power of Rome, the evil of the world, will lead to suffering, even death, for the Church. But he is just as clear in his expectation that this suffering has value, that it will eventually usher in a dawning awareness that earthly power as he knows it is oppression and that people will see it as such and choose the living God, the God who dwells with his people, the God who wills the good of all and the days of the ‘false gods,’ the gods of oppressive power will pass away.\(^\text{350}\)

16. *Edothe auto exousia* – ‘was given to it authority/power.’ The ‘authority’ granted to the beast mirrors the authority granted to the witnesses, the Church – authority over tribes and peoples and tongues and nations. The wording also recalls the recommissioning of the ‘seer’ to be a prophet to/concerning peoples and nations and tongues and *kings*. There is a certain ambiguity present in the recommissioning of the ‘seer.’ Is he to be a prophet to or about the inhabitants of the earth and their kings? In the light of the mission of the Church ‘to go out to all the world and spread the Good News,’ it is likely that both aspects of his ministry with regards to the inhabitants of the earth are envisioned. The end result is that, for a limited time, two opposing forces are at work – the authority of the Church imparted to her by God and the Lamb to bear witness to the world of the Good News of God’s plan for the good of all humanity, and the seductive lure of power for the sake of those wielding it, an ‘authority’ granted by the Dragon, the source of all evil that opposes God and his will for good. Here is what is laid before the inhabitants of the earth and those who wield false power. How will they choose while there is still time?

17. *Proskynesousin auton pantes hoi katekountas epi tes ges* – ‘all will worship him, the inhabitants of the earth.’ This phrase is again modified by an appositional phrase – the inhabitants of the earth ‘the names of whom have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb.’ Harrington argues for reading too strong a sense of ‘predestination’ into this phraseology. What is envisioned is not that some have eternally been predestined for salvation and others for damnation, but that there is a plan preordained by God for the good and salvation of all humanity. Those whose names are written in the book are those who ‘overcome,’ who opt for God. Salvation is, from start to finish, the unmerited act of God.\(^\text{351}\)

What can be understood here is either the foreknowledge of God, who knows in advance who will choose the relationship with God offered to all humanity, or, with the strong emphasis in the book on *metanoia,*

\(^{350}\) Ibid.

\(^{351}\) Ibid.
‘change of heart,’ ‘turning back,’ ‘repentance,’ that those, who by ‘overcoming’ have their names inscribed in the book of life.

18. *Esphagmenou apo kataboles kosmou* – ‘slain/slaughtered from the beginning of the world.’ This appositional phrase modifies the Lamb, the possessor of the Book of Life. Harrington writes that the saving death of the Lamb was part of God’s plan from the beginning. He cites Acts 2:23 (‘This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.’) and 1 Pet 1:18-20 (‘You know that you were ransomed... with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of times for your sake.’)\(^{352}\)

19. *Ei tis echei ous, akousato!* – ‘If anyone has an ear, let him hear!’ Harrington concludes that this admonition is an echo of the admonition found at the close of each of the messages to the Churches. He asserts that ‘John’ is turning directly to Christians with a special admonition to them. As in 2:7, 11, and 17, this call for serious attention points ahead to the proclamation of v 10.\(^{353}\)

Against Harrington, however, it can be noted that this admonition in the letters functioned as a ‘frame-break’ in which the voice of the narrator through whom the words of ‘John’ are presented asserts itself. This ‘frame-break’ is one of the indications of the canonical shaping of the book that broadens the message of the book from the narrow address to Seven Churches in Asia at the end of the first century, to a message to all Christians in all times and places. Especially in the light of the recommissioning of the ‘seer,’ this admonition is now addressed not only to all Christians throughout all ages, but to all the inhabitants of the earth. It is a call to hear and have a change of heart before it is too late.

20. *Ei tis eis aichmalosian eis aichmalosian hypgei* – ‘If anyone (is) for/into captivity, into captivity he goes.’ V.10 displays some textual problems and irregularities. There is no expressed verb in the conditional clause, yet the text, as it stands, is solidly attested in the best manuscript traditions. The phrase has a ‘proverbial’ sense to it and ellipsis is a regular feature of proverbs. The verb of the conditional clause, then is to be understood as either ‘is’ or ‘to go’ from the result clause. The phrase should be rendered: ‘If anyone is to go into captivity, then into captivity he will go.’ While this can be read as a statement of predestination, it is more likely, given the consistent perspective of Revelation, that the ‘proverbial saying’ implies that, given the present state of the world and the nature of perverse and oppressive world powers, if evil rulers decide to exile or imprison the just, it will happen. Such is the nature of their perverse ‘authority.’

21. *Ei tis en makaire apoktanthenai [dei] auton en makaire apoktanthenai* – ‘If anyone (is) by the sword to be killed, (it is necessary) for him by the sword to be killed.’ Harrington notes that, against better manuscript evidence, the first passive infinitive, *apoktanthenai*, ‘to be killed’ is read as an active infinitive, ‘to kill.’ This reading appears in many manuscripts and reflects the saying in Matthew, ‘All who take the sword will perish by the sword.’ (Mt 26:52). This reading, however, violates the parallelism of the two ‘proverbial’ sayings and such parallelism is the norm.\(^{354}\)

Parallelism in ‘proverbial’ sayings is discussed by Robert Alter,\(^{355}\) and the reading of the two ‘sayings’ with an emphasis on the parallels fits the final conclusion of the proclamation.

22. *Hode estin he hypomene kai he pistis ton agion* – ‘Here (in this) is the patient endurance and the faith of the holy ones.’ While this conclusion reflects a constant theme in Revelation that by patient endurance of suffering, oppression and even death, the ‘holy ones’ join in the victory of Christ, who overcame the world by his death, it is also to be argued that this proclamation is addressed to all the ‘inhabitants of the earth.’ Here is an alternate view of reality; here is a different world view; here is the choice laid before all humanity.

\(^{352}\) Ibid.
\(^{353}\) Ibid.
\(^{354}\) Ibid.
Commentary

In 13:1 a new vision unfolds, ‘And I saw...’ In light of the recommissioning of the ‘seer’ (10:11), this vision is recorded not only for the benefit of the Church, but for all the inhabitants of the earth. The vision concerns a beast rising from the sea, sometimes understood as the abyss, the source of evil, the source of chaos, the realms of death. This beast is related to the dragon. They are described in almost identical terms – having seven heads and ten horns. But at this point, the descriptions diverge. The dragon wears seven crowns, diadema, ‘royal crowns,’ on its heads, while the beast has ten diadema on its ten horns. On the heads of the beast are ‘names of blasphemy.’ ‘Blasphemy’ has the primary meaning of ‘to speak evil of,’ and by extension means ‘to defame,’ ‘to denigrate,’ ‘to corrupt or abase.’ It is likely that these ‘names of blasphemy’ refer to Roman Emperors who have appropriated to themselves ‘divine titles,’ titles that suggest that they are gods, on an equal footing with the one God of all Creation. This is blasphemy, elevating themselves and denigrating the true God.

As was the case with the dragon, seven heads implies a totalitarian rule, an all-encompassing rule or overlordship. The ‘horns’ evoke the image of wild beasts that gore. The rule of the dragon and of the beast is one imposed by a perverse and oppressive use of force. Both the dragon and the beast have ten horns. In biblical imagery, ten is an evocative number. It conjures images of the ten plagues, the tens signs of God executed against the oppressive power of Egypt. It suggests the ‘ten opportunities’ oppressive power has to embrace a change of heart, to submit to God’s rule, to promote the good of all people. It also conjures images of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, a summary of God’s divine rule that opposes the false and oppressive use of human power. This contrast between just and unjust rule is suggested especially by the ten crowns on the beast’s ten horns.

The beast is described with an image derived from Daniel, the fourth beast of Dn 7:7, described in terms of the first three, Dn 7:4-6. In IV Ezra, Rome is identified explicitly with the fourth beast of Daniel. Turning explicitly to the ‘components’ of the beast, leopard/panther, bear, and lion, it can be noted that the leopard/panther indicates agility, cat-like vigilance, craft and fierce cruelty, while the feet of the bear indicate the slow strength and power to crush. The lion blends massive strength with feline dexterity as power follows up a stealthy and perhaps unobserved policy of repression with the sudden terrors of a hostile edict.

There was a ‘dark humor’ in the narrative of the dragon and the woman in 12:13-18. A sense of that ‘dark humor’ continues with the notice that the dragon ‘gave’ power and a throne and great authority to the beast. The verb ‘to give’ in in the active voice, an immediate contrast to the ‘divine passives’ that have characterized God’s involvement in the story, his granting of power and authority to his prophet, his witnesses, his holy ones. The sense of this shift from the passive to the active voice is an indication that the power of Rome, the power of all perverse earthly rule, comes directly from the source of evil, that it is not of God in any way.

The continuing description of the beast is a contrastive parody of the beast and the Lamb. One of the heads had a fatal wound. It appeared as one having been slaughtered. This is the same word used for the ‘slaughtered Lamb standing before the throne of God’ in the Inaugural Vision. There, the ‘seer’ looked about for the ‘lion of Judah’ and saw instead the ‘resurrected lamb.’ Here, the seven ‘faces’ of the beast are those of lions and one has also been slaughtered and revived. In reference to Rome and with the penchant of apocalyptic writings to be written backwards, the ‘dead head’ refers to Nero’s suicide in 68 A.D. This threw the empire into chaos until Vespasian arose to restore order and revive the absolute rule of Rome – the context in which the Jewish war and the destruction of Jerusalem and its
temple was played out. Vespasian restores the ‘totalitarian’ rule of the empire, replacing the slaughtered head of Nero. By contrast, the Lamb, by his death, has won ‘victory’ and, resurrected, takes his place by the throne of God. In one form or another, evil keeps rearing its ugly head, while the Lamb has ‘overcome’ the world once and for all.

While the suicide of Nero and the rise of Vespasian are past events presented as if they were ‘predicted’ in the vision of the ‘seer,’ bringing the narrative from the past to the present moment and intending to bolster confidence in what the ‘seer’ has to say, the notion that all the world marveled can also be suggestive that the ‘vision’ and the ‘word of the prophet’ are available to and intended for all the inhabitants of the earth. What, in fact, is represented by the marveling of all the world is the seductive allure of evil, of wanting to be on the winning side, of wanting to share in the benefits of power from those on top. Yet the source of this power is ultimate evil. There is a sense in the words of the ‘seer’ that invites the people of the earth to view their choice, to consider what they have chosen, and to take an opportunity to see things as they really are and have a change of heart.

The marveling at the beast quickly turns to ‘worshipping,’ ‘bending the knee to’ the dragon and the beast. The perverseness of evil, its seductiveness is portrayed in a kind of ‘trickle-down’ theory. It has already been noted that the dragon’s ‘giving’ of power and authority to the beast is a kind of obscene parody of the ‘divine.’ Worshipping the ‘beast’ is nothing more that acknowledging the power and authority of the ‘source of evil’ from which the authority of perverse worldly power derives, the dragon, ha satan.

In ‘The Unity of the Love of God and Love of Neighbor,’ a pivotal article in Karl Rahner’s thought, Rahner argued that love of God and love of neighbor are, essentially, the same thing. A gross oversimplification of his thesis is that it is impossible to love God without, at least implicitly, loving his creation, loving all that flows from him. Love of God implies love of neighbor. Likewise, it is impossible to love other people, the high point of God’s creation without, at least implicitly, loving their source, God. Love of other people implies loving God. By the rules of logic, if A implies B and B implies A, then A equals B.356

The author of Revelation seems to be aware of this logic. The seductive force of perverse worldly power draws people to it, to embrace it, and in doing so, to embrace its source, the source of evil – a drive that makes individuals and humanity as a whole a god, a selfish, self-serving god, a perversion of all that is for the good of all, that acknowledges a dependence on a higher power, that dares to love. (see Mt 6:21, Lk 12:34 – ‘For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be,’ and Mt 25:40 – ‘And the king will answer them: Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me.’)

A final parody of the beast occurs in the rhetorical question posed by those worshipping him: ‘Who is like the beast?’ This parody functions on two levels. On one level, the question is reminiscent of the similar question in the Song of the Sea, Ex 15:11, ‘Who is like the Lord?’ The Song of the Sea celebrates God’s victory over the oppressive power of Egypt, a symbol of Rome and of all oppressive worldly powers. From this perspective, the implied answer to the rhetorical question, ‘Who is like the beast?’ is Egypt and Babylon and the Seleucid empire – all the fallen empires. On another level, the question is reminiscent of the vision of the Victory in Heaven in which Michael and his angels defeated and expelled the dragon and his angels from heaven. The name, Michael, means ‘Who is like God?’

A second question, ‘Who is able to wage war with it (the beast)?’ suggests the invincibility of Rome, or from the perspective of later readers, the current, dominant world power. This speaks once more to the allure of evil power, the drive to throw in one’s lot with the ‘powers that be,’ to protect oneself from the vengeance and destruction such powers can bring to bear on those who oppose them. It speaks of currying the favor of power structures to benefit from their strength, no matter the cost, to profit from evil. Specifically, in Revelation, this is what ‘John’ decries when the Churches make compromises and accommodations with Rome, when they live the way of the world. Now this warning is proclaimed to all the inhabitants of the earth.

V 5 marks a clear change in the description of the beast. The ‘divine passive’ returns. This ‘divine passive,’ indicates God’s involvement in the world, in the lives of his faithful, and his actions on behalf of all the inhabitants of the earth, all his creation. The beast is given a mouth to speak blasphemies and the power to act for forty two months – the time of the Gentiles, the time of the witnesses, the time of the woman/Church. Again, this ‘granting of a mouth to speak blasphemies’ is not indicative of God causing tribulation and evil in the world. It carries more a sense of God’s granting to humanity freedom, freedom to choose to accept a relationship with him or to flaunt it. But with this freedom comes the responsibility to bear the consequences for the choices made. It is as if God is saying, ‘You have made your choice, now live with it.’ The same can be said for the limitation of the time of blasphemies and evil. Corruption will eventually corrupt itself; oppressive, totalitarian rule will eventually destroy the foundation on which it is grounded. And again, in terms of the power structures of the world, ‘blasphemies’ refer to the tendency of perverse power to appropriate to itself elements of the divine, to usurp divine prerogatives.

With the freedom to act, the beast acts. He opened his mouth and blasphemed the name of God, and the ‘tent’ of God, those dwelling in the heaven. The verbatim repetition of words suggests a kind of parody of the command/execution pattern of many biblical narratives. The strict command/execution narrative pattern emphasizes the authority of the one issuing the command, whether it be God or some human authority figure. The one in authority speaks and his command is carried out exactly. But here, there is no authoritative command, only the granting of freedom to act. ‘Command’ is replaced by willfulness, unbridled ambition and greed. It is easy to imagine the petulance of a small child throwing a temper tantrum until he get what he wants, a child at that stage of human development when it appears the whole world revolves around him, exists to fulfill his every whim. So he stuffs himself with ice cream and gets sick; he runs off carelessly, falls and gets hurt; he pushes other children away and won’t share and they push back. This is the image of the beast, of oppressive, self-seeking power.

The object of the blasphemy is instructive. The beasts blasphemes the name of God. This carries the same sense as the ‘names of blasphemy’ on the beast’s heads, divine titles and attributes appropriated by willful earthly rulers. He blasphemes God’s ‘tabernacle.’ There is a slight problem with translation at this point. Some English translations use the word ‘temple,’ but most use ‘tabernacle.’ ‘Tabernacle’ is a word used to describe the ‘Holy of Holies’ in the Jewish temple. What gets lost in translation is the primary meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words. The Greek skene is used to render the Hebrew mishkan. The primary meaning of these words is ‘tent.’ Mishkan is used in the Old Testament to indicate the ‘tent of meeting’ in the stories of the wilderness wanderings, the place along the journey where God was available to, met with, his people; it is also the normal word used to describe the portable dwellings of wandering shepherds. In Greek, there are separate words for ‘palace,’ the dwelling of a king, and ‘temple,’ the shrine of a god. In Hebrew there is no such distinction;
hekhal is used both for kingly palaces and the Jerusalem temple. Now, specifically, when the beast blasphemes the ‘tent of God,’ the humble dwelling place of God, the text goes on to explain just what this dwelling place is: those ‘tenting’ in the heaven.

As opposed to the great civilizations that demonstrate their grandeur by constructing elaborate palaces for their rulers and monumental temples for their gods, the dwelling place of the Judea-Christian God is with his people. The God of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ, is a God who moves along with his people, who leads them to an unknowable future. Those ‘tenting’ in the heaven are the ‘victorious,’ those who have ‘overcome’ the world and its false values. But Revelation has already expressed a continuity between the ‘witnesses,’ the Church, and those who have ‘overcome’ and share the ‘victory of the Lamb,’ those who ‘tent’ in the heaven. It is easy to ‘blaspheme’ such a ‘god,’ to speak ill of and ridicule his humble dwelling place. The oppression of the Church is such a blasphemy. It is the reason the ‘world’ needs to be ‘overcome.’ It is the meaning of what is conveyed in Matthew’s scene of the Last Judgment: What we do to the least of Christ’s brothers, we do to Christ himself. This, now, is the message of ‘John’ to the whole world.

The ‘divine passives’ continue with the ‘granting of power to make war on the holy ones.’ In the way of the world, power is exerted through violence, domination established by war. From the perspective of Revelation any such use of power for the sake of domination is evil – and evil has its time. Specifically, the beast has the power – not the right – to make war on the ‘holy ones’ and to defeat them – in worldly terms. Nikesai, ‘to overcome, defeat, be victorious’ is exactly the same word used for the ‘victory’ of the Lamb and of his ‘holy ones.’ What appears as victory is defeat and what appears as defeat is victory. ‘John’ is clear in his expectation that resisting the power of Rome, the evil of the world, will lead to suffering, even death, for the Church. But he is just as clear in his expectation that this suffering has value, that it will eventually usher in a dawning awareness that earthly power as he knows it is oppression and that people will see it as such and choose the living God, the God who dwells with his people, the God who wills the good of all. Then the days of the ‘false gods,’ the gods of oppressive power will pass away.

The ‘authority’ granted to the beast mirrors the authority granted to the witnesses, the Church – authority over tribes and peoples and tongues and nations. The wording also recalls the recommissioning of the ‘seer’ to be a prophet to/concerning peoples and nations and tongues and kings. There is a certain ambiguity present in the recommissioning of the ‘seer.’ Is he to by a prophet ‘to’ or ‘about’ the inhabitants of the earth and their kings? In the light of the mission of the Church ‘to go out to all the world and spread the Good News,’ it is likely that both aspects of his ministry with regards to the inhabitants of the earth are envisioned. The end result is that, for a limited time, two opposing forces are at work – the authority of the Church imparted to her by God and the Lamb to bear witness to the world of the Good News of God’s plan for the good of all humanity, and the seductive lure of power for the sake of those wielding it, an ‘authority’ ostensibly granted by the Dragon, the source of all evil that opposes God and his will for good. Here is what is laid before the inhabitants of the earth and those who wield false power – a choice. How will they choose while there is still time?

Read from the perspective of a choice laid before the whole world, the inhabitants of the earth, that the inhabitants of the earth, ‘the names of whom have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb’ worship the beast is not indicative of a doctrine of predestination. What is envisioned is not that some have eternally been predestined for salvation and others for damnation, but that there is a plan preordained by God for the good and salvation of all humanity. Those whose names are written in the book are those who ‘overcome,’ who opt for God. Salvation is, from start to finish, the unmerited act of
God. What can be understood here is either the foreknowledge of God, who knows in advance who will choose the relationship with God offered to all humanity, or, with the strong emphasis in the book on metanoia, ‘change of heart,’ ‘turning back,’ ‘repentance,’ that those, who ‘repent and overcome’ have their names inscribed in the book of life. There is still time, but time grows short.

The vision of the beast concludes with a familiar admonition: ‘If anyone has an ear, let him hear!’ This admonition in the letters functioned as a ‘frame-break’ in which the voice of the narrator through whom the words of ‘John’ are presented asserts itself. This ‘frame-break’ is one of the indications of the canonical shaping of the book that broadens the message of the book from the narrow address to Seven Churches in Asia at the end of the first century, to a message to all Christians in all times and places. Especially in the light of the recommissioning of the ‘seer,’ this admonition is now addressed not only to all Christians throughout all ages, but to all the inhabitants of the earth. It is a call to hear and have a change of heart before it is too late.

The vision of the first beast ends on a somber note with what the narrator calls on the reader to hear. If the perverse powers of this world want God’s faithful to be exiled or imprisoned, they will be; if they want them to be killed, they will be. The reader encounters here ‘proverbial sayings’ which imply that, given the present state of the world and the nature of perverse and oppressive world powers, if evil rulers decide to exile or imprison the just, it will happen, if they decide to kill them, it will happen. Such is the nature of their perverse ‘authority.’

With the final words, the narrator asserts: ‘Here (in this) is the patient endurance and the faith of the holy ones.’ While this conclusion reflects a constant theme in Revelation that by patient endurance of suffering, oppression and even death, the ‘holy ones’ join in the victory of Christ, who overcame the world by his death, it is also to be argued that this proclamation is addressed to all the ‘inhabitants of the earth.’ Here is an alternate view of reality; here is a different world view; here is the choice laid before all humanity.

The vision of the beast presents our world with a sobering reality: evil exists and renews itself in varying forms throughout the ages. It is to this world, as it exists, with opposing forces for good and evil, that the community of faith is to share the Good News. How do we do this? How do we realistically present an alternate view of reality to ‘the inhabitants of the earth?’ How do we fight the evil of this world without sinking to its standards, meeting violence with violence, not tolerating the intolerant? How do we present a Gospel of patient endurance as a means of promoting good to a world that values power, influence, wealth? How can we make an inroad to furthering God’s plan without somehow compromising and making accommodations with the realities of our world? How can we be the place where God ‘tents’ within this world, trusting him to lead us to an unknowable future? Can we risk it?
The Second Beast (13:11-18)

11And I saw another beast coming up from the earth and it had two horns, like a lamb, and was speaking like a dragon. 12And all the authority of the first beast it does (exercises) before it and it makes the earth and those dwelling in it worship (pay homage) to the beast, the first, of whom was healed its fatal wound (wound of death). 13And it makes great sign that even (also) it should make fire to come down from the heaven onto the earth before the men (in the presence of, before mankind). 14And it deceives (leads astray) those dwelling upon the earth because of the signs which were given to it to do (perform) before (in the presence of) the beast, telling (saying to) those dwelling upon the earth to make an image of the beast which has the wound of the sword and has lived. 15And was given to it to give breath (spirit) to the image of the beast that also should speak the image of the beast and cause (make, do) that whosoever, should they not worship the image of the beast, would be killed (put to death) 16and he makes all (everyone), the small and the great and the rich and the poor and the free and the slaves that they should place (give) on them a mark (brand) on their right hand or on their forehead 17and that no one should be able to buy or to sell except (if not) those having the mark, the name of the beast or the number of its name. 18Here is wisdom. He having understanding, let him count up (calculate) the number of the beast; the number, indeed, is of a man and the number is six hundred sixty six.
Textual Notes

1. *Eidon allo therion anabainon ek tes ges* – ‘I saw another beast coming up from the earth.’ Harrington notes that in I Enouch 60:7-10 and IV Ezra 6:51, Behemoth (usually roughly synonymous with Leviathan and Rahab) is a land monster; here, likewise, this second beast arises out of the land. More to the point, in Daniel’s vision, the four beasts come up out of the sea (Dn 7:3), but in the interpretation of the vision they ‘arise out of the earth (Dn 7:11).  

   Focusing only on the text of Revelation, there is an internal logic for the second beast to rise out of the earth. First, 13:11 recalls 10:1, ‘And I saw another angel, a mighty one…’ This is the beginning of the vision of the Open Scroll, which culminates in the recommissioning of the ‘seer.’ It can also be noted that twice the ‘seer’ has seen ‘another angel.’ In both cases (7:2 and 10:1), the result of the vision is restraint. The first angel is commanded to hold back the four angels stationed at the corners of the earth; in the vision of the Open Scroll, the ‘seer’ is commanded not to write what he sees in the scroll and hears from the heaven, but to prophesy to/concerning the nations. It is the ‘mighty angel’ of 13:11, however, that is most significant. The description of this angel provides the background for the dark-humored parody of the ferocious dragon. This angel ‘comes down’ from heaven and takes his stand with one foot on the land, one on the sea and his right hand raised to heaven. In his stance, he combines all elements of creation: heaven, earth, and sea. By contrast, the dragon is ‘thrown down’ from heaven and is caught on the sand, between the sea and the land. The dragon is excluded from the heaven and given ‘authority’ for a limited time over the rest of creation, the earth and sea. To exercise his doomed ‘sovereignty’ he summons ‘monsters’ from those elements of creation over which he has been granted his ‘limited authority,’ the sea and the earth. The vision of ‘another beast,’ recalling the visions of ‘other angels’ whose presence in the narrative marks restraint, supports the parody of the dragon as a voice of ‘sound and fury, signifying nothing.’

2. *Eichen kerata duo homoia arnio kai elalei hos drakon* – ‘it had two horns like a lamb and was speaking like a dragon.’ The dragon has been named *diabolos* and *ha satan*, and has been characterized as the ‘deceiver,’ the ‘false adversary.’ It would appear that his ability to ‘deceive’ produces the beasts he calls up to do his bidding. This second beast has two horns, like a lamb, not the ten horns of the ferocious dragon and the first beast. And these horns are like the horns of a lamb. On the one hand, this would indicate the buds of horns on a young sheep before it has matured into a full grown ram whose horns are weapons. In itself, this is a parody of the monstrosity of the second beast. However, this description also recalls the image of Christ, the Lamb. In this case, the image of Christ is speaking with the voice of the dragon – and in this lies the deception, the anti-Christ, as it were. There is an appearance of what is good and holy concealing arrogance, deceit and evil.

3. *Ten exousian tou protou theriou pasan poiei enopion autou* – ‘all the authority of the first beast it does before (in the presence of) it.’ As the first beast is subordinate to the dragon, so the second beast is subordinate to the first. It is ‘a deceiver’ turning people to the first beast.

4. *Poiei… hina proskynesousin to therion to proton* – ‘it makes (causes)... that they should worship the first beast.’ The idea of deception, seduction, is carried in the action of the second beast. It makes the earth – from whence it comes – and all its inhabitants, over whom the dragon had been given (divine passive) authority for a limited time, worship the first beast, the one with the fatal wound that had been healed. That, again, was an allusion to and contrast with the ‘slaughtered Lamb’ that lives. What is unfolding in the portrayal of the second beast is the classic image of ‘a wolf in lamb’s clothing.’ Harrington writes that, if the first beast is a political symbol, it is the business of the beast from the land to promote the worship of the first. It is a religious symbol. It appears that the imperial religion in the service of Rome is principally in mind. In the Province of Asia, cultic officials required that religious honors be addressed to the emperor.  

5. *Poiei semeia megala* – ‘it makes great signs.’ Harrington suggests that the second beast takes on the role of a ‘false prophet,’ so that it can ‘work miracles.’ (see Rev 16:13, 19:20, and 20:10). This seems to reflect

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357 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*  
the apocalyptic imagery of Mk 13:22: ‘False Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.’ He also notes a connection with II Thess 2:9-10, which reflects early Christian tradition that expected that prodigies would precede the coming of the Antichrist. In particular, the second beast can make fire come down from heaven, an aping of the ‘sign’ of Elijah (I Kgs 18:38, II Kgs 1:10) and of the two witnesses (Rev 11:5).359

In 13:7, it was noted that ‘authority was given’ to the first beast. This created two options for the inhabitants of the earth, to choose for God according to the authority given to his prophets and witnesses, or to choose for false authority, false ‘divinity’ by becoming faithful to the beast and the dragon. The image of the second beast and his actions before men, underline the polar opposites arrayed before men, the ultimate choice that lays before them. This becomes explicit in v 14 where the text states clearly that the second beast is a deceiver. That the ‘signs were given,’ edothe, to it is another ‘divine passive’ in which the involvement of God in the two ways, the two choices, is expressed. The basic sense is that people are free; they can choose for God or not. While God wills the salvation of all, he will not force his will. The freedom God allows to humanity to accept or reject his offer of a relationship is in direct opposition to the forced religious practices of the imperial cult.

6. Poiesai eikona to therio – ‘to make an image of the beast.’ Harrington finds here a reference to statues of emperors set up in temples of Rome and of the empire, to which divine honors were rendered. Even if, in practice, the emperor in the imperial cult was subordinated to the gods, for Christians imperial cult was one with the worship of the traditional gods, and, as such, unacceptable.360

7. Edothe auto dounai pneuma te eikoni hina kai lalese – ‘was given to it to give breath to the image that also its should speak.’ In Israelite and early Christian tradition there was a belief that certain people were called and designated by God as he prophets; they spoke the word of God, spoke God’s will to the people. It has been noted that the primary role of such prophets was not to predict the future, but to critique the present in terms of God’s revealed word, the Torah. There also appears to be a liturgical ritualization of this belief. This is seen particularly in some of the Psalms in which the worshipper presents his prayer of petition in the temple and some temple functionary responds with an ‘oracle of salvation or assurance.’ The response is merely an expression of the belief that God has heard the prayer and will respond, not that the petitioner will get exactly what he asks, but that God will respond in a way that is best. In all cases, in Israelite and Christian tradition, this act of petitioning and receiving a response was guarded against a ‘magical’ understanding – if the petitioner said the right words and offered the right sacrifice in just the right way, God was forced to respond in his favor. The liturgical practices dramatized the relationship between the believer and God.

In the ancient world, such dramatizations were common among most pagan religious practices, but the ‘magical’ element was emphasized. There was a belief that the gods could be appeased and manipulated, that ‘consulting the oracles’ could give insight into the future. In this regard, Harrington sees the ‘giving of breath to images’ as a magical and deceptive aspect of pagan cults in which ‘images’ were honored as ‘gods.’ He first notes the contrast between this giving of ‘breath’ to the icon, the image, with the ‘breath of life from God’ that brought about the resurrection of the witnesses (11:11) and the image of the restoration of the ‘dry bones’ in Ezekiel (37:10) on which the image of the resurrection of the witnesses is based. In particular, he takes the idea that, as a result of receiving breath, the images can speak to reflect an ancient pagan practice in which speaking statues were engineered in various ways – by hiding someone in a hollow statue or by ventriloquism. Such voices could be used to instigate violent action against those who refused to comply with the official/authorized cult. Harrington admits that this is our only evidence that fraudulent practices of pagan cults were featured in the Roman Imperial Cult, but the claim is credible – especially since such practices as ‘consulting oracles’ seemed to thrive in the Roman Empire.361

To get a sense of how ridiculous the practice was, consider the image of the ‘Wizard of Oz.’ Still, the seriousness of the matter is seen in the fact that those who did not worship the images were to be killed.

359 Ibid.
360 Ibid.
361 Ibid.
8. *Hina dosin autois charagma* – ‘that he should give them a mark.’ Harrington writes that a *charagma* is an official stamp, as well as the impress of the emperor’s head on coins. The mark of the beast (14:11, 16:2, and 19:20) is surely a contrast to the seal of the Lamb (7:3 and 14:1). Servants of the beast are marked with the ‘stamp’ of the beast – a travesty of the seal of God upon the servants of God. Both the ‘seal’ and the ‘stamp’ are literary images. In neither case is a literal brand or tattoo to be envisioned.

On a number of occasions, the author’s penchant for using the literary device of repetition with variation has been examined. Another instance of this technique appears here. The opening of the sixth seal occasioned signs in the heavens such that the inhabitants of the earth took to flight and cowered in fear. Such ‘signs’ are always intended to be a cause of ‘repentance,’ of turning back, having a ‘change of heart.’ Apparently the ‘sign’ was effective for it was followed soon afterwards by the Sealing of the Faithful, a parody of which occurs in the second beast’s ‘marking’ of his followers. Prior to the ‘sealing of the faithful’ (6:15), and prior to the imposition of the beast’s ‘mark,’ there is an enumeration of ‘the inhabitants of the earth. These lists are similar, but with variation.

In 6:15, those listed include: *basileis* (kings), *megistanes* (great ones/magistrates), *chiliarchoi* (commanders of a thousand), *plousioi* (rich), *ischyroi* (strong/powerful), *douloi* (slaves), *eleutheroi* (free men). These were noted to be the seven ‘classes’ that made up Roman society (see note #6, p. 134).

In 13:16, those listed include: *mikroi* (small), *megalo* (great), *plousioi* (rich), *ptochoi* (poor), *douloi* (slave), *eleutheroi* (free men). Three elements from each list are exact, verbal repetitions – ‘rich,’ ‘slave,’ and ‘free men.’ Two terms, *megistanes* and *megaloi* are similar. The first has the connotation of great ones in the sense of ‘magistrates,’ ‘government officials,’ while the second is more general, ‘great ones,’ ‘notable people.’ Military commanders and ‘strong ones,’ possibly in reference to ‘soldiers’ but also ‘those of influence’ are contrasted with the ‘small’ and the ‘poor.’ ‘Kings,’ ‘absolute rulers’ are missing from the second list altogether, reducing the total number to six. But, it is the ‘kings,’ ‘emperors’ who enforce domination and impose the Imperial Cult. They force the choice between God and worldly values. They are the ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing.’

What can be noted in the two lists is that, in general, they are all embracing, all inclusive of the elements of humanity. From the perspective of God, seven ‘classes,’ the complete make-up of humanity are challenged by God’s signs to have a ‘change of heart,’ to opt for God and his will for everyone in the world. This includes even kings, the wielders of earthly power. From the perspective of ‘the kings of the earth,’ the rest of the world is to be dominated and they will enforce that domination by might, by force. They will usurp divine prerogatives in exercising their ‘supposed’ power. They will leave no option for people to choose to accept them and their power.

9. *Hina me tis dynetai agoraiai e polesei* – ‘that not would anyone be able to buy or to sell...’ The mark of the beast is the prerequisite for conducting commerce, an economic sanction impacting the very livelihood of people. It is another example of forced submission, of ‘Do it my way or not at all.’ Harrington identifies a retrospective allusion to the situation in Pergamum (2:13-16). There, Christian artisans who wished to earn a livelihood by practice of their trade, would have had to join pagan guilds. This is the more likely intended meaning, though he does note Collins’ contention that the ‘mark,’ more generally, could allude to coins of the realm bearing the image, name and insignia of the emperor. If that is the case, the author may be calling on his readers to avoid using Roman coins – thus effectively ruling out buying and selling.

In either case, making a living within the context of the prevailing world structure involves compromises and accommodations with policies and practices that oppose the will of God.

10. *Hode he sophia estin* – ‘Here is wisdom.’ Recall the phrase, ‘Here is the patient endurance and the faith of the holy ones’ with which 13:10 ended. The conclusion to the portrayal of the first beast began in 13:9 with the call ‘If anyone has an ear, let him hear.’ Throughout Revelation this has signaled a ‘frame break,’ an instance of the ‘omniscient narrator’ inserting his voice into the story he tells to address all readers of all ages. The narrator indicated the necessity of captivity/imprisonment, and even death, to bring to completion the ‘victory of the Lamb.’ The direct address to all later readers concluded with the *hode*

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362 Ibid.
363 Ibid.
phrase. Noting repetitive patterns in the book, it is reasonable to conclude that ‘Here is wisdom,’ introduces another ‘frame break.’ The simple mention of ‘wisdom’ recalls the common Old Testament adage, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’ As is commonly recognized, ‘fear of the Lord’ does not indicate terror, but a right and reverent relationship with God, giving God his due. Wisdom, in this case, involves recognizing the ‘beast,’ recognizing the ‘number of the man’ whom the beast represents. The number of the beast is 666.

On this, Harrington writes that the number of the beasts stands for its name, which can be discovered by the process of gematria, that is, by the addition of the numerical value of the letters of the name. In both Hebrew and Greek, in place of numerals, the letters of the alphabet were given a numerical value. The catch is that the name must be known before it can be decoded. (It is possible for several names to ‘add up’ to the same number. A graffito from Pompey reads, ‘I lover her whose number is 545.’ The girl and her friends would be able to recognize her name.) Harrington goes on to note that the ‘beast,’ a symbol of the Roman Empire, is here represented by an individual man, an individual emperor. This was, likewise, the case in Daniel 2:27-28 in which Nebuchadnezzar stands for the Babylonian Empire. It is reasonable to believe that the emperor is Nero, a figure much in mind throughout Revelation. It is scarcely coincidental that the Greek Neron Kaiser, translated into Hebrew, nwn qsr gives 666. (It is noteworthy that the Latin form Nero Caeser, translated into Hebrew, nrw qsr, gives 616, which occurs as a variant reading in some manuscripts. Still, one may not rule out a generic significance in the number 666. If seven is the perfect number, then six is the penultimate, the incomplete number, with 6-6-6 being emphatically negative. In contrast, Iesous gives 8-8-8, perfection and then some.364

Again, it is to be noted that Revelation seems to revel in multivalent symbols. It is likely that the name suggested is that of Nero and that Nero is contrasted specifically with Jesus along the lines discussed by Harrington. Nero, from the perspective of the late first century reader, supports the idea of apocalyptic literature being written backwards. If ‘John’ foresaw Nero, then his vision of the present must be true as well. From the perspective of all later readers, there is a pattern of corruption that can be seen in a succession of emperors, and in a succession of world empires. In every age diligence, patient endurance, and faith are the necessary components of members of the Church, the witnesses to Jesus Christ.

364 Ibid.
Commentary

When the dragon was hurled down from the heaven, he found himself on the shore of the sea, caught in between the water and dry land. God’s involvement in the ongoing story of finally establishing the rule of the Lamb was indicated by the fact that the beast ‘was given’ authority over the realms of creation below the heavens for a limited time. The significance of all of this is a recognition that, even though the final victory has already been won on the Cross of Jesus Christ, there is evil in the world, creating two opposing forces, the will and plan of God for the good of all and the arrogant, self-seeking power of the nations of the world, seeking to dominate humanity by force. In the end, humanity is faced with a choice – to opt for God and his will for good, or to opt for personal gain by compromising with and aligning oneself with the ‘so-called’ earthly powers.

Enter the beasts.

The first beast arose from the sea, the ancient symbol of watery chaos and un-creation. In appearance, it resembles the dragon – seven heads, ten horns. It represents the chaotic, violent rule of Rome and all earthly powers whose source is pure evil. It represents hubris and arrogance, all means of human corruption of the original plan of creation that are arrayed against God and his will for good. But such a will for evil can only be maintained if earthly kings and emperors choose to exercise power for themselves and not for the good of those governed. It is maintained by individuals. That is the symbolism of the second beast, the beast who rises out of the earth, the beast who represents Nero Caesar and all world rulers who corrupt the divine plan, who enforce their rule by force, who ‘worship’ the power of the first beast and the source of that power, the dragon.

Why such an interest in Nero? It would appear that the author of Revelation looked to a past catastrophe that shed light on what was to be expected if the Church accepted his call to ‘radical Christianity.’ During Nero’s reign, Gessius Florus was the Roman Governor of the Province of Judea. His disdain for the Jews, their beliefs, customs and traditions led to a rebellion in Caesarea in 66 AD. In response, he plundered the Temple and erected statues of Nero throughout Jerusalem. Nero’s response to the crisis in Judea was to dispatch Roman legions under the command of Vespasian to put down the rebellion. Nero’s suicide in 68 AD threw Rome into chaos. Vespasian returned to Rome to restore order and was proclaimed the new Emperor. Under his rule, the Jewish revolt was finally crushed, Jerusalem destroyed and the Temple razed. The slaughtered ‘head’ of the first beast was ‘revived.’ The ‘Zealot Option’ did not win ‘victory.’

In his vision of the second beast, ‘John sees’ a beast with two horns, like a lamb, and speaking like a dragon. It is impossible not to see in the appearance of the second beast an allusion to the ‘Slaughtered Lamb’ standing before the throne of God. It appears like the ‘Lamb,’ but speaks like the ‘dragon.’ It is likely that the author envisions the Nicolaitans, the Jezebel, the false prophets, who promoted making accommodations with Rome, as well as the false oracles, prophets, and practices of the Imperial Cult and the pagan gods it honored and worshipped along with the emperor. This second beast is a deceiver, a ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing,’ an Antichrist. This beast makes ‘signs’ like the prophets of Old, calling down fire from the heavens in the manner of Elijah, but leading people to worship the ‘false gods,’ the idols, the misguided beliefs in human powers to manipulate reality in its own favor – like the prophets of Baal whom Elijah challenged.

‘John’ notes specifically that this ‘beast’ is a ‘deceiver.’ It derives its authority from the ‘dragon,’ the diabolos and the satan, who has been characterized as the ‘serpent,’ the great deceiver of mankind.
from the dawn of creation. At the dawn of creation, God breathed life into humanity, but this ‘deceiver’ breathes ‘life’ into false prophets, false rulers, even false images. The breathing of ‘life’ into images so that they could speak appears to reflect an ancient practice in which people hid inside of or behind statues to give them a voice. These ‘speaking’ prophets and oracles are presented as ludicrous. The ‘power’ of the beast is to impose a culture, a political system, an economy in which conformity is demanded under pain of death and the livelihood of subjects is dependent upon embracing what is false, what is a lie, what opposes the will and plan of God for the good of all.

The mark imprinted on the followers of the beast is a parody of the Sealing of God’s Faithful. In several places in the text, the author’s penchant for using repetition with variation has been noted. Another instance of this literary technique appears here. The opening of the sixth seal occasioned signs in the heavens such that the inhabitants of the earth took to flight and cowered in fear. Such ‘signs’ are always intended to be a cause of ‘repentance,’ of turning back, having a ‘change of heart.’ Apparently the ‘sign’ was effective for it was followed soon afterwards by the Sealing of the Faithful. Prior to the ‘sealing of the faithful’ (6:15), and prior to the imposition of the beast’s ‘mark,’ there is an enumeration of ‘the inhabitants of the earth, those ‘marked’ or ‘sealed.’ These lists are similar, but with variation.

In 6:15, those listed include: basileis (kings), megistanes (great ones/magistrates), chiliarchoi (commanders of a thousand), plousioi (rich), ischyroi (strong/powerful), douloi (slaves), eleutheroi (free men). These were noted to be the seven ‘classes’ that made up Roman society (see note #6, p. 134).

In 13:16, those listed include: mikroi (small), megaloi (great), plousioi (rich), ptochoi (poor), douloi (slave), eleutheroi (free men). Three elements from each list are exact, verbal repetitions – ‘rich,’ ‘slave,’ and ‘free men.’ Two terms, megistanes and megaloi are similar. The first has the connotation of great ones in the sense of ‘magistrates,’ ‘government officials,’ while the second is more general, ‘great ones,’ ‘notable people.’ Military commanders and ‘strong ones,’ possibly in reference to ‘soldiers’ but also ‘those of influence’ are contrasted with the ‘small’ and the ‘poor.’ ‘Kings,’ ‘absolute rulers’ are missing from the second list altogether, reducing the total number to six. But, it is the ‘kings,’ ‘emperors’ who enforce domination and impose the Imperial Cult. They force the choice between God and worldly values. They are the ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing.’

What can be noted in the two lists is that, in general, they are all embracing, all inclusive of the elements of humanity. From the perspective of God, seven ‘classes,’ the complete make-up of humanity are challenged by God’s signs to have a ‘change of heart,’ to opt for God and his will for everyone in the world. This includes even kings, the wielders of earthly power. From the perspective of ‘the kings of the earth,’ the rest of the world is to be dominated and they will enforce that domination by might, by force. They will usurp divine prerogatives in exercising their ‘supposed’ power. They will leave no option for people to choose to accept them and their power.

The description of the second beast ends with what has been termed a ‘frame break,’ the omniscient narrator through whom the reader ‘hears’ the voice of the author interrupting the flow of the narrative to address all readers personally. Usually these breaks have been introduced by the phrase, ‘He having an ear, let him hear.’ At the end of the description of the first beast, that phrase was followed by, ‘Here is patient endurance and faith of the holy ones.’ The ending of the description of the second beast is introduced by the phrase, ‘Here is wisdom.’ In the Old Testament, the beginning of ‘wisdom’ is regularly stated to be ‘fear of the Lord.’ This does not mean ‘terror’ before an all powerful God, but rather a right relationship with God, a proper reverence and respect, giving God his due. There is an ellipsis here that omits the call to hear and immediately proceeds with what is to be heard by the readers of the book:
The number of the beast is the number of a man, and the number is 666. If the Greek of Nero Caesar is transliterated into Hebrew, the resulting number is 666. If the Latin for the name is transliterated into Hebrew, the resulting number is 616, a number attested as a variant reading in a number of manuscripts. The variant readings seem to establish clearly that Nero is in the mind of the author of Revelation, calling to mind all the historical associations of Nero in the life of the people of Israel and the Church.

Noting the author’s frequent use of multivalent images, it can also be noted that if the Greek of Jesus is transliterated into Hebrew, the resulting number is 888. The author frequently uses the number seven as a symbol of perfection and completion. 6-6-6 is deficient, one off perfection, 7-7-7. Jesus, on the other hand is perfection and then some, one better than 7-7-7, he’s 8-8-8.

In the original setting of Revelation, whoever the ‘man’ represented by the second beast is, and it is reasonable to conclude that the author has Nero in mind, pales in the face of the significance of the ‘wisdom’ proclaimed by the omniscient narrator. ‘The number, indeed, is the number of a man.’ The question posed by the omniscient narrator to all subsequent readers of the book is, ‘Can you recognize the wolf in sheep’s clothing?’ In the modern world, can we recognize ‘cults,’ religious programs and movements that make people comfortable, that fill their needs in some way, but in the end are all about the power, control and money that can be generated by ‘false prophets,’ by false religious leaders? Can we see the opposition between liberal and conservative Catholics/Christians as a bastardization of Christianity, a divisiveness that has no place in the Church? Can we separate the rhetoric of politicians, who seem to say all the right things about promoting the good of citizens from their intentions and motives to achieve power and control, to win elections with no real regard for the people they represent? Can we see the polarization of political parties as self-seeking in the face of bi-partisan cooperation to promote the common good? Can we see stereotyping and branding of groups of people as the prejudice and hate it really is? Can we find ‘prophetic’ voices speaking about ‘protecting ourselves’ at the price of finding what we have in common with others and working together for the good of all? When we answer to call to do the good works the Church is missioned to perform, is the call we answer actually from God or is it a distraction that, in fact, serves another purpose, that allows those issuing that call to serve their own needs, enhance their own reputations, bolster their own control and power? Where do we find ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing in our world?’ Where is it easy to miss them? What needs/wants do I have that would make me an easy prey for today’s false prophets?
Salvation and Judgment

The Companions of the Lamb (14:1-5)

14:1 And I saw (looked) and, behold, the lamb having taken his stand upon Mount Zion and with him one hundred forty four thousand having his name and the name of his father written upon their foreheads. 2 And I heard a sound from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of great thunder and the sound which I heard (was) like harpists playing on their harps. 3 And they sing as a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders and no one was able to learn the song except the one hundred forty four thousand having been redeemed (bought back) from the earth. 4 These are they who with women have not been defiled, virgins (chaste ones) indeed are they, these being those following after (disciples of) the lamb wherever they should go. These have been redeemed (bought back) from among men, first fruits for God and for the lamb. 5 And in their mouth was not found a lie; unblemished are they.

Textual Notes

1. *Eidon kai idou to arnion estos epi to oros sion* – ‘I looked and, behold, the Lamb standing on Mt. Zion.’ Harrington notes that Ps 2 again provides the background for this image: ‘I have set my king on Zion, my holy mountain.’ However, rather than a warrior king, ‘John’ sees the Lamb.365 The shift in perspective is indicated by *idou*, ‘Behold!’ The attention of the ‘seer’ and the ‘reader’ is drawn

365 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
away from the images of the two beasts to the ‘Lamb,’ a somewhat startling juxtaposition of images. As Levenson has noted, Zion is symbolic of ‘sacred space,’ the place where God chooses to dwell with men. Prior to the Babylonian Exile, the temple mount was considered to be the ‘physical’ place of such a meeting of God and humanity, the place where Israel’s relationship with God was solemnized. With the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora after the Exile, Mt. Zion became more symbolic, a representation of any place where God’s people were to be found, any place where the relationship with God could be celebrated, solemnized and ‘made real and active.’

2. hekaton tesserakonta tessares chiliades – ‘one hundred forty four thousand.’ These are the ‘victors’ of the letters to the Seven Churches, a mustering of the troops to do battle with the dragon and his beasts, those given ‘authority’ to wage war on the ‘holy ones.’ That this is a ‘mustering’ of troops is further suggested by the fact that, in the Sealing of the Faithful, it was specifically noted that 12,000 were ‘sealed’ from each of the ‘twelve tribes.’

3. To onoma autou kai to onoma tou patros autou – ‘his name and the name of his father.’ Specifically, here, Harrington draws attention to an allusion to the promise to the ‘victor’ at the end of the Letter to Philadelphia, 3:12 – ‘The one being victorious (overcoming), I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God and surely not will he go forth outside anymore and I will write upon him the name of my God and the name of the new city of my God, Jerusalem, that coming down out of the heaven from my God, and my new name.’

The allusion to the Letter to Philadelphia, the Church receiving the most positive treatment in all of the letters, focuses on the ‘combatants’ as living members of the Church, not some kind of heavenly army. The 144,000 stand in stark contrast to those who carry the mark of the beast. The battle ‘John’ envisions is between those who have opted for God and his will for the good of all and those who have opted for the corrupt and self-serving powers of the world.

4. With regards to v 2, Harrington notes that the phraseology echoes throughout Revelation. ‘I heard a sound from heaven’ (10:4, 14:15, 18:4); ‘like the sound of many waters’ (1:5, 19:6); ‘like the sound of mighty thunder’ (19:16); ‘harps’ (mentioned in 5:8 and 15:2). These phrases typically indicate a heavenly interpretation of what is seen in the vision, and that is the case here.


In note #10, p. 117, it was noted that ‘new song’ is a frequent phrase in the Psalms, but that the ‘songs’ are typically made up of familiar phrases and images borrowed from other hymns. The ‘newness,’ in most cases, refers to applying the images and sentiments to new situations in the lives of the believers. Such a traditional use of ‘new song’ is continued here.

6. Hoi egorasmenoi apo tes ges – ‘those redeemed from the earth.’ One of the earliest ‘doctrines’ to develop in emerging Christianity comes from St. Paul: Salvation is a free gift that cannot be earned. The ‘redeemed’ are those ‘bought back’ from the world and the price of redemption is the ‘blood of the Lamb.’ There is a major corollary to this doctrine: The redeemed live a life consistent with the gift they have received by faithfulness and love. The implication is this: We don’t perform acts of faithfulness and love so that God owes us; we opt to accept God’s offer of salvation and demonstrate our choice by what we do and how we live. Only those ‘redeemed’ can learn the ‘new song,’ can become sharers in a ‘new life,’ a new way of looking at the world and its values. The ‘redeemed’ are ‘redeemed out of the earth’ – from the inhabitants of the earth. These are the people who have made a fundamental choice for God and live in accordance with the choice they have made. The ‘redeemed’ is an all-inclusive, all-embracing class of humanity – the
faithful members of the Church and those who hear the Good News and respond in faith and love, those outside who respond to the mission of the Church. These are the people who resist the lure of false values, an evil drive to power and are victorious by patient endurance and faith.

7. *Houtoi eisin hoi meta gynaikon ouk emolynthesan parthenoi gar eisin houtoi* – ‘these are those who with women have not been defiled, for virgins are they.’ A surface reading of these words is problematic. They seem to suggest a disparagement of women, they defile, and an idea that ‘celibacy’ is the ultimate value and characteristic of the ‘redeemed.’ That is hardly in conformity with biblical attitudes towards sex and sexuality and the role of man and woman to share with God in the act of creation by producing children, populating the world.

While Harrington assumes that the 144,000 are the ‘armies of heaven,’ a debatable point since it has been argued (notes #2 and #3 above), given the intertextual allusions, that they refer to a mustering of troops from the Church and ‘evangelized inhabitants of the earth. He is correct in noting that, after the appearance of the two beasts and the marking of their followers, we are poised for ‘holy war.’ He now makes two observations that are pertinent to understanding the point of v. 4.

1) In a ‘holy war,’ such as the ‘wars of conquest’ recorded in Joshua, soldiers were required to preserve ceremonial/cultic purity (Dt 20; 23:9-10; see also Jdg 13:1-7, the birth of Samson; I Sm 1:11, Hannah’s vow concerning the birth of Samuel; I Sam 21:5). These references suggest the Nazirite Vow in which soldiers are not to cut their hair, drink wine or strong drink, or engage in sexual intercourse during the time of their military service. Harrington also notes the matter of priestly service as described in Lv 15:18. In both military service and the exercise of priestly office, ‘defile’ has the meaning and purpose of insulating the mysterious power of sex from the sacred ministries of priesthood and war. In the same way, the Scriptures were said to ‘defile’ the hands because study of them is apart from other tasks. ‘Virgins,’ then would be understood to be ritually pure soldiers around the Lamb. The most likely meaning for *Parthenos*, in this context is ‘chaste’ rather than ‘virgin.’

In this regard, it should be noted that Hebrew has no word that corresponds exactly to *Parthenos*, which in Greek refers to a biological virgin. *Parthenos* is used to render a number of Hebrew terms dealing with chastity, propriety, fidelity and the like, words that, in themselves, have nothing to do with biological virginity.

2) Focusing specifically on ‘chaste,’ *Parthenos*, Harrington notes that it is to be understood in a metaphorical sense. The Old Testament prophets, especially Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, represented the covenant relationship with God as a marriage of God with his people (Hos 1-3, Jer 2:1-4, Ez 16, 33). As such, all idolatry was regarded as adultery or fornication, and, in fact, Canaanite worship did involve ritual prostitution. In Revelation, the Church is the bride of the Lamb (19:7, 21:2-9), while Rome is presented as a harlot (17:4-6). The 144,000 are contrasted with the followers of the beast because they have refused to worship the beast and have remained faithful to the Lamb. In not giving themselves to the cult of the beast they have kept their ‘virginity.’ It must be acknowledged that others would take the text at its face value.

However, ‘celibacy’ for the clergy was a later development and Catholicism/Christianity has never promoted complete sexual continence as a way of life to the detriment of faithful marriage. Rogers and Rogers concur in understanding ‘virginity/chastity’ in a metaphorical sense indicating that they have kept themselves pure from all defiling relationships with the pagan world; they have resisted the seduction of the great harlot, Rome, with whom the Kings of the earth have committed fornication.

8. *Akolouthountes to arnio hopou an hypage* – ‘those following the Lamb wheresoever he should go.’ A number of Gospel passages speak specifically of following Jesus and of the costs involved. Note Mk 8:34, ‘He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”’ Lk 9:23, written at a later time when it was becoming evident that the Parousia was not imminent, modifies the saying from Mark to read ‘take up

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370 Ibid.
371 Ibid.
372 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
373 NRSV translation.
their cross daily.' This modification is in accord with Revelation's call to patient endurance. Later, in the same chapter, 9:57-62, Luke becomes more explicit about what it takes to be a follower of the Lamb: ‘As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven.”

The 144,000 are those who have committed themselves to follow Jesus and, as they share with him in his suffering, they are assured that they will share with him in his ‘victory.’

9. *Houtoi egorasthesan apo ton anthropon aparche to theo kai to arnio* – ‘These have been redeemed from men, firstfruits to God and to the Lamb.’ Rogers and Rogers note that, in the Old Testament, until the firstfruits of harvest or flock were offered to God the rest of the crop could not be put to profane or secular use. A regular designation for the Lamb/Christ is ‘firstfruits of the dead.’ There is an assimilation of the ‘victorious,’ those who live – and die – by patient endurance to the Lamb. There is a share in eternal life.

In the previous verse, it was stated that no one could learn the ‘new song’ except those “redeemed” from the earth. The same verb is used in this verse, but now it is more humanized – ‘redeemed from men.’ The idea of those ‘redeemed’ from among men suggests that there are others who are not, who will not share in the ‘victory.’ The battle lines are being drawn and humanity is faced with a choice of taking a stand on one side of the line or the other. Those who endure will be the ‘firstfruits’ of the harvest of salvation.

10. *Ouk heurethe pseudos* – ‘not was found a lie.’ Harrington finds allusions to Zeph 3:13 (The remnant of Israel – they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. They will pature and lie down and no one shall make them afraid.), to I Pt 2:22 (He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.), and especially Is 53:9 (They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.) Here, the lie would consist in acknowledging the claims of the beast. These allusions further assimilate the righteous with the Christ and contrast the Christ and his followers with the beast and his, who have throughout been characterized as deceivers.

11. *Amomoi* – ‘unblemished.’ Harrington writes that, in the LXX, *amomos* is the Levitical term for appropriate sacrifices; the 144,000 are sacrificially perfect. They are acceptable.

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374 NRSV translation.
375 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
376 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
Commentary

There is a narrative flow to Revelation, a storyline. Within creation there is good and evil. Evil opposes God and his will for the good of his creation. A ‘heavenly’ battle between good and evil has occurred, a battle beyond time and space – the realms of history, a battle between forces to influence and control the course of human history. One side seeks to dominate by force, to usurp the power and prerogatives of God; the other side seeks to promote love and the good of all, to allow humanity the freedom to accept the offer of a loving relationship with God, and with each other.

The dragon has been defeated and cast down to the realms below the heavens, to the realms of time and space, to the context of human life and history. The dragon, the symbolic source of evil, intends to dominate humanity, to steal the affections of people away from God. He has marshalled his forces, the beasts. The first beast arises from the sea, the symbol of watery chaos that threatens uncreation. This beast symbolizes the wanton drive for power, wealth, influence. It represents the ‘kingdoms of the earth,’ the political, economic, social and cultural structures that threaten and impinge on the good of all and the free choice of all to decide to serve a divine and benign sovereign. The second beast, arising from the earth, is subordinate to the first and represents those kings and rulers who devise ways to implement the values of power for power’s sake, for domination, to ‘worship’ all that opposes God’s love and will for good. The dragon and his ‘forces’ are arrayed for battle, battle to win the minds and hearts of men for evil.

A new vision begins in 14:1. In the typical fashion, it begins with the words, ‘I saw...’ For the first time since the appearance of the dragon, 12:3, what is seen is introduced by ‘Behold.’ The use of the word certainly indicates a change in perspective and an unexpected surprise. He sees the ‘Lamb’ standing on Mt. Zion. The appearance of the ‘Lamb’ in juxtaposition to the presentation of the ‘beasts’ is as surprising as what ‘John’ saw when he looked about for the ‘Lion of Judah,’ the one strong enough to open the seals – again the ‘Slaughtered Lamb’ standing before the throne of God. But the ‘battle’ has shifted to earth and now the Lamb stands on Zion, the biblical symbol of sacred space, the place where God dwells with his people. It is easy, here, to recall Jesus final words to his disciples at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, 28:20, ‘And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.’

The Lamb is surrounded by the one hundred forty four thousand sealed with his name and the name of his father. Some commentators want to see here the ‘victors,’ a heavenly army arrayed about the Lamb. However, since the battle has moved to earth, it seems more likely that what is intended is those out of all the earth who have been ‘sealed,’ those who live by patient endurance and for whom ‘victory’ is assured. When this vast number of faithful were introduced into the narrative of Revelation, it was noted that ‘sealing’ did not indicate some type of predestination, but rather, in the foreknowledge of God, a vast number, a host, of those living by patient endurance and faith. These constitute the earthly ‘army’ of the Lamb. The battle lines for the war between good and evil on the earth are being drawn.

Next the ‘seer’ hears a sound. This ‘sound’ has the function of ‘interpreting’ the vision. The sounds he hears are familiar in Revelation – rushing waters, thunders, the sounds of harpists. These ‘sounds’ have been used to suggest both the power of God in theophanic images and the sounds of the heavenly liturgies. The ‘sound’ is the sound of a ‘new song’ sung by the followers of the lamb before the throne of God. It is again possible to argue that this is a heavenly liturgy, sung by a heavenly choir, but it also can be understood as that which ‘broke the silence’ in the heavenly liturgy when the prayers of the

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377 NRSV translation.
faithful on earth were presented before the throne of God by an angel at the altar of incense. Within the Psalms, ‘new song’ appears in a number of settings. In every case there is hardly anything ‘new’ about the Psalm at all; it is rather a re-working of phrases and images drawn from other prayers in the book, but applied to a ‘new’ context. It would appear, then, that what is ‘new’ is the celebration of a heavenly liturgy on earth, the offering up of praise and confidence to God, ascending before his throne, on the eve of the earthly battle between good and evil. Only those who are faithful followers of the Lamb can learn this ‘new song,’ only they can lift their voices to speak/sing the truth.

The portrayal of the Followers of the Lamb, his ‘army,’

A. 144,000
B. Redeemed from the earth
C. Undefiled... chaste
C. Those following after the Lamb
B. Redeemed from men – anthropon
A. Firstfruits, no lie found, unblemished

The strength of the structure depends of the repetition of ‘redeemed.’ In the first instance, it is the ‘redeemed from/out of the earth.’ The phrase implies ‘inhabitants of the earth’ and this fits the new role of the ‘seer,’ to be a prophets to all the inhabitants of the earth. The second instance of the word is a repetition with variation. ‘from the earth’ has been replaced with ‘from men/mankind.’ The focus on humanity highlights the ‘human’ choice, to decide for or against God. It provides a clearer specification of the intent of God’s redemption.

There is a dual meaning to ‘redemption’ in the New Testament. In one sense, it refers to the ‘victors,’ those who share in the eternal life opened to humanity through Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. On another level, Christ died to ‘redeem’ mankind, to pay the debt due to human sinfulness. While all may not accept ‘redemption,’ the ‘redeemed’ also refers to the followers of the Lamb on earth, to the faithful in the Church. This dual focus is clearly developed in the ‘realized eschatology’ of John’s Gospel. The faithful followers of Jesus live between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet.’ They already possess redemption but have not yet lived into its full expression in eternal life.

The outermost elements of the structure are dependent on ‘having been redeemed.’ In the first case, ‘144,000 have been redeemed;’ in the second case, ‘those having been redeemed (are) the firstfruits, the truthful, the unblemished.’ This is not a case of repetition, but of specification. The vast number are those who are the firstfruits of the Lamb and of God, those in whose mouths no lie or deceit is found, the unblemished in the sense of sacrificially pure – worthy sacrifices, those worthy of sharing in the sacrifice of Christ himself by means of their patient endurance. In particular, here, it is the notion that ‘no lie is found in their mouths’ that is significant. This particular phrase suggests a refusal to buy into and proclaim the false claims of the dragon, to offer false worship to false ‘gods.’ This purity of intention mirrors the truthfulness of Christ, especially in the images of the Suffering Servant drawn from Isaiah. The three characterizations of the vast number of the faithful also serve to assimilate them to Christ, the firstfruits of the dead, the suffering servant in whom there was no deceit, and the unblemished Lamb of sacrifice.

The central elements of the structure illuminate two aspects of belonging to the ‘redeemed.’ On a mere surface reading, the first of these elements sounds sexist and puritanical, ‘those who have not been defiled with women, virgins.’ Such a surface reading flies in the face of finding consistent metaphors and biblical allusions for the imagery deployed in the book. In this case, the imagery functions on two
levels. The forces of good and evil are arraying themselves for battle. The ‘Holy War’ traditions of the Old Testament attest to the ancient practice of the Nazirite Vow. During the course of their military service, soldiers, or at least an elite corps of soldiers vowed to abstain from sexual intercourse, to abstain from wine or strong drink, and to let their hair grow long during the course of their service. In the story of the birth of Samuel, his mother, a barren woman, vows to dedicate her child to God if he will remove her barrennesss. The terms of his dedication reflect the Nazirite Vow. Samson, noted for his long hair, was born under similar conditions, but, in contrast to Samuel, he regularly violated the terms of his ‘vow.’ The point of the vow was that military service in establishing Israel’s place in the Promised Land was a sacred commitment, a commitment that required ritual purity. This idea of ritual purity was spelled out in the requirements for serving as a priest in the laws of Leviticus and also applied to worshippers bringing their sacrifices to the temple. What is expressed in English as ‘purity’ and ‘impurity’ had nothing to do with moral concepts dealing with sexuality. Sexual intercourse was the one act in which men and women were most like God, shared with him in the process of creation. It rendered men and women ‘unclean’ or ‘impure’ in a ritual sense. This impurity had to be removed by either a period of abstinence, purifying baths, or both. The Israelites engaged in ‘Holy War’ or participated in ritual worship as those dependent on God, not as those sharing in his creative acts.

On another level, in the Deuteronomic History and the corpus of prophetic writings, Israel was charged with breach of covenant for syncretistic practices, for mixing pagan religious practices with Yahwism. In pagan practice, ritual prostitution held a prominent place. By a kind of ‘imitative magic,’ worshippers attempted to assure a good harvest by planting their ‘seed’ within the temple prostitutes. This was regularly characterized as ‘whoring after the gods of other nations.’ This same inclination is to be observed throughout the Roman Empire where participation in the Imperial Cult was required, or even embraced by some communities who choose to make compromises and accommodations with the surrounding culture. All such practices constitute a ‘lie,’ a deceit in assuming that such practices could be assimilated into the life of faithful Christians.

Parthenos, again on a surface reading, poses another problem. In Greek the word means a ‘biological virgin.’ Hebrew had no corresponding word. Revelation is not promoting some early type of celibacy or abstinence from marital relations. In most cases in the LXX where the word is used, it translates Hebrew concepts of ‘ritual purity,’ ‘fidelity,’ and even ‘temporal abstinence’ as in the case of the Nazirite Vow and the requirements for those participating in cultic sacrifices.

What is to be read into the portrayal of the 144,000 troops of the Lamb is ‘worthiness.’ They are ‘worthy’ to serve God, to follow the Lamb; they are worthy, as was Christ, to be sacrificed for the sake of God’s will. They were the unblemished.

The vision of the Followers of the Lamb makes striking use of military images. The forces of good and evil are arrayed for battle. But in the end, the ‘army’ of the Lamb is a ‘choir.’ In modern culture militaristic images still abound. We wage a war against poverty, against drugs, against terrorism, against suspicious immigrants, against abortion, against just about anything considered evil — and at times just contrary to our personal and social values. There are legitimate battles to be fought, causes that support the rights and dignity of all humans to be upheld. But how do we fight these battles? According to the ‘seer’ of Revelation, we fight the good fight by joining the choir. How do we follow the Lamb? How worthy are we to share the ‘victory’? Do our efforts ‘win’ the ‘victory’ or merely polarize the battle lines? Do we seek to impose, to ‘force’ our values on others because we’re ‘right,’ or are we willing to merely ‘endure the struggle?’ What does patient endurance demand of us in our world?
And I saw another angel flying in mid heaven, having glad tidings to proclaim upon the earth and upon every nation and tribe and tongue and people, saying in a loud voice: Fear God and give glory to him because the hour of his judgment (judging) has come and worship him having made the heaven and the earth and (the) sea and streams of waters.

And another angel, a second, followed saying: She has fallen. She has fallen, the great Babylon, who from the wine of the burning anger (passion) of her immorality (illicit sexual activity) has caused all the nations (Gentiles) to drink.

And another angel, a third, followed them saying in a loud voice: If anyone worships (pays homage to) the beast and its image and receives a mark upon his forehead or upon his hand, and he will drink of the wine of the burning anger of God, having been mixed (with spices/ prepared) undiluted, in the cup of his wrath and he will be tormented in fire and brimstone (Sulphur) before the holy angels and before the lamb.

And the smoke of their torment forever (for the ages) arises and they have no relief (rest) day and night, those worshipping the beast and its image and if anyone receives the mark of its name.

Here (in this) is the endurance of the holy ones, those observing the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.

And I heard a voice from the heaven saying: Write, “Happy are the dead, those dying in the Lord from now (on).” Yes, says the spirit that they will have rest from their labors, for their works will follow after them.
Textual Notes

1. **Allon angelon** – ‘another angel.’ It has been noted that, in biblical literature, ‘Behold!’ indicates a shift in perspective or topic, a heightened perception, a surprise or perception of something unexpected. Revelation is consistent with the general use of this term in biblical literature. The author of revelation also uses another literary technique to introduce and indicate a change of direction in the overall narrative – the sight of ‘another angel.’ In general, in the instances that have occurred so far in the book, the appearance of ‘another angel’ halts a pattern of doom, destruction, and judgment and initiates a glimpse of salvation, mercy and redemption.

   In 7:2, four angels have been dispatched to the four corners of the earth and stand ready to unleash the destructive winds emanating from those corners. This destructive force is halted by the appearance of ‘another angel,’ commanded to hold back the destructive winds. The appearance of this angel leads to the Sealing of the Faithful.

   In 8:3, after the opening of the seventh seal and the appearance of seven angels with trumpets – ready to sound the trumpets and unleash another series of plagues, the appearance of ‘another angel’ inaugurates a period of silence and a heavenly liturgy during which the prayers of the faithful on earth rise up to the altar of incense before the throne of God.

   In 10:1, after the sounding of the sixth trumpet and release of fierce horsement on the earth, the appearance of ‘another angel' inaugurates the vision of the Open Scroll which culminates in the ‘seer’ being recommissioned for a ministry to all the inhabitants of the earth.

   Harrington notes that the appearance of ‘other angels’ and the Proclamation of Judgment serves to anticipate events yet to come and summarizes the coming judgment. Use of the expression ‘another angel’ marks a clear distinction from the angel with the seventh trumpet, the last angelic being mentioned (11:15).

2. **Petomenon en mesouranemati** – ‘flying in mid-heaven.’ ‘Mid-heaven’ is primarily an indication of the ‘sky.’ Ancient cosmology imagined a vast dome in the skies, holding back the ‘heavenly waters.’ God’s throne is above this vault, above the heavens. ‘Mid-heaven’ is the visible sky below the vault, the domain of birds and flying creatures, the realm of creation populated by the sun, moon and stars. This indicates, again, that the focus has shifted from the battle and victory in the heavens (above the vault – the realm of the divine) to the human realms, the earth, sea, and sky. The ‘sky’ – mid-heaven – covers all of the earth and sea indicating that the angel’s proclamation is for ‘all creation,’ all the inhabitants of the earth.

3. **Euangelion aionion euangelisai** – ‘eternal good news to proclaim/preach (announce the good news).’ Harrington observes that this ‘eternal good news’ recalls 10:1-2, 7. The ‘little scroll’ contained the good news of the mystery of God revealed to the prophets. This is the ‘good news’ now to be proclaimed to the ‘inhabitants of the earth.’

   The ‘inhabitants of the earth’ are specified as every nation, tribe, tongue and people, a common specification throughout Revelation. In 10:11, the ‘seer’ was recommissioned to prophesy to the ‘inhabitants of the earth,’ but it was specified that he was to prophesy to/concerning many peoples, nations, tongues and kings. The consistent role of a prophet is to critique and correct false ways of living. Within the social and political structures of ‘the world,’ kings can and do, in particular, foster and force such false ways of living. Hence the role of the prophet. The ‘good news,’ however, is intended for all the inhabitants of the earth in which kings can be included if they ‘repent,’ ‘change’ and promote living well. Otherwise, the inhabitants of the earth hearing the proclamation of the ‘good news’ are those who listen and resist the false values of the world’s power structures.

   In 11:9-10, the general specification of the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ were last seen. There they were gloating over the dead witnesses, however this gloating was transformed into ‘fear of God’ when the witnesses ‘rose.’ There was a sense of conversion, of seeing their own evil and becoming abashed at what they had done. That is the message of hope. For those who can see and have a change of heart, there is ‘good news.’

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378 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
379 Ibid.
4. *Phone megale* – ‘loud voice.’ The ‘omniscient narrator’ through whom the reader has access to the words of the book has used the technique of ‘frame breaks’ to insert his voice and highlight critical statements to which the reader is called to attend. The original author of Revelation uses a similar technique to call attention to pivotal ideas and themes. He records that he hears a ‘loud voice.’ Up to this point in Revelation, the phrase has occurred eleven times. The phrase introduces acclamations of God and the Lamb as answers to the sufferings of the Church and as proclamations of where real power and authority is to be found. It is used to introduce the cries of the faithful for justice, for God to act and heal the evils rampant in his world. It initiates loud cries to hold back vengeance and wrath, to spare the inhabitants of the earth and proclaim God’s mercy. It announces a proclamation of God’s salvation and goodness in the midst of evil and suffering and woe to the inhabitants of the earth who have no change of heart, who live with the consequences of their actions and choices. The ‘loud voice’ summons the ‘victorious witnesses’ to share in the life of heaven. It proclaims the establishment of God’s kingdom and the ‘victory’ in heaven.

In 14:7, the ‘loud voice’ announces that the time of judgment is NOW. On the one hand, the idea that the ‘hour of judgment is now/at hand’ can suggest the typical apocalyptic expectation that God’s definitive action to change everything, to trample the haughty and lift up the lowly is imminent. However, Revelation is clear that the definitive action has already been accomplished in the Cross of Jesus Christ. What is more likely, especially since Revelation shares with the Fourth Gospel a ‘realized eschatology,’ is that the author intends to proclaim that, for everyone, the hour of judgment is, in fact, now. How people live in the present moment matters. The choices made day by day have eternal significance. How this will later play out is unknown. But now, in this present moment, there is an urgency to be faithful and enduring, to have a change of heart. This moment matters.

5. *Phobethete ton theon kai dote auto doxan* – ‘Fear God and give him glory.’ Two observations can be made about these words. 1) They are reminiscent of patterns observed in Psalms of Thanksgiving. Throughout the Psalter, Psalms of Thanksgiving reflect the prayer of thanks and praise from the person or people who have experienced a benefit – a king after victory over an enemy, a person who has recovered from a serious illness or who has been vindicated in the face of false accusers, the whole people after a drought or after withstanding an enemy’s onslaught. The setting for these prayers often seems to involve the paying of a ‘Thanksgiving Vow/Offering’ in the temple. The Psalms regularly conclude with a call, often in the imperative, for fellow worshippers, fellow members of the community of faith, to join in thanks, to proclaim the goodness and mercy of God, to praise his goodness, to be in a proper relationship with him. This call is mirrored in the words, ‘Fear God and give him glory.’ 2) The voice of the omniscient narrator has twice broken frame to announce, ‘Here is the endurance and the faith of the holy ones,’ and ‘Here is wisdom.’ Recalling that ‘Fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom,’ the words suggest that establishing a right relationship with God and giving him the glory – rather than the Roman emperor or some other figure of worldly power – is wisdom, is the wise way of living now, in this moment of judgment.

6. *Proskynesate ton poiesante* – ‘Worship him making/creating...’ The call, to the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ ends with an injunction to worship the creator God, the God who made heaven, earth, the seas and the springs of waters. The moment of judgment is now and, in the polemic style of Revelation, the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ are invited and urged to abandon worship of false gods – including the emperor – and to worship the God of Creation.

Rogers and Rogers note that the eternal good news calls on all to fear and honor the creator, for the hour of judgment is at hand. God has revealed himself in nature – apart from any specifically Christian proclamation – so there is no excuse for people not to recognize and worship him.380

7. *Allon angelon... legon* – ‘another angel... saying’ The second angel merely makes a proclamation: ‘Babylon has fallen.’ The announcement is not made with a ‘loud voice.’ But the ‘loud voice’ returns with the proclamation of the third angel. This creates a chiastic structure:

380 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
A. An angel with ‘good news’ says in a loud voice, ‘the hour of judgment has come’
B. A second angel says, ‘Babylon has fallen.’
A. A third angel says in a loud voice, ‘those worshipping the beast will be tormented.’

The focus of the structure is the announcement that Babylon has fallen. But the ‘loud voices’ of the surrounding ‘A’ elements circumscribe the fate of Babylon/Rome/the earthly forces of evil within the judgment of God. That the ‘hour of judgment’ is here is good news for the faithful, the first ‘A’ element, but is ‘damnation/torment’ for those serving ‘Babylon/the beast.’ Harrington writes that ‘Babylon has fallen’ is an allusion to Dn 4:30 and that the chastisement of the great city will be the focus of 17:1-9. In Revelation, Babylon regularly functions as a symbol of Rome, and by extension, all arrogant and self-serving world powers. In the Old Testament, Babylon is depicted as the epitome of ungodly and unbridled lust for power and control. It is an oppressive force and a symbol of idolatry and immorality.381

8. Ek to oinou tou thymou tes porneias autes pepotiken panta ta ethne – ‘from the wine of the wrath/passion/madness of her fornication/illicit sexual activity she has given drink to all the nations.’ Again Harrington observes that this phrase brings together two phrases found separately elsewhere: ‘the wine of the wrath of God,’ 14:10, and ‘the wine of her fornication,’ 17:2. He notes that thymos, ‘wrath,’ is a rather unusual word. It can also indicate a strong feeling akin to madness and may be suggested by Jer 51:7 – ‘Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine, therefore the nations went mad.’382 Drunkenness can symbolize the intoxicating nature of power and fornication is a common symbol for idolatry – to whore after other gods. In the end, the images point to the inevitable fall of evil power so that serving such power, embracing such evil is sheer ‘madness.’ And yet it is a madness spread throughout all the nations – throughout all of creation. Note also that the text does not say, ‘she forced them to drink,’ but rather that ‘she gave them to drink.’ The evil of Babylon is that she entices people to evil, but they still have the choice to resist.

9. Ei tis proskynei to therion kai ten eikona autou – ‘if anyone should worship the beast and his image…’ Harrington notes that the ‘judgment’ recalls 13:4 (And they worshipped (did homage to) the dragon because he gave authority to the beast and they worshipped (did homage to) the beast, saying:  Who (is) like the beast and who is able to wage war with it?) and 13:16-17 (16and he makes all (everyone), the small and the great and the rich and the poor and the free and the slaves that they should place (give) on them a mark (brand) on their right hand or on their forehead 17and that no one should be able to buy or to sell except (if not) those having the mark, the name of the beast or the number of its name.) He notes that people are not compelled to worship the beast.383 13:4 is a parody of the earlier question, ‘Who is strong enough to receive the scroll and open its seals?’ There is an allure to worldly power and people seeking their own advantage will succumb to it. But, as the question indicates, this reflects a weighing of possibilities, of making a free decision to throw in one’s lot with evil, seductive power. 13:16-17 is a parody of the Sealing of the Faithful. Those who receive the ‘mark of the beast’ can engage in commerce, have rights and a standing within the economic and political power structure of the empire/worldly powers. Those who resist are outside the modes of legal rights and protection afforded by the empire, but are sealed by God for ultimate ‘victory.’ The ‘inhabitants of the earth’ have a choice and their judgment depends upon the choice they make.

10. Oinou tou thymou tou theou kekerasmenou akratou – ‘the wine of the wrath of God having been mixed undiluted...’ Anticipated in v 8, where the ‘wine of wrath’ referred to the intoxicating allure of power and the madness of pursuing it, here it is the ‘wine of the wrath of God.’ There is an exact correspondence between sin and its consequences – ‘you will reap what you sow.’ Note that, in normal, ‘family’ use, wine was often mixed with spices and even diluted with water. The ‘wine of the wrath of God’ is unmixed, undiluted, unadulterated.

381 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
382 Ibid.
383 Ibid.
11. *Basanisthesetai en pyri kai theio enopion angelon agion kai enopion tou arniou* – ‘he will be tormented in fire and brimstone (Sulphur) before (the) holy angels and before the Lamb.’ Harrington observes that the ‘lake of fire in 19:20 and 20:10 represents the ultimate fate of the wicked (21:8). It is the ‘second death.’ The image derives from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn 19:24-26) and is colored by Is 30:33 – ‘For a burning has long been prepared for you... the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, kindles it.’ That the torment of the wicked happens before/in the sight of holy angels and the Lamb could suggest a counterpart to those who gloated over the death of the witnesses, but that ‘glee’ is nowhere reflected in the text of Revelation.\(^{384}\)

In this regard it is worth noting that the ‘gloating’ of those looking on the corpses of the witnesses was turned into ‘fear of the Lord’ when the witnesses arose and were summoned to the heavens. The silence of the holy angels and the Lamb at the sight of the tormented wicked suggests a sense of sadness, sadness at what was lost, what could have been. It implies a connectedness between the ‘victors’ and the ‘defeated,’ between the ‘good’ and the ‘evil.’ The battle between ‘good and evil’ is not won by conquest, but by patient endurance and winning over the other side, not demolishing them. The very lack of ‘gloating’ in this image speaks of a contrast, of alternate world views, of a radical difference between the ‘followers of the Lamb’ and the ‘followers of the dragon.’

12. *Kapnos tou basanismou auton eis aionas aionon anabainei* – ‘the smoke of their torment rises up forever (to the ages of ages).’ ‘Rising smoke’ is a liturgical image. Recall the prayers of the faithful rising up and being presented to God by the angel attending the heavenly altar of incense (8:3-4). This ‘liturgical image’ is a parody of the former, where it is the everlasting smoke of the ‘fallen city’ and its inhabitants that arises. But even here, it is the design of God that has focus. His will is accomplished by the struggle with evil, with worldly powers, and this struggle gives him praise. The element of ‘gloating’ is absent; the sense is that all things work to the plan and glory of God. But the final aspect to be noted is that the smoke arises ‘forever.’ Human actions and human choices have eternal significance. Now is the moment of salvation – or damnation.

13. *Ouk echousin anapausin hemeras kai nyktos* – ‘they do not have rest day or night.’ Harrington sees an intertextual allusion here to 4:8, the image of the four living creatures who chant, ‘Holy, holy, holy,’ day and night without rest. He again concludes that this is a parody of worship.\(^{385}\) The proclamation of the three ‘other’ angels, anticipating later developments in the book and the ‘final’ end of God’s plan, introduces and develops the tenet that actions have eternal significance, that all things work together to accomplish the will of God, that the fates of the just and wicked are a matter of choice, and that ultimately, even the wrong choice, the rejection of God works to his glory in giving a sign of his will for mercy and love, a will that is rejected. The result of the choice of the wicked merely confirms the truth of the proclamation of the witnesses, the Church, and the very word of the Lamb.

14. Vv 9-11, the ‘judgment’ on those who worship the ‘beast,’ is counterbalanced with the ‘good news’ of judgment in the first ‘A’ element of the chiastic structure observed. It is also to be noted that these verses display an envelope or chiastic pattern:

A. If anyone worships the beast... and receives its mark
   B. He will drink the undiluted wrath of God
      C. He will be tormented before the holy angels and the Lamb
      B. Smoke rises forever
A. Those worshipping the beast... and receiving its mark

When viewed structurally, the center of the structure focuses on the ‘torment of the wicked’ before the holy angels and the Lamb.’ What is apparent is that there is a dividing line between the tormented and those experiencing bliss. This is reminiscent of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). The fate of both the rich man and Lazarus were determined by their choices, by how they lived day to day. The torment of the rich man was to ‘see’ the bliss, the happiness of Lazarus but to be unable to share in it. The final message of the parable was that, with Moses and the Prophets, with the word of God and the

\(^{384}\) Ibid.
\(^{385}\) Ibid.
testimony of the witnesses, people have all they need to guide them to live correctly, to guide them in the choices they make. In a dualistic perspective, the perspective that governs Revelation, the choices people make puts them on one side of the line or the other. Again, actions and choices have eternal significance. It is the patterns of actions people need to attend to. It is difficult, even unlikely, that people will change, will alter firmly established patterns of behavior, patterns of making choices. The ultimate choice, built up on the patterns of choices made over a lifetime, is for or against God, for happiness or torment. The 'B' elements in the structure encompass and specify the torment. The first 'B' element implies that those who 'drink of the wine of the fornication of Babylon' will, by natural consequence, drink of the 'wine of God's wrath.' They will live by their choice. The second 'B' element indicates that this is an 'eternal' choice. It is 'smoke rising up forever.' The 'liturgical' connotation of this phrase asserts that all things work to further God's plan and purpose, as was noted. The ‘A’ elements move from ‘anyone’ (singular) to ‘those’ (plural) worshipping the beast and receiving its mark. For each person, to choose 'the beast' means choosing the 'wrath of God.' The 'wrath of God' involves separation from God, his angels and the ‘victors.’ This is not a ‘rejection’ by God but a chosen separation on the part of the individual. And, sadly, for all those who make such a choice, the separation is forever. Still, that separation of those who choose against accepting God’s offer of love, mercy, a personal relationship, serves the purpose of God. It in no way diminishes God’s will for the good of humanity, for the good of all, for love and mercy and peace.

15. *Hode he hypomone ton hagion estin* – ‘Here is the (patient) endurance of the holy ones.’ It has been argued that hode (Here, In this) functions as a signal for a frame break, for the omniscient narrator to insert his voice into the text. It can also, then, be argued that nai (Yes!), in v 13, is an interjection that functions in the same way. If this is the case, and it is reasonable to conclude that it is, then vv 12-13 display another small chiastic structure in which the words of the omniscient narrator surround and highlight the words of the original author – the words he hears from heaven. It is as if the final narrator/editor of the book is raising a red flag, saying, ‘Stop! Pay attention to this. This is what the whole proclamation has intended to communicate!’ The structure can be outlined as follows:

A. [narrator/editor] ‘Here is the endurance (merit?) of the holy ones, those observing (keeping) the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus!’

B. [original author] ‘And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write: Happy are the dead, those dying in the Lord, from now on.”’

A. [narrator/editor] ‘Yes! The Spirit says that they will have rest from their labors, for their works will follow after them.’

In the structure, the ‘voice from heaven’ functions as an ‘angel interprens,’ spelling out for the author the meaning of the vision of the three angels. But now the voice of the narrator functions as an ‘angel interprens’ interpreting for the reader the meaning of the author’s explanation of the meaning of the vision. The whole passage has focused on alternate choices and the consequences of those choices. The choice for God entails keeping his commandments and holding fast to faith in Jesus Christ and his message. Here is the value, the way of life that the final editor of the book holds out to its readers. In the context of the late first century province of Asia, the author of Revelation has been encouraging the Churches of the province to adopt a radical Christianity, a Christianity that brooks no compromise or accommodation with the Roman empire, no participation in the Imperial Cult. He is fully aware that those who take a stand against Rome may pay the ultimate price, death. But the suffering, even death, engendered by staying absolutely true to Christian faith and the roots of that faith are a participation in the ‘victory’ of Jesus Christ. Death, in this context, is not something to be feared, but a ‘happy fate.’ This vision of judgment depicts the dividing line between the blessed and the tormented. There is ultimate value in keeping the faith, living by God’s will and plan. To this interpretation, the final narrator/editor of the book says, ‘Yes!’ ‘That’s it. That’s what being a follower of the Lamb, a disciple of Jesus Christ, a member of the Church is all about. That is the victory we share!’ Harrington notes, in particular, that the final words, ‘rest from their labors’ and ‘their works will follow
after them’ are clear allusions to Mt 11:28 (Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest) and the Last Judgment scene in Mt 25:31-46. Not only the ‘works’ of the Churches, but the right intentions for performing those ‘works’ functioned prominently in the Letters to the Churches. What we do, why we do it, the choices we make and why we make them – these have eternal significance no matter what time or place we live, no matter the circumstances of the Church in its present world.

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386 NRSV translation.
387 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
Commentary

In the narrative logic of Revelation, the battle between good and evil has moved from the heavens to the earth. At the beginning of Chapter 14, there was a vision of the Followers of the Lamb, gathering around the Lamb on Mt. Zion. It appeared that the battle lines had been drawn. What might be expected at this point is a description of the battle on earth, the Church arrayed against the ferocity of worldly power structures. But, as happens so often in Revelation, expectations are shattered. Instead of a battle scene, the reader is confronted with the vision of three angels, essentially announcing that the battle has been won, Babylon has fallen, and proclaiming the judgment on the good and the evil of this world.

The overall theological perspective of Revelation is that of ‘realized eschatology.’ This is a world-view shared by the author of the Fourth Gospel. The existence of the Church, the followers of the Lamb, is caught up between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet.’ Jesus Christ, on the Cross, has overcome the world and its false power structures. Members of the Church, by their faithful and patient endurance, share in that once-for-all ‘victory.’ That is the ‘already.’ But the full effects of that ‘victory’ have yet to be established and that will come about by the Church fulfilling her mission to continue to do what Christ did, to confront false values, false expectations, false attempts at controlling life – and the lives of others, to confront these things not by taking up arms and forcing submission to the will and plan of God, but by witnessing to the truth, enduring patiently, being a ‘sign’ of God’s true will and plan for the ‘inhabitants of the earth.’

From that perspective, it makes perfect sense to ‘jump ahead’ in the story, to proclaim the judgment that is already in place but whose full implications have yet to be realized. The author of Revelation is not interested in the details of the earthly ‘battle,’ only in its outcome. This, in particular, recalls the vision of the Followers of the Lamb, in which the 144,000 ‘troops’ of the Lamb are basically viewed as a ‘choir.’ The final outcome, present for inhabitants of the earth right now, continues to work itself out in the choices people make in how they live their lives, in choosing for or against God and his offer of an eternal relationship with him, a relationship that promotes the good, the well-being, the redemption of all. That is, while the Proclamation of Judgment, vv 6-13, anticipate later developments in the story of Revelation, it fits its current placement in the narrative as a statement of what ‘already is,’ as a statement of what really constitutes the context in the world in which the Church finds itself – in every age.

The pivotal nature of this Proclamation of Judgment in the overall development of the Book of Revelation can be seen in a number of structural elements and techniques used to develop its content. The Proclamation of Judgment takes the form of another ‘heavenly vision.’ ‘John’ will see three angels, each of them specifically designated as ‘another angel.’ To this point in the narrative, that term has been used multiple times. The author of revelation uses the sight of ‘another angel’ to indicate a change of direction in the overall narrative. In general, in the instances that have occurred so far in the book, the appearance of ‘another angel’ halts a pattern of doom, destruction, and judgment and initiates a glimpse of salvation, mercy and redemption. In 7:2, four angels had been dispatched to the four corners of the earth and stand ready to unleash the destructive winds emanating from those corners. This destructive force is halted by the appearance of ‘another angel,’ commanded to hold back the destructive winds. The appearance of this angel leads to the Sealing of the Faithful. In 8:3, after the opening of the seventh seal and the appearance of seven angels with trumpets – ready to sound the trumpets and unleash another series of plagues – the appearance of ‘another angel’ inaugurates a period of silence and a heavenly liturgy during which the prayers of the faithful on earth rise up to the
altar of incense before the throne of God. In 10:1, after the sounding of the sixth trumpet and release of fierce horsemen on the earth, the appearance of ‘another angel’ inaugurates the vision of the Open Scroll which culminates in the ‘seer’ being recommissioned for a ministry to all the inhabitants of the earth.

The sight of ‘another angel’ indicates a change in perspective, something surprising, something unexpected in much the same way as the use of ‘Behold!’

There are other balances and repetitions. Both the first and the third angels speak ‘in a loud voice.’ The second angel merely ‘says.’ Moreover, the content of the proclamation of the third angel begins and ends with the idea of those who worship the beast and receive his mark. These initial observations suggest that the content may be deployed in a chiastic (concentric) pattern and that is the case.

A. An angel with ‘good news’ says in a loud voice, ‘the hour of judgment has come’
B. A second angel says, ‘Babylon has fallen.’
A. A third angel says in a loud voice, ‘those worshipping the beast will be tormented.’

The vision begins with the sight of ‘another angel’ flying in mid-heaven. ‘Mid-heaven’ refers to the sky, the place of the sun, moon and stars, the element of the ‘heavenly’ component of creation visible and available to humanity. The throne of God is ‘above the heaven,’ above the imagined ‘heavenly vault.’ The angel flying in mid-heaven reinforces the fact that the focus of the narrative has been firmly shifted to the created world, the world of the ‘inhabitants of the earth.’

Characters in Revelation are initially described by what ‘they have’ – having a sword, having stars in his right hand, having seven heads, having horns, having crowns, having a small scroll, having a golden censer. This ‘other angel’ is characterized not by some physical object in his possession, but by having ‘good news’ to proclaim to all the ‘inhabitants of the earth,’ every nation, tribe, tongue and people. Once again the commission of the ‘seer’ to be a prophet to/concerning all the inhabitants of the earth is invoked. This ‘good news’ is for everyone.

The angel ‘speaks in a loud voice.’ The author of Revelation has often used ‘Behold’ to draw special attention to what he sees or hears. ‘Speaking in a loud voice’ functions in the same way. Up to this point in Revelation, the phrase has occurred eleven times. The phrase introduces acclamations of God and the Lamb as answers to the sufferings of the Church and as proclamations of where real power and authority are to be found. It is used to introduce the cries of the faithful for justice, for God to act to heal the evils rampant in his world. It initiates loud cries to hold back vengeance and wrath, to spare the inhabitants of the earth and proclaim God’s mercy. It announces a proclamation of God’s salvation and goodness in the midst of evil, and suffering and woe to the inhabitants of the earth who have no change of heart, who live with the consequences of their actions and choices. The ‘loud voice’ summons the ‘victorious witnesses’ to share in the life of heaven. It proclaims the establishment of God’s kingdom and the ‘victory’ in heaven. In 14:7, the ‘loud voice’ announces that the time of judgment is NOW. This is the ‘good news.’

On the one hand, the idea that the ‘hour of judgment is now/at hand’ can suggest the typical apocalyptic expectation that God’s definitive action to change everything, to trample the haughty and lift up the lowly is imminent. However, Revelation is clear that the definitive action has already been accomplished in the Cross of Jesus Christ. What is more likely, especially since Revelation shares with the Fourth Gospel a ‘realized eschatology,’ is that the author intends to proclaim that, for everyone, the
hour of judgment is, in fact, now. How people live in the present moment matters. The choices made day by day have eternal significance. How this will later play out is unknown. But now, in this present moment, there is an urgency to be faithful and enduring, to have a change of heart. This moment matters.

The ‘loud voice’ speaks two imperatives: ‘Fear God’ and ‘Give him glory.’ Two observations can be made about these words. First, they are reminiscent of patterns observed in Psalms of Thanksgiving. Throughout the Psalter, Psalms of Thanksgiving reflect the prayer of thanks and praise from the person or people who have experienced a benefit—a king after victory over an enemy, a person who has recovered from a serious illness or who has been vindicated in the face of false accusers, the whole people after a drought or after withstanding an enemy’s onslaught. The setting for these prayers often seems to involve the paying of a ‘Thanksgiving Vow/Offering’ in the temple. The Psalms regularly conclude with a call, often in the imperative, for fellow worshippers, fellow members of the community of faith, to join in thanks, to proclaim the goodness and mercy of God, to praise his goodness, to be in a proper relationship with him. This call is mirrored in the words, ‘Fear God and give him glory.’ Moreover, the call to reverence God, to thank him, is typically given a motivation. In this case it is the ‘creator’ aspect of God that is help up for praise; he is the maker of the heavens, the earth, the seas and streams. As creator, his will holds sway over what he has created—and his will is a benevolent will.

Secondly, the voice of the omniscient narrator has twice broken frame to announce, ‘Here is the endurance and the faith of the holy ones,’ and ‘Here is wisdom.’ Recalling that ‘Fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom,’ the words suggest that establishing a right relationship with God and giving him the glory—rather than the Roman emperor or some other figure of worldly power—is wisdom, is the wise way of living now, in this moment of judgment.

At least implicitly, the proclamation of the first angel concerns the judgment of the just. It focuses on those called to participate in a liturgy, a celebration of God’s authority over all creation. Counterbalanced against this positive proclamation is the dismal judgment upon the unjust, the worshippers of the beast, in the proclamation of the third angel.

The second angel merely makes a proclamation: ‘Babylon has fallen.’ The announcement is not made with a ‘loud voice.’ But the ‘loud voice’ returns with the proclamation of the third angel. This creates a chiastic structure. The focus of the structure is the announcement that Babylon has fallen. But the ‘loud voices’ of the surrounding ‘A’ elements circumscribe the fate of Babylon/Rome/the earthly forces of evil within the judgment of God. That the ‘hour of judgment’ is here is good news for the faithful, the first ‘A’ element, but is ‘damnation/torment’ for those serving ‘Babylon/the beast.’

The proclamation of the third angel also is constructed in a chiastic pattern:

A. If anyone worships the beast... and receives its mark
   B. He will drink the undiluted wrath of God
   C. He will be tormented before the holy angels and the Lamb
   B. Smoke rises forever

A. Those worshpping the beast... and receiving its mark

When viewed structurally, the center of the structure focuses on the ‘torment of the wicked’ before the holy angels and the Lamb. In contrast to those who ‘gloated’ over the death of the witnesses, the fate of those worshipping the beast before the angels and the Lamb is met with silence. In this regard it is worth noting that the ‘gloating’ of those looking on the corpses of the witnesses was turned into ‘fear of the Lord’ when the witnesses arose and were summoned to the heavens. The silence of the holy angels
and the Lamb at the sight of the tormented wicked suggests a sense of sadness, sadness at what was lost, what could have been. It implies a connectedness between the ‘victors’ and the ‘defeated,’ between the ‘good’ and the ‘evil.’ The battle between ‘good and evil’ is not won by conquest, but by patient endurance and winning over the other side, not demolishing them. The very lack of ‘gloating’ in this image speaks of a contrast, of alternate world views, of a radical difference between the ‘followers of the Lamb’ and the ‘followers of the dragon.’

What is apparent is that there is a dividing line between the tormented and those experiencing bliss. This is reminiscent of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). The fate of both the rich man and Lazarus were determined by their choices, by how they lived day to day. The torment of the rich man was to ‘see’ the bliss, the happiness of Lazarus but to be unable to share in it. The final message of the parable was that, with Moses and the Prophets, with the word of God and the testimony of the witnesses, people have all they need to guide them to live correctly, to guide them in the choices they make. In a dualistic perspective, the perspective that governs Revelation, the choices people make puts them on one side of the line or the other. Again, actions and choices have eternal significance. It is the patterns of actions people need to attend to. It is difficult, even unlikely, that people will change, will alter firmly established patterns of behavior, patterns of making choices. The ultimate choice, built up on the patterns of choices made over a lifetime, is for or against God, for happiness or torment.

The ‘B’ elements in the structure encompass and specify the torment. The first ‘B’ element implies that those who ‘drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication (Babylon)’ will, by natural consequence, drink of the ‘wine of God’s wrath.’ They will live by their choice. ‘Wrath,’ thymos, can mean ‘wrath,’ ‘strong passion,’ ‘madness.’ Drunkenness can symbolize the intoxicating nature of power and fornication is a common symbol for idolatry – to whore after other gods. In the end, the images point to the inevitable fall of evil power so that serving such power, embracing such evil is sheer ‘madness.’ And yet it is a madness spread throughout all the nations – throughout all of creation. Note also that the text does not say, ‘she forced them to drink,’ but rather that ‘she gave them to drink.’ The evil of Babylon is that she entices people to evil, but they still have the choice to resist. The second ‘B’ element indicates that this is an ‘eternal’ choice. It is ‘smoke rising up forever.’ The ‘liturgical’ connotation of this phrase asserts that all things work to further God’s plan and purpose, as was noted.

The ‘A’ elements move from ‘anyone’ (singular) to ‘those’ (plural) worshipping the beast and receiving its mark. For each person, to choose ‘the beast’ means choosing the ‘wrath of God.’ The ‘wrath of God’ involves separation from God, his angels and the ‘victors.’ This is not a ‘rejection’ by God but a chosen separation on the part of the individual. And, sadly, for all those who make such a choice, the separation is forever. Still, that separation of those who choose against accepting God’s offer of love, mercy, a personal relationship, serves the purpose of God. It in no way diminishes God’s will for the good of humanity, for the good of all, for love and mercy and peace.

It has been argued that hode (‘Here,’ ‘In this’) functions as a signal for a frame break, for the omniscient narrator to insert his voice into the text. It can also, then, be argued that nai (Yes!), in v 13, is an interjection that functions in the same way. If this is the case, and it is reasonable to conclude that it is, then vv 12-13 display another small chiastic structure in which the words of the omniscient narrator surround and highlight the words of the original author – the words he hears from heaven. It is as if the final narrator/editor of the book is raising a red flag, saying, ‘Stop! Pay attention to this. This is what the whole proclamation has intended to communicate!’

The structure can be outlined as follows:
A. [narrator/editor] ‘Here is the endurance (merit?) of the holy ones, those observing (keeping) the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus!’
B. [original author] ‘And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write: Happy are the dead, those dying in the Lord, from now on.”’
A. [narrator/editor] ‘Yes! The Spirit says that they will have rest from their labors, for their works will follow after them.’

In the structure, the ‘voice from heaven’ functions as an ‘angel interprens,’ spelling out for the author the meaning of the vision of the three angels. But now the voice of the narrator functions as an ‘angel interprens,’ interpreting for the reader the meaning of the author’s explanation of the meaning of the vision.

The whole passage has focused on alternate choices and the consequences of those choices. The choice for God entails keeping his commandments and holding fast to faith in Jesus Christ and his message. Here is the value, the way of life that the final editor of the book holds out to its readers.

In the context of the late first century province of Asia, the author of Revelation has been encouraging the Churches of the province to adopt a radical Christianity, a Christianity that brooks no compromise or accommodation with the Roman empire, no participation in the Imperial Cult. He is fully aware that those who take a stand against Rome may pay the ultimate price, death. But the suffering, even death, engendered by staying absolutely true to Christian faith and the roots of that faith are a participation in the ‘victory’ of Jesus Christ. Death, in this context, is not something to be feared, but a ‘happy fate.’

This vision of judgment depicts the dividing line between the blessed and the tormented. There is ultimate value in keeping the faith, living by God’s will and plan.

To this interpretation, the final narrator/editor of the book says, ‘Yes! That’s it. That’s what being a follower of the Lamb, a disciple of Jesus Christ, a member of the Church is all about. That is the victory we share!’

We live between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet.’ That is our present moment in time. And this present moment, now, is the hour of judgment; now is the moment of salvation – or not. What sense of urgency do we as individuals have to live ‘this moment’ as the moment of judgment? What sense of urgency does the faith community have to live ‘this moment’ as the moment of judgment? What does this mean to us in practical terms, in how we live our lives from day to day and moment to moment? When, in a polarized world, the ‘other side’ seems to be defeated, do we have a sense of ‘victory,’ ‘happiness,’ or ‘gloating?’ Or rather is there a sense of sadness? In the light of the portrayal of the present moment as the moment of judgment, how do we understand sin and redemption? Do we really embrace and live the ‘already’ as we move to the ‘not yet?’ What are the intoxicating allurements of this world, our world, for us?
The Harvest (14:14-16)

14 And I looked and, behold, a white cloud and sitting upon the cloud (one) like a son of a man, having upon his head a golden crown (wreath) and in his hand a sharp sickle. 15 And another angel came forth from the temple crying out in a loud voice to the one sitting upon the cloud: Put forth (send) your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come because the harvest of the earth has become dry (ripe). 16 And he took, the one sitting upon the cloud, his sickle upon the earth and the earth was harvested (reaped).

Textual Notes

1. *Idou* – ‘Behold!’ After visions of three angels, the object of the vision changes – a ‘white cloud’ and ‘one sitting on it.’ ‘Behold’ signals this change in what is seen. If the Proclamation of Judgment in vv 6-13 focused on the fact that the hour of judgment is now, the Harvest (vv 14-16) and the Vintage (vv 17-20) look to a future, final ‘judgment.’

2. *Nephele leuke* – ‘white cloud.’ Thoughout Revelation there have been images of fierce storms, with hail and lightning. What is seen here is a ‘white cloud,’ which can simply be indicative of the dry, warm weather of harvest time. But it’s also a peaceful image. The harvesting of the earth is not presented as a terrifying ordeal, but a simple reaping of a good crop.

3. *Huion anthropou* – ‘son of man.’ (see Note #11, p. 27). *Huios anthropou* translates the Hebrew expression *ben adam* – ‘son of man.’ In most cases this means simply ‘a human being.’ Yet the phrase applied to Ezekiel when he is addressed by God implies a human being to whom God imparts authority to prophesy. In Dn 7:13 it refers of a human figure coming from the realms of heaven. These images are in the minds of the evangelists in their Gospel descriptions of Jesus as the ‘son of man.’ It refers to Jesus in his earthly life. The Gospels express the theological conviction that the ‘son of man,’ the earthly Jesus, is the resurrected Christ, the coming judge of all creation. In particular, in Mk 14:62, Jesus answers the high priest by saying, ‘You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the power and coming with the clouds of heaven.’ ‘Sitting at the right hand of the power’ expresses a special relationship with the ‘power,’ with God. It implies a sharing in the authority of God. While ‘coming with the clouds of heaven’
suggests his divinity. The authority of Jesus is made even more explicit in Mt 24:31-33 where the ‘son of man’ commands his angels to gather up his elect from throughout creation. In Mt 25:31-33, this coming of the ‘son of man’ is specifically linked with judgment.

4. **Stephanon chrysoun** – ‘a golden crown.’ Typically, Revelation distinguishes between *stephanos* and *diadema*. *Stephanos* is most often considered a crown or wreath of ‘victory,’ while *diadema* refers to a ‘royal crown,’ an emblem of authority and rule. So far, *diadema* has only been used for the ‘crowns’ on the heads of the dragon (12:3) and those on the head of the first beast (13:1). The rule of Christ is not established by ‘conquest’ but by submission – ‘not my will but yours be done.’ The ‘victory’ of the Lamb occurs on the Cross; Christ has ‘overcome’ the world not by might but by patient endurance and submission.

5. **Drepanon oxy** – ‘sharp sickle.’ Harrington notes that the ‘son of man’ comes not to conquer but to reap. He cites Mk 13:26 in which the coming of the son of man on the clouds is the beginning of judgment. He also suggests a backwards look to Rv 1:7 in which all the tribes of the earth lament in remorse at the coming, with the clouds, of the glorified Christ. \(^\text{388}\)

‘Judgment,’ like a ‘harvest,’ is a time of discrimination, of distinguishing between the ‘weeds’ and the ‘wheat,’ the ‘good’ and the ‘bad.’ It is not a time of violent conquest, but simply sorting out what *is*.

6. **Allos angelos exelthen ek tou naou** – ‘another angel came out of the temple.’

‘Another angel...’ (see Note #1, p. 260.)

‘Temple.’ Throughout the Letters and Visions, the heavenly ‘temple’ has been contrasted with ‘pagan temples.’ The ‘heavenly temple’ is the site of the throne of God and the altar before it. It is that place where the right relationship between God and his creatures is celebrated and made real. The ‘throne’ in this temple is the seat of God, the seat of his sovereignty, and this, too, contrasts with the seat of power of the emperor and other worldly powers. That the ‘other angel’ comes forth from this temple is a sign that he says comes from the highest authority, that of the creator/redeemer God himself.

Harrington observes that ‘one like a son of man’ waits for the word of the Father. He cites Mk 13:32 – ‘But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.’

7. **Phone megale** – ‘loud voice.’ Another indication by the author that what follows is of particular importance.

8. **Therison... therisai... therismos** – ‘Reap!... to reap... the reaping/harvest.’ The ‘other angel’ commands the one sitting on the cloud to reap/harvest because the hour to reap/harvest has come.’ As in the Proclamation of Judgment where it is noted that the ‘hour of judgment has come,’ the angel announces that the hour of God’s final ‘judgment’ has come. This is a future event to be described more fully in 20:11-15. The Harvest and the Vintage are further examples of the technique of anticipation.

Harrington observes that the verb ‘to reap/harvest’ and the noun ‘reaping/harvest’ are used in the LXX to convey the idea of ‘gathering in,’ not ‘mowing down.’ \(^\text{389}\)

The use of *therisai*, then, supports the idea that the ‘judgment’ is not a vindictive trampling of enemies, but a gathering in and separation of the ‘good’ and the ‘evil’ by their works and choices. The judgment is based on how people choose to live. The ‘inhabitants of the earth’ judge themselves.

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\(^\text{388}\) Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

Commentary

Many commentators note that the images of the Harvest and the Vintage are derived from Joel 3:12-13, whose focus is the extermination of the pagan nations. The ‘harvest’ and ‘vintage’ are, in Joel, parallel images of judgment. This observation leads many to conclude that the Harvest and Vintage in Revelation are also to be understood as parallel images. Against this contention, it can be maintained that Revelation preserves a balance between the Proclamation of Judgment in 14:6-13 and the Harvest and Vintage in 14:14-20. In the Proclamation of Judgment, there is first an announcement that the hour of judgment has arrived and that this is ‘good news’ for the just. This is followed by the portrayal of judgment on those who worship the beast. The Proclamation of Judgment asserts that ‘now is the moment of judgment,’ that how we live in the present moment has eternal significance.

The images of the Harvest and the Vintage advance ahead to present an anticipation of the end-time, the final judgment. This final judgment is based on how the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ have lived their moment(s) in time, how they have consistently lived day by day. The image of the Harvest is that of in-gathering and is a symbol of salvation; the image of the Vintage, with the ‘crushing’ of the grapes, is a symbol of judgment, of retribution, of quid pro quo justice.

While 14:14-20 do not display a chiastic structure similar to what can be observed in the Proclamation of Judgment, a balance can be observed that unites the whole section. The appearance of ‘one like a son of man’ is preceded and followed by the appearance of three angels. This creates a balanced pattern of seven heavenly beings who ‘execute’ judgment. Their judgment is perfect, complete, fully just and justified. Moreover, it is the role of the ‘Son of Man,’ obviously to be understood as Christ, to mediate salvation, to gather in the just. The balance in the appearance of the heavenly beings suggests that the role of the Christ is paramount; it is gathering in the ‘just’ that fulfills God’s will for his creation.

The vision of the Harvest is introduced as a new topic with the words, ‘And I looked...’ ‘Behold!’ indicates a sense of the unexpected. ‘John’ sees a ‘white cloud.’ In contrast to the images of violent storms that have spoken to the tumultuous state of creation and the terrifying power of God, the ‘white cloud’ conjures images of actual harvest times, times of warm sunshine and calm weather. He sees a human figure seated – enthroned – on the cloud, enthroned on tranquility. While ‘son of man’ simply means a ‘human being,’ Old Testament usage in Daniel and Ezekiel and the fact that Jesus refers to himself in the Gospels as ‘the son of man,’ leaves no doubt that the one seated on the cloud is the Christ. The image is of the Parousia, the second coming of Christ to judge the ‘inhabitants of the earth.’

The figure of Christ is wearing a golden crown and holding a sharp sickle in his hand. The crown is a stepphanos, a crown or wreath of ‘victory.’ To this point in Revelation only the dragon and the first beast have been described as wearing diademata – ‘royal crowns.’ Christ’s ‘victory’ was accomplished by patient endurance and submission to the will of his Father – ‘Let this cup pass from me, but not my will, but yours be done.’ His rule, his judgment, is not by right of conquest, but by means of sacrifice. The ‘sharp sickle,’ presents an unexpected contrast to the calm, pastoral image of Christ seated on the cloud. The reader is led to wonder whether the coming of the Christ in judgment, which begins with peaceful images, will turn into a blood bath of vengeance and retribution.

The contention that this image of the Harvest refers to the end-time is re-inforced by ‘another angel’ coming from the heavenly temple, the place of God’s throne, who commands the ‘son of man’ sitting on the cloud to put forth his sickle and ‘harvest/reap’ the earth. The apocalyptic discourse in Mark’s Gospel records the tradition of the unknowability of the end-time: ‘But about the day or hour no one knows,
neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.\textsuperscript{390} The ‘angel’ brings to message to the ‘Son’ that the time of judgment is now.

The most significant aspect of these three verses is the use of the verb therisai, ‘to reap,’ and its cognate noun. This word is used in the LXX to mean ‘to gather in,’ not ‘to cut/mow down.’ The whole focus of the image of the Harvest is that, at the appointed time known only to the Father, the Christ gathers in the faithful, his followers, the ‘victorious.’ Yet a harvest cannot be gathered in without first being cut down, without the ‘sickle.’ The ‘witnesses,’ the faithful followers of the Lamb must endure patiently, even to the point of death, of being cut down, to be gathered into the assembly of the just, the holy ones around the throne of God.

Two images in Mark’s Gospel are instructive at this point, the images of seed planted and break broken. Seed must be ‘buried’ to produce ‘new life.’ Bread can be shared to sustain life, to serve the needs of many, but only if it is broken. These images weave their way all through Mark’s Gospel reaching a culmination in the scene of the Last Supper – ‘While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take: this is my body.”’\textsuperscript{391} Mk 14:22. The Fourth Gospel uses a similar image in 12:24 – ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.’

All readers of the Book of Revelation are encouraged to find hope in the fact that what we do, day by day, how we live in the present moment has eternal significance. We are encouraged to find hope in a final ‘in-gathering,’ a final reward for following the Lamb, for enduring patiently and remaining faithful. In the end, does this give us the message that the world is a mess, that there’s nothing we can do about it, so just hang in there and God will make everything better in heaven? But ‘John’ also calls for a radical Christianity, a way of life that resists the values of the world, that engages in ‘good works’ to promote what is just and good, to make this world better right now for all people. Is this just a ludicrous dream or a vision of how things can really be? Is there a mixed message here? Are the readers of Revelation to look only to a future fulfillment of God’s plan and try to escape the bad things in the world that surround us? Are we to fully engage in the world and fight what is wrong? If so, how do we ‘fight?’ Do we ‘overcome’ the world by right of conquest or by other means? How are we to live, individually and as a community of faith, as followers of the Lamb to be included in the ‘in-gathering?’

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{390} NRSV translation.
\item \textsuperscript{391} NRSV translation
\end{itemize}
The Vintage (14:17-20)

And another angel came forth from the temple, the one in the heaven, having, also he, a sharp sickle. And another angel came forth from the altar, he having authority over the fire, and he called out with a loud voice to him holding the sharp sickle, saying: Put forth your sharp sickle and gather the bunches of grapes of the grape vines of the earth, for its grapes have become ripe. And the angel swung (wielded) his sickle to the earth and gathered the grapes of the earth and he threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden outside the city and blood came forth from the winepress up to the bridles of the horses, as far as one thousand six hundred stadia (about 184 miles).

Textual Notes

1. *Allos angelos* – ‘another angel.’ Harrington notes that the vision of the Vintage is an anticipation of 19:11-12, just as the vision of the Harvest is an anticipation of 20:11-15. He notes that in the Synoptic Gospels angels are ministers of the Son of Man at the Judgment (see Mt 13:39, 41-42.)

Note that an envelope structure can be perceived that unites all the material from 14:14 through 20:15:

A. Harvest of the just – 14:14-16

B. Vintage of the unjust – 14:17-20

B. Judgment on the unjust – 19:11-21

A. Judgment of all the earth, just/unjust separated – 20:11-15

2. *Echon... draponon oxy* – ‘having a sharp sickle.’ There is an assimilation of this angel to the ‘Son of Man’ in the harvest – both wielding sharp sickles. In this case, the cutting and trampling of the grapes will be emphasized. Note how the ‘judgment’ of those who have drunk the wine of the wrath of the fornication of Babylon are judged and treated as ‘harvested grapes.’

3. *Allos angelos exelthen ek tou thesiasteriou ho echon exousian epi tou pyros* – ‘another angel came forth from the altar, he having authority over the fire.’ This second angel functions in exactly the same way as

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392 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
the angel commanding the ‘Son of Man’ to gather in the harvest of the just. Both come from the ‘temple’ and ‘altar,’ that is, from before the throne of God. As messengers of God they serve to demonstrate that ‘judgment’ is fully in God’s hands, under his control. Mention of the ‘altar’ and of authority over ‘fire’ is reminiscent of both 6:8-10, the vision of the fifth seal, and 8:3-5, the vision of the seventh seal. In the image of the fifth seal, the souls of the just are below the altar, crying out to God for justice. That justice is about to be executed. In the vision of the seventh seal, ‘another angel’ has a golden censer, offering up the prayers of the just on earth. In an action drawn from Ezekiel, he hurls the censer to the earth, an action representing both judgment and purging/cleansing. In the case of the seventh seal, the ‘sign’ did not have its desired effect; it produced no change of heart. It is this refusal to repent, to turn back, that results is the final judgment represented here. There is again a correspondence between the unjust way of life and the judgment it occasions.

4. *Pempson sou to drepanon to oxy kai trygeson* – ‘put forth your sharp sickle and gather.’ Note the similarity with the wording of the command to the Son of Man: *pempson to drepanon sou kai therison* – ‘put forth your sickle and reap.’ The action of Christ is to ‘gather,’ carried in the verb *therisai* – ‘to reap.’ ‘Sharp’ is omitted from the description of the sickle he is to extend. The angel is commanded to ‘gather,’ but with a ‘sharp’ sickle. The gathering is not a ‘harvest’ in itself, but a gathering for the sake of ‘crushing.’ The choice of words in the two commands suggests a sense of irony, a sense of the futility of not ‘following the Lamb.’

5. *Ekmasan hai staphylai autes* – ‘has become ripe the grapes of it (the earth).’ Rogers and Rogers note that the verb connotes ‘to be at a peak,’ ‘to be full.’ In a scene of judgment, the symbolic implication is that the evil of the earth has reached its peak, that the wicked are full of wickedness.

6. *Lenon tou thymou tou theou ton megan* – ‘the winepress of the great wrath of God.’ Harrington notes that Is 63:1-6 stands behind this image:

‘Who is that that comes from Edom,
from Bozrah in garments stained crimson?
Who is this so splendidly robed,
marching in his great might?
It is I, announcing vindication,
mighty to save.
Why are your robes red,
and your garments like theirs
who tread the winepress?
I have trodden the winepress along,
and from the peoples no one was with me;
I trod them in my anger
and trampled them in my wrath:
their juice spattered on my garments,
and stained all my robes.
For the day of vengeance was in my heart,
and the year of my redeeming work had come.
I looked, but there was no helper;
I stared, but there was no one to sustain me;
so my own arm brought me victory,
and my wrath sustained me.
I trampled down peoples in my anger,
I crushed them in my wrath,
and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.’

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391 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
394 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
395 NRSV translation.
7. *Epatethe he lenos exothen tes poleos* – ‘and was trodden/trampled the winepress outside the city.’
Rogers and Rogers note that in biblical days, grapes were trampled in a trough, which had a duct leading to a lower basin where the juice collected. The treading of grapes was a familiar figure for the execution of divine wrath upon the enemies of God. (see the Is 63:1-6 above.)
Harrington notes that, in prophetic tradition, the destruction of the pagan nations was expected to take place in the course of their final assault on the holy city (see Joel 3:12, Zech 14:2-3, 12-13, and Ezek 38-39). For ‘John,’ the ‘city’ would be the ‘New Jerusalem.’ (This, again, implies that the heart of a judgment of condemnation is exclusion from the presence of God.) It is also likely that he had in mind the crucifixion of Jesus which occurred outside Jerusalem. Once again this indicates that the ‘overcoming’ of and ‘judgment’ on the world took place on the Cross.

8. *Achri ton chalinon ton hippon* – ‘as high as (up to) the bridles of the horses.’ Harrington notes that this gruesome picture of a river of human blood was first suggested by the passage in Isaiah, 63:1-6. He notes an even more immediate source for the image in the apocalyptic tradition, citing in particular I Enoch 100:1-3.

In those days the father will be beaten together with his sons until a stream shall flow with their blood... The horse shall walk through the blood of sinners up to his chest; and the chariot shall sink down up to its top.

Harrington further notes that the passage in I Enoch has to do explicitly with the self-destruction of sinners, a theme explored in Revelation where it is consistently noted that sinners, that those who abuse power, that those who become rich by exploiting others, all fall by their own devices.

9. *Apo stadion chilion hexakosian* – ‘to (up to) one thousand six hundred stadia.’ This represents about 184 miles. Harrington suggests that this is a symbolic number, a square (40 X 40), where forty represents a generation. The judgment, then, encompasses the whole earth, the whole population of the earth, the whole present generation.

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396 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
397 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
398 Ibid.
399 Ibid.
Commentary

The vision of the Vintage presents the end-time from the perspective of the condemned. It begins with the appearance of ‘another angel,’ who, like the Son of Man, is holding a sharp cycle. The image of the Harvest involved the ‘Son of Man’ gathering in the just, those who had suffered the trials of this world. There, judgment was ‘good news.’ The parallel between Christ and the angel, both holding sharp sickles, is significant. As Jn 3:17 makes clear, the purpose of Christ’s mission, the purpose of his ‘victory’ is not to condemn the world but to save it. As such, ‘another angel’ has the role of executing justice on those who have refused to believe in Christ, those who have refused God’s offer of a relationship and eternal life, those who have embraced instead worldly power, worldly values, worldly arrogance.

The judgment to be imposed flows from the will of God. In the same way that the angel who ‘commanded’ the Christ to put forth his sickle and gather in the righteous of the earth, the angel with the sharp sickle comes forth from the heavenly temple, the ‘throne room’ of God. It is God alone who knows the time of judgment; it is God alone who renders judgment.

The parallels continue with the appearance of a second angel who commands the first angel to put forth his sickle to the earth in exactly the same way that the angel of the Harvest vision spoke to Christ. Both of these angels come from the ‘temple’ and ‘altar,’ that is, from before the throne of God. As messengers of God they serve to demonstrate that ‘judgment’ is fully in God’s hands, under his control. Mention of the ‘altar’ and of authority over ‘fire’ is reminiscent of both 6:8-10, the vision of the fifth seal, and 8:3-5, the vision of the seventh seal. In the image of the fifth seal, the souls of the just are below the altar, crying out to God for justice. That justice is about to be executed. In the vision of the seventh seal, ‘another angel’ has a golden censer, offering up the prayers of the just on earth. In an action drawn from Ezekiel, he hurls the censer to the earth, an action representing both judgment and purging/cleansing. In the case of the seventh seal, the ‘sign’ did not have its desired effect; it produced no change of heart. It is this refusal to repent, to turn back, that results in the final judgment presented here. There is again a correspondence between the unjust way of life and the judgment it occasions.

There is a similarity with variation in the wording of the command to the Son of Man – ‘put forth your sickle and reap’ and the command to the angel of the Vintage. The action of Christ is to ‘gather,’ carried in the verb therisai – ‘to reap.’ ‘Sharp’ is omitted from the description of the sickle he is to extend. The angel is commanded to ‘gather,’ but with a ‘sharp’ sickle. The gathering is not a ‘harvest’ in itself, but a gathering for the sake of ‘crushing.’ The choice of words in the two commands suggests a sense of irony, a sense of the futility of not ‘following the Lamb.’

The angel is commanded to put forth his sharp sickle because the grapes of the earth are ‘ripe.’ The verb, ‘to be ripe,’ connotes ‘to be at a peak,’ ‘to be full.’ Grapes and the juice of grapes are frequently used as an image of blood. In a scene of judgment, the symbolic implication is that the evil of the earth has reached its peak, that the wicked are full of wickedness. The image suggests being engorged, like a plump tick, full of blood (or like Eglon, the king of Moab, a fat king who had ‘engorged’ himself by victimizing others – Jdg 3:17. In more modern terms, the image is carried in the figure of Jabba the Hut from Star Wars.)

The image of trampling grapes in a winepress is a frequent Old Testament image for judgment (see Is 63:1-6). Here, the winepress is described as the ‘winepress of the wrath of God.’ On a surface reading, this can suggest violent retributive justice on God’s part. However, most often ‘wrath of God’ does not suggest violent retribution so much as a kind of ‘righteous indignation.’ It suggests an attribute of God.
that opposes the very idea of evil, of human violence and a will to victimize and dominate others. Paul’s idea that ‘sin is its own punishment’ is nothing new. There is a constant theme throughout both the Old and New Testaments that actions have consequences and that the just punishment for sin is to reap the consequences of the evil life one chooses.

The trodding/trampling of the winepress results in a blood bath, an image taken from the apocalyptic writing, I Enoch. What is noteworthy in the borrowing of this image is that, in the original context of I Enoch, the passage refers to the self-destruction of sinners. Sin is its own punishment.

There are a number of features of v 20 that deserve comment. The ‘trampling’ takes place ‘outside the city.’ Throughout Revelation, the primary sense of ‘city’ is ‘Jerusalem/New Jerusalem.’ Symbolically, ‘Jerusalem’ is that place where God chooses to dwell with his people. The ‘trampling’ of the wicked is outside the city; their ‘punishmen’ is separation of God and his dwelling with his people. This concept of the ultimate punishment for choosing against God as separation from God was already suggested in the Proclamation of Judgment (14:9-11) in which the torments of the wicked appear before the angels and the holy ones, but a separation is maintained.

A second aspect of the ‘trampling’ occurring ‘outside’ the city is the fact that the crucifixion took place outside Jerusalem. It was outside Jerusalem, in the ‘world’ of those who choose separation from God, that Christ ‘overcame’ the world. Christ met the ‘world’ on its own terms and emerged the ‘victor,’ not by force, but by submission. Now the ‘world’ is left to live by its own choices – is left ‘outside.’

The massive amount of blood flowing from the winepress is derived from the image in I Enoch and, as was stated, in its context in I Enoch, it suggested the self-destruction of sinners. In particular, it can be noted that those judged are those who ‘drank of the wine of the burning passion of the immorality of Babylon’ (14:8). Again, Babylon symbolizes Rome and all worldly powers who allure followers with the intoxicating enticements to power, wealth, prestige, influence, pleasure. They have drunk their fill and now, crushed by their own choices, the blood of their corruption pours forth. The river of blood flows sixteen hundred stadia – about 184 miles. What is to be noted about the number is that it is a perfect square, 40 X 40. Forty is the number of a generation. The Israelites wandered forty years in the wilderness until the evil generation passed away and a new, purified generation was ready to take possession of the Promised Land. 40 X 40 has the sense of ‘generation of generations,’ a vast population of those choosing worldly values over God and his will for good. It is a massive number arrayed against the 144,000 sealed witnesses to the Christ. And it is crushed like a plump tick.

The hour of judgment has come. Sin is its own punishment. How we live in the present moment has eternal significance. The Book of Revelation makes these assertions and makes them strongly. Can the Church and members of the community of faith individually take these statements seriously as more than pious platitudes? Can victims of violent crimes, those fleeing their homelands to escape poverty, violence and oppression find any consolation in a belief that sin is its own punishment? In our experience, does this prove to be true? Have we experienced sin as its own punishment in our own lives? Have we seen the self-destructiveness of evil in the events that have shaped our world? Is what we understand to be justice in our world anything more than an administration of force? Is that God’s idea of justice? In the face of all these questions, how do Christians today ‘overcome’ and know that they are ‘victors?’ In the face of all these questions, how are we to understand ‘winning’ and ‘losing?’ When we experience the tables being turned on others – individuals, groups, political parties, government regimes – is this God’s justice? A victory of violence over violence? Or the self-destructiveness of sin?
The Last Plagues

The Song of Moses and the Lamb (15:1-4)

15:1 And I saw another sign in the heaven, great and wonderful, seven angels having seven plagues, the last ones, for in them the wrath of God was brought to completion.

2 And I saw (something) like a glassy sea having been mixed with fire and those being victorious (overcoming, conquering) over the beast and over its image and over the number of its name having taken their stand on the sea, the glassy one, holding the harps of God

3 and singing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the lamb, saying: Great and wonderful your works, Lord, God, All Powerful (one), righteous and true your ways, King of the nations!

4 Who indeed should not fear you and he will give glory to your name? For only you are undefiled; for all nations will come forth and they will worship (bend the knee) before you because your righteous deeds have been revealed.
1. *Allo semeion* – ‘another sign.’ ‘Sign’ is first introduced into Revelation in 12:1, the vision of the woman, clothed in the sun, standing on the moon and wearing a crown of twelve stars. This ‘sign’ is immediately juxtaposed with the ‘sign’ of the dragon and the ‘signs’ it can perform. These ‘signs’ point to the conflict between good and evil. Likewise, the ‘plagues’ unleashed by opening the seals and sounding the trumpets are couched in terms of the ‘signs’ wrought by Moses in the Exodus story. These signs are demonstrations of God’s power and control over creation intended to motivate the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ to recognize God, to have a change of heart, to freely choose God’s plan for creation over the false allure of worldly power and values. This idea, in particular, comes into play here with the introduction of the ‘final plagues.’

2. *Angelous hepta echontas plegas hepta tas eschatas* – ‘seven angels having seven plagues, the last (final).’ A new, and final, round of seven plagues is introduced here, again mediated by seven angels, seven messengers from God. The Proclamation of Judgment and the visions of the Harvest and the Vintage have indicated that the life of Christians in the present moment matters, that world history is progressing to a future, final point, a point when the world’s evil will be full and that evil will turn on itself in self-destruction. Introduced here is a last ditch effort on the part of God to motivate change, to give the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ a final chance to ‘repent,’ to choose lasting values, to choose for God. On ‘plagues,’ see A Structural Note, p. 155.

3. *En autais etelesthai ho thymos tou theou* – ‘in them was completed (brought to completion) the wrath of God.’ The aorist (past) tense of the verb – ‘to complete, bring to completion’ – in a context in which the final seven plagues have yet to be unleashed, is a narrative indication of the effectiveness of God’s plan. What God intends is as good as done. This does not indicate that, with the final seven plagues, God will forcefully impose his will on creation, but that his plan will be fulfilled - ‘And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’ (Mt 25:46) A new, and final, round of seven plagues is introduced here, again mediated by seven angels, seven messengers from God. The Proclamation of Judgment and the visions of the Harvest and the Vintage have indicated that the life of Christians in the present moment matters, that world history is progressing to a future, final point, a point when the world’s evil will be full and that evil will turn on itself in self-destruction. Introduced here is a last ditch effort on the part of God to motivate change, to give the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ a final chance to ‘repent,’ to choose lasting values, to choose for God. On ‘plagues,’ see A Structural Note, p. 155.

4. *Thalassan hyalinen memigmenen pyri* – ‘a sea of glass having been mixed with fire.’ This ‘sea of glass’ appears in the vision of the Heavenly Temple, 4:6. (see note #16, p. 108). The image of a ‘sea of glass’ suggests calm waters, the overcoming of the watery chaos from creation myths. This is a ‘calm after the storm.’ It is also a ‘calm’ preceding the final plagues, the final signs from God to the ‘inhabitants of the earth.’ Water mixed with fire is a strange image. However, this ‘sea of glass’ is to be associated with the vision of the Heavenly Temple. Also associated with the Heavenly Temple is the altar of incense before the throne where the angel with the golden censer offered the smoke of the prayers of the faithful before the throne of God. It is possible to see in the tranquil image of a ‘glassy sea having been mixed with fire’ an indication of God’s control of nature – combining unlikely elements – and a tranquil setting for offering fitting worship – burnt offerings, the fire and smoke of incense.

5. *Kai tous nikontas ek tou theriou...* – ‘and those being victorious over the beast...’ The ‘victors’ have overcome the beast, its image, and the number of its name – 666. The ‘victors’ are those who have resisted the allure of the Imperial Cult, who have resisted compromise and accommodation with worldly powers. These would include those having been sealed (7:1-8), the 144,000 followers of the Lamb (14:1-5), and the faithful members of the Seven Churches.

6. *Estotas epi ten thalassan* – ‘having taken their stand upon the sea.’ As with the angel who ‘took his stand’ with one foot on the sea, one on the land and his hand raised to heaven, the idea of ‘taking a stand’ indicates positioning oneself for a purpose. *Epi ten thalassan* is ambiguous. *Epi,* ‘upon,’ can indicate at the very edge of the sea or, more literally, standing on the water. ‘Standing on the water’ would indicate a further assimilation of the ‘victorious’ with Christ who, in the Gospels, walked on the water. It would

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NRSV translation.
indicate a share in ‘victory,’ in the ‘divine’ by sharing a mastery over the elements of creation. Whatever the case, the purpose of the positioning is liturgical, the song about to be sung.

7. *Kitharas tou theou* – ‘harps of God.’ The phrase indicates musical instruments specifically reserved for liturgical functions. Harps – stringed instruments – in particular suggest the celebration of Psalms, those hymns, thanksgiving prayers, prayers of petition and laments that characterize the prayer life of God’s people and are incorporated into temple worship.

8. *Adousin ten oden Mouseos... kai oden tou arniou* – ‘They are singing the song of Moses... and the song of the Lamb.’ As was the case with the plagues unleashed by opening the seven seals and the plagues unleashed by sounding the seven trumpets, the plagues of the seven bowls are preceded by a heavenly liturgy. In each case, there is a ‘continuity’ between events in heaven and events on earth. There is one order of being. Likewise, the liturgies mitigate the horrific images of the plagues – they are of a piece with the heavenly liturgies, they are ‘signs’ to draw people in, to convince them to accept the redeeming, loving, creator God.

9. *Mouseos tou doulou tou theou* – ‘Moses, the servant/slave/bondsman of God.’ Harrington writes that, as in Hebrews 3:5 Moses is called God’s ‘servant’ and is thereby set in contrast to God’s ‘son.’ (Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant... but Christ was faithful in all God’s house as a son.) The deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt was the ‘type’ of the deliverance of God’s people from the beast. In this sense, the Song of Moses is also and principally the Song of the Lamb because they who worship have won their victory by the blood of the Lamb. The song itself is a mosaic of Old Testament phrases: Pss 86:9 (All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name), 98:2 (The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations), 111:2 (Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them); 139:14 (I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well), 145:17 (The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings); Dt 32:4 (The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he); Amos 4:13 (For lo, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind, reveals his thoughts to mortals, makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth – the Lord, the God of hosts, is his name); Jer 10:7 (Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your due; among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is no one like you); Mal 1:11 (From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts).

10. *Ta ethne hexousin kai proskynesousin enopion sou* – ‘the nations will come and worship before you.’ What the song celebrates is the saving purpose of God. From the plagues in Egypt, designed to free people and demonstrate God’s sovereignty to an arrogant world power, to the plagues of Revelation, from the election of Israel to bring God’s blessings to all the families of the nations of the world, to the ‘victory’ of Christ on the Cross to overcome the world – God’s plan for his creation is consistently one of peace, of sharing the good things of creation, of drawing all to accept God’s invitation into a personal relationship with him. It is this saving will in human history that the Song of Moses and the Lamb celebrates.

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401 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
Commentary

Each of the three plague cycles, seals, trumpets, and bowls, is preceded by a heavenly liturgy. These liturgies express the ideal of the relationship between creation and its God. The focus then shifts to the situation on the realms of creation that fail miserably in measuring up to the ideal. Consider the reactions of people confronted with injustice, violence, oppression – there is anger, a knee-jerk impulse to fight back, to get vengeance. The imagery of Revelation – and most of biblical literature imputes these same impulses to God. Yet there is a difference. The violent actions imputed to God function not as wanton acts of vengeance, but as ‘divine discipline.’ They function as a means for God to correct the misunderstandings and evil impulses of his creatures. They are ‘signs.’

The word ‘sign’ was first used in Revelation to introduce the pregnant woman, a symbol, ‘sign’ of the Church. She is confronted by another ‘sign,’ the dragon and the ‘signs’ the dragon can perform – signs similar to the plagues. In this confrontation, she is presented as protected by God and as a woman enduring hardship. As a symbol of the Church she is a ‘sign’ that the ideal is possible in the realms of creation.

Now the imagery of Revelation turns to another ‘great sign,’ seven angels holding the last seven plagues, strikings, ‘signs’ from God to try to move creation to the ‘ideal.’ In the conventions of biblical storytelling, 40 and 3 are symbolic designations of duration: 40 represents a complete time of long duration – Israel wandering for 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus’ fast of 40 days before beginning his public ministry; 3 represents complete time of short duration – Jonah spending three days in the belly of the great fish, Jesus’ three days in the tomb. The seven plagues envisioned here are ‘the last’ plagues, creating a cycle of three sets of seven. As in the ‘seven days of creation,’ each set of seven plagues is ‘perfect,’ just the right number to get the job done. The ‘job’ is to present humanity with a choice and an understanding of the power, love, and mercy of God for all humanity to enable people to make the right choice – still, the choice is theirs. That there are three cycles of plagues indicates ‘short duration.’ With these last plagues the ‘wrath of God,’ his ‘righteous indignation’ at evil in the world is completed. Things are coming to a head.

The next element of the vision of a ‘sea of glass mixed with fire.’ This ‘sea of glass’ appears in the vision of the Heavenly Temple (4:6). The image of a ‘sea of glass’ suggests calm waters, the overcoming of the watery chaos from creation myths. This is a ‘calm before the storm,’ a ‘calm’ preceding the final plagues, the final signs from God to the ‘inhabitants of the earth.’ Water mixed with fire is a strange image. However, this ‘sea of glass’ is to be associated with the vision of the Heavenly Temple. Also associated with the Heavenly Temple is the altar of incense before the throne where the angel with the golden censer offered the smoke of the prayers of the faithful before the throne of God. It is possible to see in the tranquil image of a ‘glassy sea having been mixed with fire’ an indication of God’s control of nature – combining unlikely elements – and a tranquil setting for offering fitting worship – burnt offerings, the fire and smoke of incense.

Those having taking their stand upon the sea are the ‘victorious.’ This would included those who had been sealed, the 144,000 followers of the Lamb, and the faithful of the Seven Churches. ‘To take a stand’ indicates taking up a position for a purpose and here that purpose is fitting worship. For this reason they are ‘armed’ with harps – they are the ‘choir’ of the ‘victorious.’ What they sing is the song of Moses and the Lamb. The deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt was the ‘type’ of the deliverance of God’s people from the beast. In this sense, the Song of Moses is also and principally the Song of the Lamb because they who worship have won their victory by the blood of the Lamb. The song itself is a
mosaic of Old Testament phrases. The practice of combining phrases and images from several Psalms to create a ‘new song,’ is well attested in the Book of Psalms. What the song celebrates is the saving purpose of God. From the plagues in Egypt, designed to free people and demonstrate God’s sovereignty to an arrogant world power, to the plagues of Revelation, from the election of Israel to bring God’s blessings to all the families of the nations of the world, to the ‘victory’ of Christ on the Cross to overcome the world – God’s plan for his creation is consistently one of peace, of sharing the good things of creation, of drawing all to accept God’s invitation into a personal relationship with him. It is this saving will in human history that the Song of Moses and the Lamb celebrates – that all nations will come and worship before the one, supreme God.

The Song of Moses and the Lamb celebrates God’s saving purpose and the liturgy in which it is sung presents an ‘ideal’ of the relationship between the ‘victorious’ and their God. Does the universal Church, does our individual faith community live this ‘ideal?’ Can we? Or is the ‘ideal’ a goal to which we are moving? Does such an ‘ideal,’ such a goal really inform the way we live in the world, the way we are a community of faith and a ‘sign’ to all the nations? Do we see ourselves as ‘apart from the world’ or as a people with a mission to the world? Can the world look at us and see the ‘sign?’ Can they see the ‘ideal’ or, at least, the possibility of making the ‘ideal’ a reality? Can they see in us a real alternative to the values of the world or just another group of people living the values of the world in perhaps a distinctive way?
5And after these things, I looked and the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in
the heaven was opened. 6And came forth the seven angels holding the seven plagues,
out of the temple, having clothed themselves in pure, shining linen and having been
girded about around the chests (with) golden belts (wide golden sashes). 7And one from
the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the
wrath of the God living unto the ages of ages. 8And the temple was filled with smoke
from the glory of God and from his power, and no one was able to enter into the temple
until should be completed the seven plagues of the seven angels.

16:1And I heard a loud voice out of the temple saying to the seven angels: Go!
Pour out the seven bowls of the wrath of God onto the earth!

Textual Notes
1.  

2.  

Enoige ho naos tes skenes tou martyriou en to ourano – ‘was opened the temple of the tent/tabernacle of
the testimony in the heaven.’ Harrington notes that this is a strange designation. It is likely that this
heavenly ‘tabernacle’ is the archetype of the earthly tent of ‘witness.’ The phrasing is reminiscent of

285
11:19 – ‘Then God’s sanctuary in heaven was opened.’

It is likely that the construction plan for Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem, recorded in I Kings, provided the pattern for the construction of the ‘tent of meeting’ in the Exodus story. Tradition indicates the belief that these were imagined to be constructed on the model of God’s heavenly dwelling. What is new or different in this description of a heavenly sanctuary is that the ‘tabernacle/tent’ is referred to as the ‘tent of witness,’ not ‘meeting.’ ‘Witness’ has been a key term in revelation, connoting both faith in Jesus Christ and testimony to that faith through refusal to make compromises with the world, through patient endurance of the trials and tribulations of the world for the sake of remaining faithful to Christ and his mission. In the Song of Moses and the Lamb immediately preceding this vision, the ‘witnesses’ constituted the choir taking their stand on the ‘sea of glass.’

That the ‘temple’ was opened indicates, as was the case in 11:19, that the vision of heavenly things is, at least symbolically, obvious to those on earth below, not just the ‘seer.’ This is not a private vision, but what all can and should ‘see.’ The implication is that the ‘plagues’ to follow are open signs for the inhabitants of the earth to come to recognize the hand of God in creation, to see and respond with the correct choice.

3. *Exelthon hoi hept angeloi hoi echontes tas hept plegas ek tou naou* – ‘came forth the seven angels, those having the seven plagues, out of the temple.’ What can be seen by all is the seven angels with the seven plagues – what can be seen by all is the consequences for their actions and choices. In the light of the previous section, the ‘ideal’ sheds light on the ‘real.’

4. *Linon katharon lampron* – ‘fine, bright linen.’ Looking ahead, Harrington notes that these angels are clothed like the bride (19:8) and the armies of heaven (19:14). White garments have been mentioned throughout Revelation as the raiment of the just, the ‘victorious.’

5. *Zonas chrysas* – ‘golden belts/sashes/girdles.’ Reminiscent of the ‘belts’ of the ‘high priests,’ this image also suggests the the vesture of the ‘Son of Man’ in 1:3. There is a continuing assimilation of Christ with God and with the ‘heavenly court’ and the ‘faithful’ with Christ throughout the book.

6. *Hen ek ton tessaron zoon edoken tois hepta angelois hepta phialas chrysas* – ‘one from the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls.’ Things are coming full circle. The plagues began with the opening of the first four seals and in each case, one of the living creatures ‘gave’ to one of the four horsemen. The ‘living creatures’ are the most immediate attendants to the throne of God, the pillars on which the throne sits. What is ‘given’ comes from the innermost circle surrounding the divine.

7. *Gemousas tou thymou tou theou* – ‘filled with the wrath of God.’ Harrington cites Rm 1:18 (For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.) Harrington’s observation is in accord with the basic contention that God spoke his word into the world and that God’s word and will and plan is observable to all. The ‘wrath of God,’ rather than a personal vengeance on God’s part, is an expression of the conviction/belief that God’s righteous indignation, similar to that of humans, is engendered by evil in the world. Where humans may want to ‘fight’ this evil, in God’s plan, it destroys itself and this is seen as the outworking of God’s ‘wrath.’

8. *Zontas eis tous aionas ton aionon* – ‘living to the ages of ages.’ Throughout the Old Testament, the God of Israel is contrasted with the pagan gods, generally dying and rising gods of nature, but also a ‘living God,’ not a god of silver or stone. Such a contrast is maintained in Revelation, with a polemic tone when the contrast is maintained between the ‘living God’ and the supposedly divine Roman Emperors – even when the corrupt power is seen to die and be reborn as in the allusion to Nero’s suicide and the resurrected emperor-god, Vespasian. Even in contrast to Jesus who dies and rises – in himself – the Roman divinity dies and is ‘resurrected’ in another.

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402 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
403 Ibid.
404 Ibid.
9. *Egemiste ho naos kapnou ek tes doxes tou theou...* ‘was filled the temple from the glory of God...’ Harrington observes here the traditional elements of a theophany (Ex 40:35, Is 6:4, Ez 10:4, I Kgs 8:10-11). He concludes that the elements of a theophany emphasize the solemnity of the moment. 405

10. *Oudeis edynato eiselthein eis ton naon achri telesthosin hai hepta plegai ton hepta angelon* – ‘no one was able to enter into the temple until were completed the seven plagues of the seven angels.’ Harrington observes the similarity with Ex 40: 35 and I Kgs 8:11. Moses and the priests could not enter the tent or temple because of the ‘cloud of the Lord’s glory.’ With Krodel, he suggests that the intent of this is that the time of intercession is over, that the hour of judgment is here and no one can interfere with it. 406 It can further be noted that the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the ending of the last cycle of plagues, ended with the temple in the heavens being opened, revealing the theophanic power of God. Here, the last round of plagues is introduced by the same opening of the temple and the same theophanic display. As was the case in 11:19, when the temple was first opened, there is a suggestion that the vision has been expanded beyond the purview of the ‘seer’ to encompass all of creation. This ‘vision’ seems to suggest that God’s word, will, power and plan is evident in and throughout all of creation. Those who pay attention can ‘see;’ they have all they need to choose rightly, to avoid embracing a judgment of condemnation.

11. *Ekousa megales phones* – ‘I heard a loud voice.’ Again ‘John’ uses a ‘loud voice’ to focus his readers’ attention. ‘This is important!’ In other sequences of plagues and in individual plagues, the action is initiated by a ‘loud voice.’ It has been the voice of a ‘strong’ angel commanding lesser angels, or the voice of one of the living creatures. Even ‘elders’ have issued commands. In this case, the ‘loud voice’ emanates from the ‘temple which no one could enter.’ It can be suggested that, as no one can enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels are completed, and as it has been stated that this sequence of plagues completes – brings to an end – the ‘wrath of God,’ that this ‘loud voice’ initiating the final plagues is the voice of God himself.

12. *Ekcheete tas hepta phialas tou thymou tou theou eis ten gen* – ‘pour out the seven bowls of the wrath of God on the earth.’ If the above arguments are sound, the initiating ‘loud voice’ of God commands the angels, ‘Pour out my signs on the earth.’ This is a ‘final’ display of signs. The inhabitants of the earth face a critical moment, to read the signs of the times and respond appropriately, or to ignore them and suffer the consequences – separation from the God of creation.

405 Ibid.  
406 Ibid.
Commentary

‘And after these things...’ These words indicate a new direction in the story being told, they mark a transition. The ‘wrath of God’ has been spent, completed, and the story begins to move to its culmination.

The words announce a new vision, that of the tabernacle/tent of the heavenly temple being opened. This vision of the ‘open temple,’ as in 11:19, suggests that what can be seen is, or should be, apparent to all. This idea of an ‘open heavenly temple’ reflects a common belief expressed in Israel’s Wisdom traditions. God speaks his word in the world. By paying attention to what is observable, all humanity can learn ‘wisdom,’ can discern what leads to a godly and righteous way of life. What is unique in the description of the heavenly tabernacle/tent is that it is called the ‘tabernacle of witness/testimony.’ In the Old Testament, the construction of the ‘Tent of Meeting’ during the wilderness wanderings and the plan of Solomon’s Temple are mirror images of each other. On the journey and on Mt. Zion in the days of the monarchy, the tabernacle/tent was conceived of as that place where God met with, dwelt with his people. Those people were believed to be the descendants of Abraham, the children of Israel. But in the new age, membership in God’s people has a new definition. God’s people are men and women of any nation, tribe, people and tongue who live by faith in Jesus Christ and give testimony to that faith by their works and by patient endurance, by their refusal to compromise with the values of the world. This is what should be apparent to all the inhabitants of the earth; this is the basis of judgment.

What can also be seen is the seven angels coming out of the tabernacle with the final seven plagues – strikings, signs. As always, the plagues are signs intended to move people to a change of heart, to repentance. In the vision, then, what should be apparent to all – represented by the ‘plagues’ – are the consequences for human choices and actions. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword. Those who support a lavish lifestyle by exploiting and oppressing others will eventually go to the well once too often and the whole system will be depleted and come crashing down. Those who separate themselves from the eternal God, will be left out of the community of the just, will be eternally separated from God.

The ‘seven angels’ are dressed in fine, bright linen, an anticipation of the vesture of the bride (19:8) and the armies of heaven (19:14). To be clothed in ‘white’ has served as a ‘vindication of the victorious,’ so that there is a melting, a continuous assimilation of the Lamb with the divine, of creatures, heavenly and earthly, with the Lamb. There is a merging unity. In particular, here, it is to be noted that the golden belts, derived from the description of the High Priests garments in Leviticus, recall the appearance of the Son of Man in the Inaugural Vision (1:3). There is a movement from sharing in the ‘victory of the Lamb’ to a more complete sharing in the life of the Lamb who shares in the life of the Divine. It is inclusion in this unity of life that is at stake.

Within this vision, things are coming full circle. In the first series of plagues, the opening of the Seven Seals, each of the Living Creatures gave ‘authority’ to one of the four horsemen, initiating the drama of the struggle between good and evil played out throughout the book. Now, one of the Living Creatures gives to each of the seven angels bowls filled with the ‘wrath of the eternal God.’ The four Living Creatures are the closest attendants to the throne of God in the heavenly temple. The implication is that they receive and hand on the ‘wrath of God’ from the ‘hands’ of God himself.

‘Wrath of God’ is a troubling concept, conjuring images of capricious and vengeful deities. In Romans 1:18, Paul writes:
For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. 407

The ‘wrath of God,’ rather than a personal vengeance on God’s part, is an expression of the conviction/belief that God’s righteous indignation, similar to that of humans, is engendered by evil in the world. Where humans may want to ‘fight’ this evil, in God’s plan, it destroys itself and this is seen as the outworking of God’s ‘wrath.’

What can also be observed in this portrayal of God and his ‘righteous indignation’ is a subtle, polemic contrast between the ‘eternal’ God and the false gods. Throughout the Old Testament, the God of Israel is contrasted with the pagan gods, generally dying and rising gods of nature, but also a ‘living God,’ not a god of silver or stone. Such a contrast is maintained in Revelation, with a polemic tone when the contrast is maintained between the ‘living God’ and the supposedly divine Roman Emperors who die – even when the corrupt power is seen to die and be reborn as in the allusion to Nero’s suicide and the resurrected emperor-god, Vespasian. Even in contrast to Jesus who dies and rises – in himself – the Roman divinity dies and is ‘resurrected’ in another.

Once the Living Creature has given the bowls to the angels, the heavenly temple fills with the smoke of God’s glory so that no one could enter it. This is an image of the presence of God’s power in the elements of a theophany. The image appears to be derived from two Old Testament passages. In Ex 40:35, Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because of the cloud of God’s glory; in I Kgs 8:11, the priests of the Temple were likewise restrained from entering the temple because of the cloud of God’s glory. If no one can enter the ‘heavenly temple,’ then no one can offer intercession. There can be no more delays. The time of God’s ‘wrath’ is now, the time of judgment is now.

It can further be noted that the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the ending of the last cycle of plagues, ended with the temple in the heavens being opened, revealing the theophanic power of God. Here, the last round of plagues is introduced by the same opening of the temple and the same theophanic display. As was the case in 11:19, when the temple was first opened, there is a suggestion that the vision has been expanded beyond the purview of the ‘seer’ to encompass all of creation. This ‘vision’ seems to suggest that God’s word, will, power and plan is evident in and throughout all of creation. Those who pay attention can ‘see;’ they have all they need to choose rightly, to avoid embracing a judgment of condemnation.

The section ends with the proclamation of a ‘loud voice,’ a signal that what is proclaimed is of particular importance. Since no one can enter the temple, it is reasonable to assume that the ‘loud voice’ is that of God himself. There is immediacy in this command to the angels to go and pour out their bowls on the earth. The command, in effect, tells the angels to pour out the ‘consequences’ of human choices and actions on the earth, to bring human history to its inevitable end. This is a ‘final’ display of signs. The inhabitants of the earth face a critical moment, to read the signs of the times and respond appropriately, or to ignore them and suffer the consequences – separation from the God of creation.

There is an urgency to this vision, an urgency for the faithful to persevere, an urgency for the inhabitants of the earth to read the ‘signs of the times’ and have a change of heart. And there is an immediacy to the vision. Intermediaries are receding into the background and the ‘voice’ of God, his ‘word’ spoken into the world has come to the fore. People have what they need to choose eternal life, to choose a

407 NRSV translation.
world governed by the plan and will of God, a world that promotes the good of all, a world of harmony, justice and peace predicated on humanity’s assimilation to the Lamb.

Set aside the words of Scripture. Set aside the example and teachings of Jesus Christ. Set aside the teachings of the Church. Set aside the customs and traditions and cultures of human societies. Look at the world. Can we encounter God? Can we observe God’s wisdom behind the structure of creation? Can we discern, from observation, the difference between good and evil? Can we find a common ground with other people, people of different backgrounds, cultures, social status, religious beliefs? Can we find, embedded in the very fabric of the world we share a moral framework? Can we conclude that we are creatures, not sufficient unto ourselves? Can we acknowledge that we are dependent on a ‘higher power?’ Can we find God? God as he is? God stripped of all the assumptions and cultural overlays, all the wishful thinking of who and what we might want God to be? If we can, what happens when we add back into the mix the words of Scripture, the teachings of Jesus, the teachings of the Church and view these from the perspective of the God we discover? Will that allow us to hear God’s word as he intends it rather than according to our presuppositions and predispositions? Will we, the inhabitants of the earth, find our God and, in finding him, find a common ground, a source of unity? How urgent is it for us to do this? How will we be judged?
The First Four Bowls (16:2-9)

2And went forth the first and he poured out his bowl onto the earth and a harmful and painful boil occurred on the men having the mark of the beast and on those worshipping (paying homage to, bending the knee) its image.

3And the second poured out his bowl into the sea and it became blood, as of a dead man, and every living soul (essence) died, those in the sea.

4And the third poured out his bowl into the rivers and the streams of waters and blood occurred (they became blood). 5And I heard one of the angels of the waters saying: Righteous are you, now being and you were undefiled, for these things you have judged, because the blood of the holy ones and the prophets they spilled (poured out), now you have given them blood to drink; they are worthy (deserving = as they deserve).

7And I heard one from the altar saying: Indeed, Lord, God, All powerful one, true and righteous (are) your judgments.

8And the fourth poured out his bowl upon the sun and it was granted to it to burn (scorch) the men (humanity) in fire. 9And were burnt (scorched) the men (humanity), a great scorching heat, and they blasphemed (cursed) the name of God, he having authority over these plagues, and they did not change (turn back, repent) to give him glory.
Textual Notes

1. *Kai apelthen ho protos kai execheen ten phialen autou eis ten gen* – ‘And went forth the first and poured out his bowl upon the earth.’ Exact verbal repetition indicates a command/execution pattern with exact and explicit execution of the command.

Harrington notes that the bowls, like the trumpets, are modeled on the plagues of Egypt. In this case, the chastisement is universal and definitive, impacting not some fraction of the world but all those who worship the beast and bear his mark, those who oppress and persecute the Church.¹⁰⁸

2. *Egeneto elkos kakon kai poneron epi tous anthropous* – ‘A harmful and painful boil occurred on the men.’ This first plague is derived from the sixth of the Egyptian plagues (Ex 9:8-12, Dt 28:35). There was a sense of satire in the Egyptian plagues, lampooning supposed Egyptian power and, in the final editing of the Pentateuch, Egypt came to function as a symbol of Babylon. Now, Egypt and Babylon both function as symbols of Rome – and of all corrupt world powers for later readers of the book. That lampooning sense is still evident in the polemic inflicting of ‘boils’ on a hapless oppressor.

3. *Ho deuteros execheen ten phialen autou eis ten thalassan* – ‘the second poured out his bowl into the sea.’ As was the case with the trumpets (8:8-11), Revelation makes two plagues of the first Egyptian plague – turning water to blood. Though the bowl is poured into water, there is still enough verbal repetition to indicate the exact execution of the initiating command – a general command that now receives specific execution appropriate for the nature of the ‘plague.’

4. *Egeneto haima hos nekrou kai pasa psycho zoes apethanen* – ‘it became blood like (that) of a dead man and every living psyche(soul) died.’ While it might be tempting to read into the text an idea of pollution and its consequences, the plagues function as signs and as consequences for the actions of the inhabitants of the earth. In the context of Revelation, the images have concerned wars of conquest and lethal imposition of rule, including the enforcement of the Imperial Cult. The shedding of innocent blood has consequences, in this case a proliferation of bloodshed and death imagined as making water undrinkable and killing all living things in the water – a source of food for humans. This plague corresponds to the sounding of the second trumpet (8:8-9), but again, rather than a sign impacting some fraction of the world/sea to motivate a change of heart, this ‘plague’ is not the enactment of the inevitable consequences of the actions of Rome/worldly powers. While the plague is said to touch the entire sea, there is still a distinction between the faithful and those who worship the beast and its image, who bear its mark. However, that distinction is somewhat cloudy since for ‘John’ it is expected that faithful Christians will give testimony to the truth by enduring patiently the trials of the world.

5. *Ho tritos…* ‘the third…’ The third plague is the doublet of turning the sea into blood, but now fresh waters of rivers and springs are impacted. As a doublet, this plague is narrated in a very summary fashion.

6. *Ekousa tou angelou ton hydatos* – ‘I heard the angel of the waters.’ The ‘angel of the waters’ functions as an *angel interpreps*, explaining the import of the two plagues of turning water into blood.

Harrington observes that the notion of an ‘angel’ in charge of the elements has been suggested by the four angels taking their stand at the four corners of the earth (7:1), and the evil or fallen angel ruling over the abyss (9:11). More to the point, the image is derived from the apocalyptic writing of I Enoch: After this he showed me the angels of punishment who are prepared to come and release all the powers of the waters which are underground to become judgment and destruction unto all who dwell upon the earth... for they were the angels who were in charge of the waters (I Enoch 66:1-2).²⁰⁹

Perhaps more to the point is the fact that the first beast emerged from the sea, recalling the watery chaos of creation and the threat of the beast to return the world to such a state of chaos – to unleash uncreation. In this case, the ‘angel of the waters’ contravenes the efforts of the beast and turns his evil back upon him. Actions have consequences and the wanton shedding of blood turns that blood back upon those who shed it.

Harrington also notes that the words of the ‘angel’ form a sort of antiphon to the canticle of 15:3-4; they

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¹⁰⁸ Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

²⁰⁹ Ibid.
illustrate the divine ‘righteousness’ and ‘holiness’ proclaimed in the song. Such antiphons have appeared in ‘heavenly liturgies’ when the elders fall down and give an antiphonal answer to what is ‘liturgically’ proclaimed.410

7. *Ho on kai ho en* – ‘the one who is and who was.’ As was the case in 11:17, the threefold acclamation is shortened, no longer including, ‘the one who is to come.’ God’s judgment is NOW.

8. *Hoti haima exechean… haima autois dedokas piein, axioi eisin* – ‘because they poured out blood… you have given them blood to drink; they are worthy/deserving.’ What the angel proclaims is 1:1 retribution. ‘They are worthy’ is a sarcastic parody of 3:4 where ‘worthiness’ is praised rather than being a statement of obtaining one’s just desserts.

Harrington notes that this proclamation expounds the principle stated in Wis 11:16 – ‘that they might learn that one is punished by the very things by which one sins.’411

9. *Ekousa tou thysiasteriou legontos* – ‘I heard the altar saying.’ About this strange image, Harrington notes that the reference is either to the angel of the altar (14:18) or a personification of the altar mentioned in 6:9 and 8:3-5. In either case, he contends that the ‘voice’ is that of the martyrs from 6:9-11 (How long, O Lord, O Holy One and True, do you not judge and avenge our blood from these dwelling on the earth?); their prayer of lament has been answered. He notes, too, that the words of this acclamation echo those of 15:3.412

Given that no one can enter the temple/tabernacle until the seven bowls have been spent, the personification of the altar makes the most sense. It is the context for offering up the prayers of the faithful on earth – the angel with the golden censer – and from under the altar the voices of those who had already paid the price of resisting evil rose in lament. Now, the altar itself ‘speaks’ for those it serves, praising God’s answer to prayers, his vindication of his just ones.

10. *Edothe auto kaumatisai tous anthropous en pyri* – ‘It was given/granted to it (the sun) to burn/scorch men in fire.’ The ‘divine passive’ indicates again the hand of God behind the plagues. Harrington points out the contrast between the fate of ‘men’ in this plague and that of the vast throng gathered before the throne in the Song of Victory: ‘Not will they be hungry any more nor will they thirst anymore and indeed not should fall upon them the sun nor any scorching (heat), for the lamb in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them along the way to living fountains (springs) of waters and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes’ (7:16-17). He observes further that what is expressed by this contrast is a reflection of the Wisdom principle stated in Wis 11:15: ‘For through the very things by which their enemies are punished, they themselves receive benefit in their need.’413

A significant element in the contrast concerns the composition of the vast throng: ‘Behold, a large (diverse) crowd (multitude), which, to number (count) it, no one was able from out of every nation and tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the lamb’ (7:9). The contrast is not strictly between those ‘inside’ the Church and those ‘outside.’ Those ‘outside’ who have a change of heart, who resist the values and policies of world powers, those who are ‘on the way’ are included in those standing before the throne. The faithful are contrasted with those who buy into the evils of this world, the false sense of power and self-sufficiency, even those ‘inside’ the Church who compromise and make accommodations with the evils of this world.

11. *Eblasphemesen to onoma tou theou... kai ou metenoesan* – ‘they blasphemed the name of God... and did not repent/change/turn back.’ As the Christ is assimilated to his Father and the faithful are assimilated to the Christ, so the evil people of this world are assimilated to their master, the Beast (see 13:1, 5-6). They blame God for their plight rather than accepting that they are simply experiencing the consequences of their actions, their way of life. In contrast to those who looked on the two witnesses who had been killed and turned to give glory to God (11:13), here there is no repentance. The proclamation of 14:7 has gone unheaded: ‘Fear God and give glory to him because the hour of his judgment (judging) has come and worship him having made the heaven and the earth and (the) sea and streams of waters.’

410 Ibid.
411 Ibid.
412 Ibid.
413 Ibid.
Commentary

The third, and final, cycle of plagues begins in the same fashion as the first two, the Seals and the Trumpets. Four plagues are narrated in rapid succession. In biblical literature, the number ‘3’ symbolizes complete time of short duration. The three cycles of plagues quickly demonstrate God’s sovereignty over all of creation and function as signs to call all people to change, to repentance, to embracing the offer of a permanent relationship with God, a relationship leading to eternal life. With this third cycle, God’s signs, his offer of a relationship, his frustration with those who continue to ignore the truth and refuse the offer are coming to an end.

There is a clear pattern of command/execution in the narration of the pouring out of the bowls of God’s wrath – an expression that indicates God’s frustration, his righteous indignation at the evil of the world that chooses to oppose his love. This pattern demonstrates both the faithfulness of God’s servants and God’s absolute mastery over all that he has created.

With the expulsion of the ‘dragon’ from the realms of heaven, the struggle between good and evil has moved to the elements of creation below the ‘heavenly dwelling’ of God – the earth, the seas, and the sky (below the firmament that separates the realm of God from the realms of his creatures). The pouring out of the first four bowls impacts each of these elements of creation – the earth, where men are afflicted with painful boils, the waters of the seas and the fresh waters of rivers and springs, where the water is turned to blood and all living things in the waters die, and the ‘mid-heaven,’ the sky, where the heat of the sun is intensified to scorch men on the earth below.

While the plagues are drawn from the cycle of Egyptian plagues in the Exodus story, ‘signs’ of God’s dominion over even the powers of earthly empires, they display the added dimension of expressing a basic tenet of Israel’s Wisdom Tradition – ‘...that they might learn that one is punished by the very things by which one sins’ (Wis 11:16). The concept is expressed most dramatically in the pouring out of the second bowl. The result was that the sea became blood, as of a dead man, and all living things in it died. It was out of the sea that the first Beast arose, the symbol of worldly power structures coming from the source of the watery chaos of uncreation. The ‘Beast’ threatens a return to chaos by its murderous attempts to establish its power and domination over humanity, a pattern of ‘rule’ that causes the suffering of the Church, even the shedding of the blood of the faithful followers of the Lamb. How it lives will prove to be its own downfall. This is made particularly clear in the expansion of the narration of the third plague, turning fresh waters into blood. The ‘seer’ hears a voice, an ‘interpreting angel,’ who makes clear the meaning of the plague – because they have shed the blood of the holy ones and prophets, the evil of the earth will drink blood, they will endure the fate which they deserve.

There is evidence in Jewish apocalyptic writings that certain angels have control over elements of creation. It is an ‘angel of the waters’ who interprets the plague. It is the angel, a ‘messenger’ of God who counteracts the efforts of the Beast to return the world to watery chaos; it is the ‘angel of the waters,’ who holds such chaos in check. All is moving forward according to God’s will and plan.

And what is God’s plan? That is the focus of the fourth plague. The plague is a ‘sign,’ an invitation from God to ‘repent,’ to have a ‘change of heart,’ to experience God’s mercy. Unfortunately, the fourth plague turns out to be a ‘sign’ that is ignored, an invitation that is refused. The inhabitants of the earth blaspheme the name of God, blaming him for their woes, and they refuse to ‘repent.’ They leave no room for God’s mercy.
Of particular interest in the account of the fourth plague is its allusion to the promise made to the ‘vast throng’ gathered before the throne of God in the Proclamation of Judgment, 14:6-13. After this proclamation, the ‘vast throng’ of the faithful are promised that the sun and scorching heat will no longer strike them. They will experience God’s care and mercy. There is a contrast between the faithful who are spared and the recalcitrant who are not. The contrast is not strictly between those ‘inside’ the Church and those ‘outside.’ Those ‘outside’ who have a change of heart, who resist the values and policies of world powers, those who are ‘on the way’ are included in those standing before the throne. Those, by contrast, who buy into the evils of this world, the false sense of power and self-sufficiency, even those ‘inside’ the Church who compromise and make accommodations with the evils of this world, are those who reject God’s care and mercy.

The call to ‘change’ and accept God’s mercy is one of the most predominate themes throughout the entire Bible. There is a class of stories that abound throughout biblical literature, Crime and Punishment stories. These stories make up the bulk of the Primeval History; they feature in the actions of the Israelites during the wilderness wanderings; they form the backbone of the stories of the Judges; they are the focus of a number of Jesus’ parables. The stories have a basic outline:

A. People do what is evil in the eyes of the Lord
B. God acts to correct the evil, pronouncing a judgment – usually in absolute, life and death terms
C. People admit that they were wrong
D. God’s judgment is mitigated – there are still consequences, but not life and death
E. In the end, God’s mercy prevails

‘Mercy’ is the final word in God’s dealings with recalcitrant humanity. This raises an issue for the Church and its individual members. How merciful can I/we be with war lords who abduct small boys to fight in wars of revolution in Africa? How merciful can I/we be with ISIS? With the terrorists of 9/11? How merciful can I/we be with those who deal in human trafficking? With those who sell teens and pre-teens into the sex trade, who abuse children, who enslave undocumented aliens? How merciful can I/we be with racists, bigots, sexists? Can I/we accept God’s offer of mercy to these people? Can I/we harbor any belief that people can change? Are patterns of behavior so set that any personal or systemic change in our world is highly improbable if not impossible? Are we called to ‘fight’ evil or to offer mercy to the evildoers? How can we offer safety and protection to the vulnerable of the world, how can we safeguard those we love and be merciful to those who embrace patterns of violence, hatred, and blatant disregard for human life? How can we be followers of the Lamb?
The Fifth Bowl (16:11-12)

10 And the fifth poured out his bowl upon the throne of the beast and its kingdom became darkened and they gnawed their tongues out of distress (pain, agony). 11 And they blasphemed (cursed) the God of the heaven from (because of) their pain and because of their boils and they did not change (turn back, repent) from their works.

Textual Notes

1. *Execheen ten phialen autou epi ton thronon tou theriou* – ‘He poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast.’ The command/execution pattern continues, but in the fifth through seventh plagues, the plagues are directed specifically to the worshippers of the beast. The narration of the last three plagues is almost as brief as the narration of the first four. This fits the assertion that the cycle of plagues in three sets of seven indicates a complete time of short duration. The last set moves quickly to completion. This plague is derived from the 9th Egyptian plague – darkness over the whole earth. Here, however, the darkness falls on the kingdom of the Beast. In the logic of Revelation, the ‘throne of the Beast’ represents Rome and its power and authority has been conferred on it by the Dragon (13:2).

2. *Emasonto tas glossas auton ek tou ponou* – ‘they gnawed their tongues out of distress.’ Harrington notes that Wisdom 17 paints a vivid picture of the terrors of the plague of darkness. 414 Israel’s Wisdom literature is dualistic – good vs. evil, righteousness vs. injustice, godly vs. ungodly, light vs. dark. In the immediate context, there have been many allusions of the Book of Wisdom and Israel’s Wisdom tradition. What is particularly pertinent is the Wisdom background to the Fourth Gospel and the frequent images and sayings contrasting light and darkness. Especially pertinent is Jn 3:19 – ‘And this is the judgment, that

414 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.  

3. *E blasphemesan ton theon tou ouranou* – ‘they blasphemed the God of the heaven.’ Harrington observes that ‘to blaspheme’ recurs three times in the plagues of the Seven Bowls, vv. 9, 11, and 21. He concludes that this threefold repetition points to those who had wholly taken on the character of the false god they served, the beast who is the great blasphemer (13:1, 5-6). With the threefold cycle of plagues, indicating that God’s purpose is accomplished quickly, the threefold repetition of ‘to blaspheme’ in this cycle is indicative of the obstinance of those who worship the beast. In rapid succession, they blaspheme God three times. For them, the pattern is set. No multiplication of ‘signs’ will have any effect on them. What is particularly significant to note in the repetition is that in vv. 9 and 11 it is noted that they blasphemed and that they did not repent. In the third repetition, in v. 21, the phrase, ‘they did not repent,’ is missing. They are so set in their ways that having a change of heart is no longer a possibility. They, by their actions, have ruled such a change out.

Commentary

That the narrative of Revelation is approaching a climax is indicated in how quickly the plagues of the Fifth through Seventh Bowls are narrated. God’s signs are coming to an end, and quickly. The fifth plague is derived from the ninth Egyptian plague, a plague of darkness. The contrast between light and darkness is a dominant symbol in Israel’s Wisdom tradition and, in particular, informs the imagery of the Fourth Gospel in which Jesus has come into the world as light. Jn 3:19 states: ‘And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.’

The plague of darkness enshrouds the evil empire in darkness; it shows evil for what it is. And still, people choose the darkness rather than the light. And they curse God for unveiling their greed, their ambition, their duplicity, their evil. And, as was the case in v. 9, they do not ‘repent,’ they have no ‘change of heart.’

It is significant to note that in the narration of the final plagues, ‘they blasphemed’ occurs three times, in vv. 9, 11, and 21. In each of the first two instances, this is followed by ‘they did not repent.’ That is the purpose of the plagues, to function as ‘signs’ of the truth, as ‘signs’ to draw people to a change of heart. But the people prefer the darkness. The notice that ‘they did not repent’ is missing from v. 21. By then, the time for repentance is over. God has done all that he can; those who choose darkness will live with the consequences of their choice.

Since the recommissioning of the ‘seer’ to be a prophet to all the inhabitants of the earth, there has been a broadened perspective in the book. Words of judgment, warning, and hope have been addressed to all people, those within the Church and those outside. There has been a universal call to all of God’s children to accept his will and plan for the good of all. And darkness prevails. In our world, the words of Revelation ask all people to examine the dark areas of their lives and to embrace the light before it is too late. What are the dark areas in our own lives? What are those hidden habits and failures and inclinations that we embrace in the dark? What are those things in our lives we don’t want others to know? What are those things we wish we could hide from God? In what ways do we prefer the darkness? Why is it so difficult to let go of these personal demons and embrace the light?

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415 NRSV translation.
416 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
The Sixth Bowl (16:12-16)

12 And the sixth poured out his bowl upon the great river, the Euphrates, and its water was dried up so that might be prepared the way of the kings, those from the rising (place) of the sun (the East). 13 And I saw, from the mouth of the dragon and from the mouth of the beast and from the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits, like frogs: 14 they are, indeed, spirits of demons making signs which go out to the kings of the whole inhabited world to gather them to the war (battle) of the great day of God, the Almighty. 15 Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is he being awake (watchful, alert) and keeping (protecting) his garments so that he should not walk about naked and they (anyone) might see his shamefulness (genitals). 16 And he gathered them to the placed called, in Hebrew, Harmagedon (Armageddon).

Textual Notes

1. Execheen ten phialen autou epi ton potoman ton megan ton euphratesn – ‘He poured out his bowl upon the great river, the Euphrates.’ (see note #3, p. 167). It is to be noted that the Euphrates marked the eastern boundary to the Roman Empire and that ancient Babylon had been located on the Euphrates. Throughout Revelation, Babylon functions as a symbol of Rome and as a symbol of all corrupt worldly powers. Harrington notes that what is likely in the mind of the author of Revelation is the fact that beyond the Euphrates is the land of the Parthians, a possible rival to the power of Rome and a possible ‘worldly redeemer’ on the model of Cyrus who, from Persia, east of Babylon, conquered Babylonia and allowed the exiled Jews to return home.417

2. Exeranthe to hydor autou hina hetoimasthe he hodos ton basileon ton apo anatoles heliou – ‘was dried up its water so that might be prepared the way of the kings, those from the rising place of the sun.’ Harrington, again noting that a possible Parthian invasion is in the mind of the author, cites passages in Exodus, Joshua, and Jeremiah in which water is ‘dried up’ to allow safe passage. These passages

417 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
reference the crossing of the sea by Israel, fleeing from the power of Egypt. He notes, again, that Rome is to be understood as a latter day Egypt. Harrington does not pay any attention to the phrase ‘prepare the way.’ This is clearly an allusion to Isaiah (40:3). What is most noteworthy in Isaiah is that the ‘way’ is not a path to be traveled by the Israelites, but a ‘way’ by which God himself will come to his people. In this sense, the pouring out of the sixth bowl is a means of preparing a way for God to again come to his people. Apocalyptic literature ‘hopes for’ some form of divine intervention. Revelation has made clear that the definitive action of God to save his people has already happened in the Cross of Jesus Christ. In the working out of that world-changing action, perhaps God will intervene through an invading army that will topple the power of Rome; perhaps he will intervene in some other way – the images of Revelation tend to be multi-layered. What is clear is that God himself, through his ‘signs’ is himself preparing a way for coming to his people.

3.  *Eidon ek tou stomatos tou drakontos... tou theriou... tou pseudoprophetou... pneumata tria akatharta hos batrachoï – ‘I saw out of the mouth of the dragon... the beast... the false prophet... three unclean spirits like frogs.’ It is possible to see in the dragon, the beast and the false prophet an ‘unholy trinity.’ In particular, in the logic of Revelation, the dragon is the source of all evil expelled from heaven; the (first) beast is the symbol of worldly power – Rome – rising from the sea and threatening watery chaos, uncreation; the false prophet is the second beast (13:11). This second beast was specifically identified as Nero and, by implication, Vespasian who arose from Nero’s death to continue exercising the false authority of the first beast. False prophets and false teachers also functioned in the Letters to the Seven Churches as representatives of evil who attempted to lure the Church away from fidelity to the Lamb, who corrupted the Christian life by promoting compromise and accommodation with the powers of the world.

Of the three ‘spirits,’ Harrington notes that they are similar to the locusts of the fifth trumpet (9:1-11). The frogs are demonic beings in the fashion of those described in Zech 13:2. These spirits, from the mouths of the satanic trinity, are lying spirits which deceive humankind (13:4), and lead people to their doom. As to the ‘frogs,’ Rogers and Rogers note that ‘frogs’ were classified as an unclean animal, an abomination in Lv 11:10, 41. The unclean spirits proceed from the mouths of the unholy triumvirate, suggesting the persuasive and deceptive propaganda that in the last days will lead men to commit undoncitionally to the cause of evil.

4.  *Pneumata daimonion poiounta semeia – ‘spirits of demons performing signs.’ This is reminiscent of the beginning of the cycle of Egyptian plagues in which the court ‘magicians’ could duplicate the signs performed by Moses. In the progression of ‘signs,’ first Moses began to perform signs that the ‘magicians’ could not duplicate and then the effects of the signs touched only the Egyptians, not the Israelites. In both cases, the ‘signs’ were intended to display power and authority and assure the loyalty of ‘subjects’ to one ‘god’ or the other.

In this case, however, it is the ‘spirits of demons’ who perform the signs. These are the spirits of the dragon and the beasts and the struggle is for the allegiance of all humanity.

5.  *Epkoreuetai epi tous basileis tes oikoumenes holois synagagein autous eis ton polemon... - ‘they (the signs) go out to the kings of the whole inhabited world to gather then for the battle/war...’ Harrington observes that the ‘kings of the whole inhabited world’ refers to the subject kings of the Roman Empire, the vassal kings of the ‘civilized’ world as opposed to the barbarian Parthians of v. 12. It is likely that ‘mustering’ these kings for battle is an allusion to the legend of Nero Redux, or Nero Redivivus – the resurrected Nero. In popular belief it was held that Nero would return, at the head of a Parthian army, to destroy his enemies and regain his throne. The demonic spirits are portrayed as summoning the ‘kings of the whole inhabited world’ to join the Parthian invaders and together to battle the forces of God.

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418 Ibid.
419 Ibid.
420 Ibid.
421 Ibid.
6. _Tes hemeras tes megales tou theou tou pantokratoros_ – ‘the great day of God the almighty.’ The great and terrible day of the Lord is a common image in apocalyptic literature. The images is derived from Joel 2:11. In most apocalyptic writings, this day represents the definitive action of God to dethrone the mighty and lift up the lowly, to initiate a radical new version of creation, to vindicate his oppressed people. In Revelation, that ‘day’ has already occurred on Calvary. Yet the struggle between good and evil continues because deception and lust and greed and ambition still hold sway in the world. Not all have ‘chosen’ for the Lamb. In Revelation, the urgency turns not on getting ready for the ‘Great Day of the Lord,’ but to choose to accept the victory of the Lamb before it is too late, before time runs out for making that choice.

7. _Idou eteromai hos kleptes_ – ‘Behold! I am coming as a thief.’ Within the narration of the plague of the sixth bowl, this constitutes a frame break. The break, at this point, does not interject the voice of the omniscient narrator as has been encountered throughout the text. Here, it is the voice of Christ himself who breaks frame, who issues a warning, and who offers a blessing. The call to ‘watchfulness’ recalls similar passages in the Gospels (Mt 24:43; Lk 12:39). What is most significant here is that the voice of Christ appears in the context of a plague unleashed on all the world, a plague in which the demonic spirits are gathering the ‘Kings of the whole inhabited world’ for battle. Not only to members of the Church, but to all the world Christ issues his warning. He is coming, and the ‘second coming’ of Christ is uniformly associated with judgment.

8. _Makarious ho gregoron kai teron ta himatia autou_… ‘Blessed/fortunate the one being watchful and keeping his garments…’ Harrington notes that this is one of the seven ‘beatitudes’ of Revelation. They are red threads weaving together the whole book.422

The seven beatitudes are:

a. 1:3 – ‘Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.’

b. 14:13 – ‘Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.’

c. 16:15 – ‘Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame.’

d. 19:9 – ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’

e. 20:6 – ‘Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years.’

f. 22:7 – ‘Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.’

g. 22:14 – ‘Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates.’423

9. _Hina me gymnos peripatei kai bleposin ten aschemosynen autou_ – ‘So that he should not walk about naked and they should see his genitals.’ Harrington observes a connection with the admonition given to the Church in Laodicea. The members of the Church are advised to buy from the Lord white garments to put on to cover the shame of their nakedness (3:18). He notes that the subjunctive verb forms, ‘to walk’ and ‘to be seen,’ are indicative of habitual actions. He follows Sweet in seeing that warning is not so much to caught with one’s pants down, but with no pants at all.424

It is much more likely that the blessedness of those who are fully clothed is a specifically cultural reference. Note the Greek word for ‘naked’ – _gymnos_. It was common practice in the Greek and Roman worlds to hold athletic competitions in a _gymnasium_ – a venue for such contests where the contestants competed nude. Such competitions were held to honor gods and rulers – especially once rulers began adopting the status of gods. Such practices, introduced into Israel by Greek and Roman overlords, were particularly abhorant to the Jews. The genitals were ‘signs’ of life, of that aspect of human life where we are most like God – creating new life. The abhorance to public nudity was not a prudish attitude towards sexuality, but a respect for the ‘divine’ nature of procreation. It is highly likely that, in the Churches of the Province of Asia, Jews and Christians on the one hand were forced to participate in the games honoring

422 Ibid.
423 NRSV translations.
424 Wilfrid Harrington, _op. cit._
gods and emperors, and on the other that some willingly participated to gain acceptance in the surrounding culture and to avoid exclusion from the life of the surrounding society. ‘To walk about naked’ is not an image of being caught unawares – with one’s pants down – but a clear indication of compromising with the surrounding culture, of making accommodations with the powers and values of the world.

10. *Synagagen autous eis ton topon* – ‘and he gathered them to the place.’ The main issue with this phrase concerns the antecedents of ‘he’ and ‘them.’ While some manuscripts do not include the words of Christ, the best manuscript evidence supports its inclusion. Without those words, there are no clear antecedents for the subject and object of ‘to gather.’ It makes logical sense to conclude that ‘Christ’ gathered the ‘blessed’ to *Har Megiddo* for a showdown between good and evil.

11. *Harmagedon* – ‘the mountain of Megiddo.’ In popular misunderstanding, *Armageddon* has become an event as much as a place. It is taken to refer to the final conflict of good and evil, the place and time where God will wreak his vengeance on the world. Against all this it can simply be noted that *Har Magiddo* is a geographical location in northern Israel. Harrington observes that the mountain is situated on a plain near Mt. Carmel, dominated by the strategic pass from the coast to the plain of Jezreel. Its situation made it the scene of many Old Testament battles and, since the defeat and death of Josiah at Megiddo (II Kgs 23:29-30) it had become a symbol of disaster.
Commentary

A degree of ambiguity marks the pouring out of the sixth bowl. The ‘plague’ involves drying up the Euphrates in a manner reminiscent of drying up the waters of the Sea of Reeds in Exodus and of the Jordan River in Joshua. In both cases, the drying of the water allowed the Israelites safe passage on their journey to freedom and entry into the Promised Land.

There have been several references or allusions to the Parthians in Revelation. The kingdom of the Parthians was beyond the Euphrates, the eastern border of the Roman Empire. In the imagery of the book, the Parthians were portrayed as present day Persians who, under Cyrus, defeated Babylon, a symbol of Rome, and allowed the exiled Jews to return to their homeland. It seems likely that the hope of a Parthian invasion to challenge the power of Rome stands behind the imagery here. This would definitely fit the requirements for a ‘plague’ on those who worship the beast.

What generally gets overlooked by commentators, however, is the phrase, ‘that might be prepared a way...’ This is an obvious allusion to Is 40:3 – ‘prepare the way of the Lord.’ In the imagery of Isaiah, the ‘way’ is not a pathway to be traveled by the Israelites, but a ‘way’ for the Lord to make his way to them. It is not unreasonable to understand the ‘plague,’ impacting the worshippers of the beast, as a positive action on God’s part to lead an invading army against the worldly power that is oppressing God’s faithful servants.

In the pattern of three sets of plagues, drawn from the Egyptian plague cycle in Exodus, it is common to focus on the ‘frogs’ in treating the pouring out of the sixth bowl. But the frogs emerge from the mouths of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet, the ‘false prophet’ being a characterization of the second beast. The main attribute of the ‘frogs,’ the inherent spirits of the ‘ unholy trinity’ is their power to deceive. These spirits have the ability to ‘perform signs,’ making them rivals to God and his will for the good of humanity. But the signs they perform are false. They send out ‘signs’ to gather the kings of the inhabited world for battle on ‘the Great Day of the Lord.’ In the logic of Revelation, this is a lie. The ‘Great Day of the Lord,’ the apocalyptic events that changes everything, has already happened in the Cross of Jesus Christ.

It is not exactly clear whether the signs sent to the ‘kings of the whole inhabited world’ refers to the ‘civilized’ vassal kings of Rome who are summoned to fight off a possible invasion and challenge to Rome’s power, whether the ‘kings of the whole inhabited world’ included external invaders in an alliance with rebellious vassals to challenge the power of Rome, or whether what is imagined is a mustering of world powers to stand against the ‘forces’ of God who had already defeated the dragon in a heavenly battle. What is clear is that the spirits of the dragon and the two beasts are marshalling forces for some kind of definitive battle on the ‘Great Day of the Lord,’ when that victory has already been won by the Lamb.

An unusual feature in the vision of the sixth bowl is the voice of Christ. In wording drawn from the Gospel tradition, he warns that he is coming as a thief, coming when people least expect it. This obviously alludes to the Parousia, to the second coming of Christ which will occur for the sake of judging the world. The judgment is imagined as a grand sorting out of the ‘victorious’ and those ‘overcome’ in the aftermath of the victory won on the Cross.

The words of Christ continue with the pronouncement of a ‘beatitude,’ one of seven that run through the book (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; and 22:14). The ‘blessing’ lauds those who are awake and
alert – and fully clothed. On the surface, this looks like praise for those who are ready, prepared for the coming of Christ, who are not caught unawares. But the pronouncement of praise is very explicit – it is praise for those who are not literally naked, those whose genitals are not exposed. There is a specific background to this ‘beatitude.’ In the Greek and Roman worlds athletic competitions were held in the nude. Such competitions featured in festivals celebrating both the gods and human rulers, especially those rulers who expected to be honored as deities. For the Jews and Jewish-Christians, public nudity was particularly abhorant. The genitals were considered a ‘source of life,’ the feature of humanity that allowed people to share in the creative process, to be most ‘like’ God. As such, public displays of nudity were considered an affront to the sacredness of procreation, not a mere, prudish attitude towards sexuality. In the Roman culture of the Province of Asia in the late first century, participation in such athletic events was to be expected and was in some cases enforced by threat of exclusion from society, from trade guilds and thus from a means of making a living, and in some cases even by death. How blessed are they who have a proper respect for life and the source of life; how blessed are they who do not compromise their values for the sake of livelihood, prestige, belonging. How blessed are they who do not succumb to the deceitful lure of the surrounding culture.

While the best manuscript traditions include the proclamation by Christ, it is omitted in some manuscripts and a good number of commentators think it is secondary and intrusive in the text. On the contrary, the last words of the passage, ‘And he gathered them to the place called, in Hebrew, Har Megidon,’ would make no sense without Christ’s proclamation. The subject of the verb, ‘to gather,’ is ‘he.’ Without the words of Christ, there is no antecedent for the subject. As such, those whom ‘he’ gathers are to be understood as the ‘blessed.’ They will be gathered at Mt. Megiddo, a classic site of many Old Testament battles, a battle ground on the main route from Mesopotamia, through Israel, and on to Egypt. It is a battle ground on which Israel is caught between world powers. It is a site associated with disaster – Josiah, the reformer king of Judah died there. It is a place where the ‘blessed,’ ‘the faithful,’ can ‘overcome,’ can ‘endure’ till the end.

There is no shortage of ‘deceivers’ in our world. There are those who hold out power, wealth, fame, and status as the ultimate goals of life. The are deceivers from the world of business vying for our dollars with the promise of finding fulfillment in life by what we can acquire. The deceivers are from the world of politics and government, promising the ‘American Dream,’ if we support their unbridled thirst for power. And there are the deceptions we perpetrate ourselves, to achieve our personal goals, to maintain a sense of comfort in our personal worlds. What is the power of advertising in our world? What is the power of political campaigns? What is the power of Wall Street? What is the power of the little white lie? How easy is it to find the answer, the philosophy, the rationale for what we want to believe, for what we find safe and comfortable, for what shields us from commitment to others while protecting what is convenient for us? If the bishop of our diocese states something we don’t like do we look to what another bishop has said elsewhere to justify ignoring Church rule in our local Church? Can I pick and choose which teachings of the Church make me comfortable and claim to be a good Christian by conforming to the things I like and ignoring those that challenge me to move beyond myself? In my world, who are the deceivers and who are the deceived? Into which camp do I fall? Is it both?
And the seventh poured out his bowl into the air and came forth a loud voice out of the temple from the throne saying: It is done. And there occurred lightning flashes and sounds and thunder claps and a great earthquake happened, such as not has happened ever since man has been upon the earth, so large (violent) was the earthquake and great. And the great city became in three parts and the cities of the nations fell and the great Babylon was remembered before God, to give to her the cup of the wine of the wrath of his burning anger. And every island fled and mountains were not to be found. And great hail like a talent weight is coming down out of the heaven upon the men and the men blasphemed (cursed) God because of the plague of the hail, for great is the plague of it, exceedingly.
Textual Notes

1. *Execheen ten phialen autou epi ton aera* – ‘he poured out his bowl into the air.’ Note the repetitive patterns. In the first four plagues, the bowls were poured out on the earth, the sea and fresh waters, and on the sun. The fifth bowl was poured out on the throne of the beast – an earthly kingdom. The sixth bowl was poured out on the Great River, the Euphrates. Now the seventh bowl is poured out into the air. There is a double pattern encompassing all the elements of creation.

2. *Gegonen* – ‘it is finished/has happened/has occurred.’ Harrington notes that both the seventh seal and the seventh trumpet signaled an ending. Here the ‘end’ is more than the ending of a cycle of plagues, but a finality.\(^{425}\)

   The English, ‘It is finished’ suggests an allusion to the words of Christ on the Cross in the Fourth Gospel, Jn 19:30. In Greek, however, different words are used. On the Cross, Jesus uses the word *teleo* – ‘to be at an end, over, finished, complete.’ The verb used here is *ginomai* – ‘to be, become, happen, occur.’ There is a similar sense to the words that can suggest a connection between the two passages, but such a connection cannot be overpressed. The sense of Jesus’ words is that he is done, that he has finished what he set out to do; the sense of the verb used in Revelation is that history has run its course, that all that should have occurred has happened, and – in the sense of the verb meaning ‘to be present, become’ – a new era has dawned.

3. *Astrapai... phonai... brontai... seimos...* - ‘lightning... sounds/rumblings... thunder... an earthquake...’ At the end of each of the three cycles of plagues there is a ‘theophany,’ signs of God’s presence in the forces of nature. Such ‘theophanies’ in the Bible are always ‘signs’ of God’s presence in power – not necessarily harmful power, but a demonstration of the ‘otherness’ of God, of the smallness of humanity in the face of such a God. In the vision of the Seals and the Trumpets, the theophanies replaced a final, seventh plague and provided a transition to the ongoing story, a transition in which the story continues under the ‘signs’ of God’s power and control. In this case, the earthquake, not usually a theophanic element, impacts the great cities of the world and a plague of hail is also narrated. In terms of plagues, as ‘signs’ of God’s authority, this is the end.

   A number of commentators point to catastrophic earthquakes in the Province of Asia as the backdrop for the imagery of the earthquake in these verses. In the action/consequences framework of Revelation, it is possible to see the imagery employed here as another bit of polemics and a verification of the truth that sin is its own punishment. There is a certain folly to building temples and monuments in an area known for catastrophic earthquakes, like building a city on a flood plain. Yet the cities of Asia did just that, and rebuilt after disaster struck. The arrogance of human rule and human hubris is doomed to fail – and by its very arrogance.

4. *Egeneto he polis he megale eis tria mere* – ‘became the great city in three parts’ The ‘great city’ is Rome, the seat of worldly power. Before God’s might it cracks apart. It can’t stand before the God of all creation.

   The deployment of the ‘earthquake’ plague matches exactly the use of the plagues in the Exodus story, a ‘sign’ of who God really is and the futility of resisting his will for good for all creation.

5. *Hai poleis ton ethnon epesan* – ‘the cities of the nations fell.’ It is likely that vassal states to Rome are envisioned here, the ‘kings of the earth’ for whom the ‘seer’ is to be a prophet. These are the nations who serve the ‘beast.’

6. *Babylon he megale emnesthe enopion tou theo* – ‘Babylon, the great, was remembered before God.’

   There are two levels on which this reference to Babylon is to be understood. Throughout Revelation, the city has represented Rome, and by extension all false worldly powers. On another level, Babylon is sometimes paired with/compared with Egypt, depicting a long history of human arrogance in the face of the power and sovereignty of God. That Babylon was ‘remembered’ is significant. In biblical literature, ‘to remember’ does not simply mean ‘to call to mind.’ It means ‘to make present again.’ ‘To forget’ means to obliterate, to erase – ‘Remember not against us the iniquities of the past.’ At the beginning of Exodus, the cries of the oppressed Israelites reach the ears of God in heaven and *he remembered.* God made present again his election of his people, his will that in them all the nations of

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\(^{425}\) Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
the earth are to find blessing, and, remembering, he acted to save, to free them. In this case, the tables are turned. God remembers the evil of Babylon – actually and symbolically. As Egypt before her and as Rome after her, and like all the corrupt world powers that will emerge through the rest of human history, God remembers and will deal with her according to her deeds.

7. Ουτί μου δίω οἱ άνθρωποι τοῦ θέλημα τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ οἴνου τῆς θυμωνίας τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου – ‘to give to her to drink of the wine of the wrath/fury/passion of the his anger.’ This is an exact imposition of the judgment on Babylon announced in 14:8-10, in the Proclamation of Judgment. Babylon was censured for causing men to drink of the wine of her fornication, indicating the alluring and intoxicating enticements offered by corrupt world powers. The judgment against her stated that she would drink the wine of God’s wrath. The fulfillment of this judgment occurs here as the result of God’s remembering.

8. Πᾶσα νῆσος ἐγένεται καὶ οὐκ ἐμφανίσθησαν – ‘every island fled and mountains were not found.’ See note #3, p. 153. Images of the movement of mountains and other land masses function in a number of psalms as indications of God’s mastery over creation. Harrington notes that in apocalyptic literature, such phenomena are to be interpreted as signs of the end time. Rogers and Rogers note that the weight of a ‘talent’ varied from about 60 to 100 pounds. The image is of a ‘crushing’ hail, a hail that will not only destroy vegetation, but crush men.

9. Χαλαζά μεγάλη ως ταλαντία – ‘Great hail as a talent weight.’ Rogers and Rogers note that as Rome, Babylon, Egypt, and all oppressive power structures symbolically ‘crush’ the people under their rule, so will those exercising such power be ‘crushed.’ The plague of hail is drawn from Ex 9:23-24, but is made much more harmful, much more devastating. This is the end.

10. Εβλασφημείτε... – ‘they blasphemed/cursed...’ Within the vision of the angels with the Seven Bowls, three times is it noted that men blasphemed, that they cursed God, that they blamed him for the plagues as an inconvenience for them, as suffering, but with no recognition on their part of the meaning of the ‘signs,’ no willingness to acknowledge that it is God, not Roman Emperors, not gods of silver and stone who rules the world, who has a plan for the good of all creation. Twice, in the vision of the fourth bowl and the vision of the fifth, it was noted that ‘they blasphemed and they did not repent.’ Those two vision gave an indication that it was not too late, that having a change of heart was still a possibility. At the end of the plague unleashed by pouring out the seventh bowl, it is again recorded that men blasphemed, but there is no longer any notice that they did not repent. After the proclamation ‘It is finished,’ there is no longer any opportunity to repent, to change, to turn to God’s offer of mercy and love. From this point on, the book will turn to the working out of God’s plan, the end of evil and the appearance of the ‘New Jerusalem.’

426 Ibid.
427 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
Commentary

In each of the three cycles of plagues, the seventh involves a ‘theophany,’ a demonstration of God’s presence in power. In the visions of the Opening of the Seals and the Seven Trumpets, the ‘theophany’ replaces the final plague in the series and provides a transition to what follows. The ‘theophany’ in the vision of the Seven Bowls is different. It includes ‘plagues’ of earthquakes and gigantic, crushing hail. Within the vision of the Seventh Bowl there is a statement, ‘It is finished.’ There is a finality to this plague. The time to ‘repent,’ to ‘have a change of heart’ is over. At the end of this cycle, the book moves to visions of the end of evil and the establishment of a ‘New Jerusalem.’

The seventh bowl is emptied into the air. This creates a twice repeated pattern throughout the cycle. In the first four plagues, grouped together in a rapid narration, the bowls are emptied onto the earth, the sea and fresh water, and onto the sun. In the final three, narrated more expansively, the first is poured out onto the throne of the beast, an earthly kingdom, the second on the Great River, the Euphrates, and the third into the air. This double pattern emphasizes that God’s signs are for and impinge upon all realms of creation – earth, sky and sea.

In all three sets of plagues, the first four are narrated quickly and then the last three are narrated in more detail. This creates a focus on three plagues in each of the sets. The focus on three plagues in each set combined with the deployment of three sets of seven plagues function symbolically. ‘Three’ is the number of complete time of short duration. The ‘plagues’ are ‘signs’ from God pointing to his sovereignty and inviting the inhabitants of the earth to recognize this and embrace a relationship with this loving, merciful creator God, a relationship far different from the oppressive relationship with the Roman Emperor or with the false and capricious pagan gods. With the completion of the third set of ‘signs,’ the time for repentance is over. Patterns are fixed and the book will move on to its inevitable conclusion.

The ‘earthquakes’ impact the great cities of the world, particularly the ‘Great City,’ Rome. This great city cannot stand before the might of God; it is broken into three pieces. Three – it’s fall is accomplished and quickly. The ‘cities of the nations’ most likely refers to the great cities of vassal states, countries and kingdoms who worship the beast, who have pledged loyalty to Rome. In this case, especially considering the seven notable cities of the Province of Asia, actual catastrophic earthquakes stand behind the imagery of the plague. To build cities in a region known for damaging earthquakes, to re-build them after earthquakes, with their elaborate temples, gymnasia, public buildings and monuments, is sheer folly. It points to the arrogance of human hubris, an arrogance that leads to its own destruction.

A significant feature of the vision of the seventh bowl is the treatment of Babylon. In Revelation, Babylon serves to functions. Primarily it is a representation of Rome. But, with Egypt, it forms a continuous picture of human history dominated by corrupt world powers who feed off the people they conquer and oppress, a picture of the arrogance and drive for power, wealth, status and fame that allow nations and people to conclude that they control their own destiny, that they can live independently, that they have no need of God.

God looks on Babylon and he ‘remembers.’ This is a specific allusion to the opening verses of Exodus in which the cries of the oppressed Israelites rise to the heavens and God looks down and he ‘remembers.’ In biblical literature, ‘to remember’ means to make present again, to make ‘real’ again. God remembers choosing a people and setting them apart to bring his blessings to all the nations of the earth, and he
acts to show them mercy, to free them, free them to choose to serve him, to serve his purpose for the world.

In a polemic move, God ‘remembers’ Babylon, remembers the characterization of the city in the Proclamation of Judgment and the judgment pronounced upon her (14:8-10). She had caused men to drink of the wine of her fornication, allured them with the intoxicating enticements of power, wealth, status. And she was condemned to drink of the wine of God’s wrath – his righteous indignation at the prevalence of evil and self-seeking desire rampant in his world. Now, God executes that judgment. The ‘earthquakes’ and ‘drinking of wine’ re-inforce Revelation’s conviction that sin punishes itself, causes its own destruction.

As Egypt, Babylon, Rome, and all corrupt and oppressive worldly power structures have crushed men, have crushed their spirits, have oppressed people, have run rampant over human rights and human dignity, so too will they be crushed – the symbol of the gigantic, crushing hail.

Three times in the vision of the Seven Bowls, it has been noted that men blasphemed, that they cursed God, that they blamed him when things fell apart, when they ignored his signs and were made to live with the consequences of their own choices and actions. Twice, in the visions of the fourth and fifth bowls, it was noted that ‘they did not repent.’ That note is missing from the final plague. ‘It is finished.’ The time for repentance, for having a change of heart, has passed. The patterns are fixed. God’s love and mercy have been refused. There will come a ‘New Jerusalem,’ but those who refused to recognize God, who refused to accept his invitation to a relationship of love and mercy, will be left out.

The vision of the seventh plague centers on limited time and urgency. On the one hand, it is easy to see this urgency as a warning about death. No one can know the time of his death, so there may be limited time to respond to God. But responding to God does not involve a single choice, a single ‘yes.’ It involves a lifetime of choices, a lifetime of actions. The issue is the patterns of one’s life. What are the dark places of our lives? What are those patterns of behavior – as a Church, as a nation – that we don’t want to look at, that we don’t want to change? What are the personal demons that each of us struggle with? Do we really want to win that struggle? We can say all the right things about love, about acceptance, about tolerance, about service to those in need, but do we live love, acceptance, tolerance and service or just talk about it? Do we find ways of excusing ourselves from being committed to other people – gays, hisptanics, blacks, drug users, alcoholics, bullies, prostitutes, abortionists, corrupt politicians – because we can see ourselves behaving responsibly according to the standards of our surrounding culture? Do Gospel values and the teachings of Jesus Christ really motivate us to choose and live a specific way of life? And if the patterns of our lives become so set, will we ever be able to ‘repent,’ ‘to change?’ That’s the urgency, to have a change of heart before patterns are so set that it becomes impossible to change. What urgency is faced by our world? What urgency is faced by the Church? What urgencies do we face personally?
The Harlot and the Beast (17:1-18)

17:1 And came, one from the seven angels having the seven bowls, and he spoke with me saying: Come here! I will give to you the judgment (punishment) of the prostitute sitting upon the many waters, 2 with whom the kings of the earth have fornicated (committed sexual immorality) and those inhabiting the earth have been made drunk from the wine of her fornication (sexual immorality). 3 And he carried me away into a deserted place (the wilderness) in the spirit and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast being full of the names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. 4 And the woman was clothed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold and precious stone and pearls, holding a golden cup in her hand being full of abominations (ceremonial impurity related to idolatrous practices) and the impurity of her fornication (immoral sexual acts), 5 and upon her forehead having been written a name, a mystery: ‘Babylon, the great, mother of prostitutes and of the abominations (ceremonial impurity related to idolatry) of the earth.’ 6 And I saw the woman being made drunk from the blood of the holy ones and from the blood of the witnesses of Jesus.

And, having seen her, I marveled (wondered) a great wonder. 7 And the angel said to me: On account of what did you marvel (wonder)? I will tell to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast carrying her, (the one) having the seven heads and the ten horns. 8 The beast which you saw was and is not and is about to rise out of the abyss and go forth into destruction; and they will be amazed, those dwelling upon the earth, the name of whom has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the universe, (at) the beast that was and is not and will come.

9 Here (is) the understanding of him having wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains where the woman sits on them and seven kings are there; 10 the five have fallen, the one is, the other not yet has come, and when he should come in a little while, it is necessary for him to remain. 11 And the beast which was and is not, also he is an eighth, and out of (among) the seven is he, and into destruction he goes forth. 12 And the ten horns, which you saw, are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but authority (for) one hour they will receive (together) with the beast. 13 These have a single mind (understanding) and their power and authority they are giving to the beast. 14 These, with the lamb, will do battle (wage war) and the lamb will defeat them for Lord of lords is he and king of kings, and those with him (are) called and chosen and faithful.

15 And he says to me: The waters which you saw, where the prostitute (whore) is sitting, they are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues. 16 And the ten horns which you saw and the beast, these will hate the prostitute and they will make her desolate and naked and her flesh they will eat and her they will completely burn in fire.
17 For indeed God has granted into their hearts to do his purpose and to do a single purpose and to give their kingdom to the beast until the words of God will be brought to completion. 18 And the woman, which you saw, is the great city, having kingship (rule) over the kings of the earth.

Textual Notes

1. *Elthen heis ek ton hepta angelon... kai elalesen met' emou* – ‘one of the seven angels came... and he spoke with me.’ One of the seven angels having the bowls of the ‘wrath of God’ now functions as the *angel interprens*.
2. *Krima ten pornes ten megales* – ‘judgment/sentence/verdict of the great whore’ Harrington notes that the judgment/verdict on Rome has already been twice proclaimed, 14:8 and 16:9. This judgment is to be described in detail throughout chapters 17-18. Rogers and Robers point out that *porne* – ‘prostitute/whore,’ along with ‘adultery’ – were used in the Old Testament, especially in the prophetic corpus, as symbols of idolatry and religious apostasy. The ‘whore,’ here, is Rome, denoting the corrupt apostate religious system headed by the ‘false prophet’ who is the second beast. While some commentators see ‘Babylon’ as a center of idol worship in itself, the internal evidence suggests the ‘Babylon’ functions primarily as a symbol of Rome. It still can be noted that ‘Egypt’ and ‘Babylon,’ while functioning primarily as representations of ‘Rome’ also suggest a long history of corrupt, idolatrous world powers of which, in the mind of the author, Rome is the culmination.

Beyond these considerations, Harrington notes that In Ezek 16 Jerusalem is described as a harlot/whore and in Ezek 23 Jerusalem and Samaria, a pair of sisters, (the southern and northern kingdoms), are so

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428 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
429 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
designated. In the ancient world, it was common to personify a city as female and to characterize the excessive wealth and idolatrous practices of ancient seats of power as prostitution. While such images in today’s world would be considered ‘sexist,’ we have to remember that we are dealing with an ancient mind-set and ancient images.

3. *Kathemenes epi hydaton pollon* – ‘sitting on many waters.’ While it is known that ancient Babylon was located on the Euphrates, Harrington notes that this image is borrowed from Jer 51:13 – ‘O you who dwell by many waters, rich in treasures, your end has come, the thread of your life is cut.’ The description does not, literally, fit Rome. The ‘seer’ has simply borrowed it from Jeremiah and has applied it to his ‘Babylon.’ In v. 15, the ‘waters’ are interpreted as Rome’s vassals.

4. *Meth’ hes eporneusan hoi basileis tes ges* – ‘with whom have fornicated/whored the kings of the earth.’ The imagery of 17:2 is derived from the Proclamation of Judgment, 14:6-13. That was also the case for the imagery behind 16:19 in the vision of the seventh bowl, referring to drinking of the wine of God’s wrath. The ‘kings of the earth’ are those mentioned in 16:14, vassals of Rome. These ‘kings’ are distinct from those mentioned in 17:12 who are ‘future’ kings. Harrington observes that these ‘kings of the earth’ are the rulers wo have ‘whored after Rome,’ have purchased the favor of Rome and to curry that favor have adopted the the Roman Imperian cult and social mores.

5. *Emethysthesan hoi katoikountes ten gen ek tou oinou tes proneias autes* – ‘they have been made to drink, the inhabitants of the earth, from the wine of her fornication.’ ‘Whore Babylon,’ Rome, has not only corrupted the rulers of the earth, but all its inhabitants with the intoxicating allure of her wealth, culture, and power. Again Harrington notes that these ‘inhabitants of the earth’ are the enemies of God because they are recalcitrant, infatuated worshippers of the beast.

6. *Apenenken me eis eremon en pneumatic* – ‘he carried me into the wilderness in the spirit.’ Harrington notes that the ‘wilderness’ or desert may have negative connotations as the haunt of demons, as in Is 13:20, from the perspective of the ‘seer,’ it may also have positive connotations. Being ‘transported in the spirit’ is a clear recollection of the transport of the ‘seer’ in the Inaugural Vision, 1:10. He is ‘removed’ out of the ordinary world to see the ‘truth’ that lies beyond the clouded circumstances of everyday life. The ‘wilderness’ was also the site of the confrontation between the Woman and the Dragon, 12:1-6, 13-18 (see note # 13, p. 213). It would seem that, in this case, the ‘wilderness’ is to be understood as that place of ‘retreat’ and purification in which one can be stripped of all social and cultural influences and see things as they really are.

7. *Gynaika kathemenen epi therion kokkinon* – ‘a woman sitting upon a scarlet beast.’ Harrington observes that the ‘woman’ is the antithesis of the woman of ch 12 – a symbol of the Church. The ‘beast’ is the one introduced in ch 13 who is now clothed in scarlet. Harrington concludes that this is a reflection of the fiery red dragon of 12:3. In this case, the beast is wearing blasphemous names all over, not only on his seven heads (13:1). The ‘beast’ is the empire, the woman being the goddess Rome (Dea Roma), sustained and supported by the Empire. In depictions of this goddess, she is portrayed as riding on a tiger – ‘the beast.’

Rogers and Rogers observe that ‘scarlet’ was a popular color in Ancient Rome, indicating luxurious and haughty splendor.

8. *He gyne en peribeblemene porphyroun kai kokkinon* – ‘The woman was clothed/wrapped about in purple and scarlet.’ As Rogers and Rogers noted, scarlet was the color indicating luxury and splendor. Purple was the color of ‘royalty.’ These were two specifically imperial colors making a display of finery, power, extravagant wealth. By contrast, the ‘bride’ will be clothed in the fine linen of ‘righteous deeds.’

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430 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
431 Ibid.
432 Ibid.
433 Ibid.
434 Ibid.
435 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
436 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
9. 
**Kechrysomene chrysia kai litho timio kai margaritais** – ‘Adorned with gold and precious stone and pearls.’

In contrast even to the Christ, robed in white with a golden breast-plate of a ‘high priest,’ and the faithful adorned in simple white linen, this is a portrayal of undue extravagance.

10. 
**Echousa poterion chrysoun** – ‘holding a golden cup.’ Harrington observes that this image is again drawn from Jeremiah, Jer 51:7 – ‘Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, making all the earth drunken.’

This image, again, is a recollection of the Proclamation of Judgment. It focuses on the intoxicating allure of ‘Babylon/Rome.’

11. 
**Gemon bdelygmaton kai ta adatharta tes porneias autes** – ‘being full of abominations and the impurity of her fornications.’ ‘Obscenities/abominations,’ bdelygma, is the expression used in Dn 9:27, 11:31, 12:11 to refer to the altar of Zeus set up in the Jerusalem temple by Antiochus IV. As such, it is a reference to idolatry.

Specifically, Rogers and Rogers note that the primary meaning of the word is ‘that which stinks,’ ‘an abomination,’ ‘that which is detestable.’ The word is used in the LXX of the moral and ceremonial impurity connected with idolatrous practices.

The impurity of her sexual immorality specifically refers to cultic impurity and again calls to mind the imagery in the Proclamation of Judgment.

12. 
**Epi to metopon autes onoma gegrammenon, mysterion** – ‘upon her forehead a name was written, a mystery.’ Harrington observes that it is frequently stated that Roman prostitutes displayed their names on their foreheads, but that there does not seem to be sufficient evidence to support such a claim. He suggests, rather, that the image is more likely a parody of 14:1 – ‘And I saw (looked) and, behold, the lamb having taken his stand upon Mount Zion and with him one hundred forty four thousand having his name and the name of his father written upon their foreheads.’

The ‘mysterious name’ should not be overpressed. Babylon, in the book, is a symbol of Rome. The ‘mystery’ is, in the light of the inscription, that all cannot see the depravity of Roman rule, of corrupt world powers making empty promises.

13. 
**Eidon ten gynakn methyousan ek tou haimatos ton agion kai ek tou haimatos ton martyron** – ‘I saw the woman being drunk from the blood of the holy ones and from the blood of the witnesses.’

Rogers and Rogers write that the metaphor of getting drunk on the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses of Jesus portrays the wanton slaughter of a great number of believers along with the intoxicating effect it produced upon the murderous harlot. This depicts the tremendous persecution of true believers by the apostate religion of the last days.

Harrington finds in the image an allusion to the past persecution of Nero. He substantiates this assertion by means of 17:10, which appears to describe a certain succession of emperors after the suicide of Nero. He concludes that Rome is guilty of a double crime of idolatry (v. 4) and murder (v. 6). He notes further that Ezekiel had accused Jerusalem of these same crimes – pointing to the attempts, in the latter days of the monarchy, to stave off a Babylonian invasion by making accommodations with the ‘evil empire.’

Harrington also observes that this is the only place in Revelation where ‘martyr’ is used in the strict sense of someone who dies for the faith. In most cases it refers simply to ‘witnesses,’ to those who give ‘testimony’ to Jesus and largely indistinguishable from the ‘holy ones.’

14. 
**Ethemausa idon auten thauma mega** – ‘I marveled/wondered, seeing her, a great marvel/wonder.’

Harrington merely notes that a common feature of apocalyptic literature is for the ‘seer’ to wonder or be amazed at what he sees (see Dn 7:15).

There is a certain ambivalence to the image. Is it, ‘Wow, look at the luxuriousness with which this
worman is adorned!’ Or is it a disgusted wondering, ‘How can such wanton evil prevail? How can people and rulers get drunk on, find pleasure in, the murder of good people?’ Given the penchant for ambivalent, multi-layered images, it is likely that the author intends both connotations. The reader gets a glimpse of how easy it is to be attracted to the power and luxury of Rome, an empire that, for all its luxury and power, feeds off the blood of good people. The author seems to be suggesting how easy it is to get caught up in a way of life that is so horrible, such an abomination, that looks so good. Then again, it can simply mean ‘stunned.’ The ‘seer’ lacks the insight to understand what he’s seeing, is confused and in need of an angel interprens.

15. Kai eipen moi ho angelos – ‘and the angel said to me…’ Note the verbal repetitions in v. 7, exactly matching the initial view of the woman sitting on the beast. This angel who speaks takes on the role of the angel interprens and will address exactly what is seen.

16. To therion ho eides en kai ouk estin kai mellei anabainein ek tes abyssou – ‘the beast which you saw was and is not and is about to rise out of the abyss.’ Harrington observes that this ‘title’ of the beast is a parody of the ‘title’ of God and the Christ used throughout the book – ‘he who is and who was and who is coming.’ Specifically, it notes Revelation’s fixation on Nero. He was the ruler of Rome; he is now dead; he is about to rise up – return to regain power. (It was noted earlier that there was a Nero legend common in the late first century, that the emperor would return to life and reclaim this power.) He notes further that both the second beast, rising from the abyss and identified as Nero, the number of his name is 666, and the Lamb share a characteristic – they appear dead but rise up again.445

17. Kai eis apoleian upagei – ‘and into destruction he goes.’ Here is the point of contrast. The Lamb having been slain stands before the throne of God, comes to judge the earth, is assimilated to the one sitting on the throne and shares rule over all creation. The beast likewise was slain – committed suicide – but will rise, not to resume power but to do into utter destruction. Later in the imagery of Revelation, the concept of ‘second death’ will occur, the eternal death of separation from God that awaits those who embrace and worship the dragon and the beast and the image of the beast.

18. Thaumasthesontai hoi katoikountes epi tes ges – ‘they will marvel/wonder, those dwelling on the earth.’ Those who will marvel are specifically identified as those whose names are not written in the Book of Life. It is to be assumed here that there is no ambivalence to the marveling of the people of the earth. They will see what they want to see – the beast who was and is not, but will come again. On the surface, they will see vindication but will not see that the beast is back to go to ultimate destruction – and so are they!

19. Hode ho nous echon sophian – ‘Here is the mind having wisdom.’ This phrase is similar to that of 13:18 (see note # 10, p. 247). Again, it is likely that ‘Here is Wisdom,’ like the phrase ‘Let him having an ear, hear,’ represents a frame break, in which the omniscient narrator’s voice is heard. In this case, it appears that this narrator has intruded his voice to call attention to a specific aspect of the interpretation of the vision. What follows the intrusion – ‘Here is the mind having wisdom,’ is a continuation of the words of the angel interprens. The phrase functions as a red flag – ‘Pay attention to this!’ Harrington correctly notes that the point is not to find the key some hidden or esoteric puzzle, but rather to discern the true character of Babylon/Rome.

20. Hai hepta kephalai hepta ore eisin hopou he gyne kathetai ep’ auton – ‘The seven heads are seven mountains where the woman sits on them.’ Rome has traditionally been described as the City of Seven Hills. The woman, the whore, Dea Roma, sits on the Seven Hills – holds sway over them, is the protecting goddess of the city. That Rome is a city encompassing seven hills coincidentally fits the author’s penchant for using the number seven. The seven hills represent the city completely and perfectly.

21. Kai basileis hepta eisin: ho pente epesan, ho heis estin, ho allos oupo elthen – ‘and seven kings are there: the five have fallen, the one is and the other has not yet come.’ Once again Revelation’s penchant for deploying the number seven is evident. Exactly how ‘John’ handled the list of emperors and calculated the number of emperors after Nero is uncertain. Harrington notes that the emphasis is on ‘seven,’ a complete number of rulers, with the last, monstrous emperor to emerge very soon.446

*De Imperatoribus Romanis* provides a list of Roman Emperors with family histories:

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445 Ibid.
446 Ibid.
31-14 BC  Augustus - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/auuggie.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/auuggie.htm)
14 BC – 37 AD  Tiberias - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/tiberius.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/tiberius.htm)
37-41 AD  Caligula - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/gaius.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/gaius.htm)
41-54 AD  Claudius - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/claudius.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/claudius.htm)
54-68 AD  Nero - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/nero.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/nero.htm)
68-69 AD  C. Julius Vindex - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/galba.htm#Note%202](http://www.roman-emperors.org/galba.htm#Note%202)
        L. Clodius Macer - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/galba.htm#Note%203](http://www.roman-emperors.org/galba.htm#Note%203)
        Galba* - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/galba.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/galba.htm)
        C. Nymphidius Sabinus - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/sabinus.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/sabinus.htm)
        Otho* - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/otho.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/otho.htm)
        Vitellius* - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/vitell.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/vitell.htm)
79-81 AD  Titus - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/titus.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/titus.htm)
81-96 AD  Domitian - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/domitian.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/domitian.htm)
(89 AD  L. Antonius Saturninus** - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/domitian.htm#Note_X](http://www.roman-emperors.org/domitian.htm#Note_X)
96-98 AD  Nerva - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/nerva.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/nerva.htm)
98-117 AD  Trajan - [http://www.roman-emperors.org/trajan.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/trajan.htm)

22. *To therion... ogdoos estin... kai ek ton hepta estin... - ‘the beast... is an eighth... and he is of/from the seven.’ Given the characterization of the second beast as Nero, the fact the he was and is not, and given the legend of the ‘expected return’ of Nero, it would seem, in the author’s mind, that Nero forms the starting point and the culmination of the list – beyond the ‘seventh who is to come.’ It is possible to conjecture that the chaotic period after Nero’s suicide, with rule passing through a number of hands, is to be considered as one period of rule. Then Nerva would be the current emperor with another to come before the rising of the beast Nero. Within the chaotic period, Harrington has identified three individual emperors, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, though this can be debated. Those three, plus Vespasian and Titus would be the five who were. Then Domitian, in whose reign most commentators believe that Revelation was originally composed, would be the sixth – the one who is. Then another emperor would rule before the rise of Nero, the final beast destined for utter destruction. The problem with this rendering is that Nero is no longer included in the seven. More conjectures and numberings can be suggested, but that hardly seems to be the point. Seven is a symbolic number. In the mind of the author, Nero starts everything off – an especially vile and beastly emperor, a symbol of the worst that can be, similar to Ahab in the Books of Kings. He starts a line of 5 emperors who are now gone – however they are to be calculated and such ‘calculation’ can be made to fit the author’s purpose; he is not writing a history of the Roman Empire. (Note, Luke’s Gospel and Acts can be said to be modeled on Classical Greek Histories, but Luke plays free and loose with dates, locations, and events. The science of ‘history’ had not yet been invented. The purpose of ancient ‘histories’ was to explain and interpret the meaning of people and events for the lives of people in the present society. That is also the purpose of historical references in Revelation.) A seventh emperor is to rule who will be followed by the rising of the beast, Nero, resurrected for the sake of going to utter destruction. That simply says that the status quo is going to last a bit longer, but the culmination is coming soon. Hang on! Endure!

23. *Ta deka kerata... basileis eisin, hoitines basileian oupo elaban – ‘the ten horns... are kings who have not yet received a kingdom.’ Rogers and Rogers suggest that these ‘ten kings’ are European Kings who will rule as part of a revived Roman Empire. This seems a bit of a stretch. Harrington holds that the image is derived from Dn 7:24 – ‘As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom tens

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447 De Imperatoribus Romanis, [http://www.roman-emperors.org/impindex.htm](http://www.roman-emperors.org/impindex.htm)

* In his list of Emperors, Harrington includes only Galba, Otho, and Vitellius for the chaotic years following Nero’s suicide.

** In 89 AD, Saturninus led a brief mutiny against Domitian, held some power for a short period, but his mutiny was quickly and roundly put down.

448 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
kings shall arise and another shall arise after them." These ten kings belong to the future – they have not yet received a kingdom. They will have limited authority – for one hour. What Harrington observes is that the beast, at his coming, goes immediately to destruction. These ‘ten kings,’ as part of the beast, the ten horns, will receive authority at the beast’s rising, but will quickly pass as he goes into destruction.

The intent of the image would appear to be ‘futility.’ The beast will rise again and with him ten kings, not seven, and yet the judgment has been made; the beast will rise only for destruction and with him any hope of extending a corrupt, idolatrous rule.

24. Houtoi mian gnomen echousin… dynamin kai exousian auton to therio didoasin – ‘these have one mind… their power and authority they will give to the beast.’ As those throughout the book who ‘did not repent,’ these ten kings will have a single minded devotion to the beast, handing over to him their power and authority, placing their rule in the service of evil, corruption, idolatry, all things inimical to the will of God. Harrington notes again that these kings are distinct from the ‘kings of the rising place of the sun’ (16:12), who are mustered for battle at Mt. Megiddo.

25. Houtoi meta tou arniou polemesousin kai to arnion nikesei autous – ‘These will wage war with the Lamb and the Lamb will overcome/be victorious over them.’ The followers of the Lamb had been mustered for battle at Mt. Megiddo (Armageddon) to do battle with the vassals of Rome and the kings from the East. This appears to be an expansion – or a continuation in the future – of the battle. Whatever the case, the outcome is a foregone conclusion: the Lamb will overcome. Note that the verb is exactly the same as that used to characterize the faithful followers of the Lamb, to ‘overcome/be victorious.’ The manner of their victory has consistently been ‘patient endurance.’

26. Hoti kyrios kyrion estin kai basileus basileon – ‘because he is Lord of lords and King of kings.’ A noun followed by its plural, genitive form is an Hebraic expression of the superlative. He is the highest Lord and King, no other can surpass him.

27. Hoi met’ autou kleitoi kai eklektoi kai pistoi – ‘those with him are called and chosen and faithful.’ These are the faithful followers of the Lamb, those who have been sealed, the 144,000. Note that the text does not say that those with the Lamb will ‘fight the battle,’ simply that they are with the Lamb. It is the Lamb who overcomes evil. Harrington notes that this is the only occurrence of kletos, ‘called,’ and eklektos, ‘chosen’ in Revelation. He cites Mt 22:14 as a source for these designations – ‘many are called, but few are chosen.’ The imagery focuses on God’s universal will for the salvation of humanity and the sad fact that there are those who choose evil, who choose darkness, who choose not to be among God’s chosen ones. ‘Chosen’ does not mean to belong to a specific group of people, the ‘Chosen People’ by means of blood ties, but by faith and accepting the call of Christ to carry on his mission.

28. Ta hydata ha eides – ‘the waters that you saw.’ Recalling 17:1 that was based on Jeremiah’s description of Babylon (see note # 3, p. 311), these waters are now identified with ‘peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues.’ In general, this is a typical expression for the ‘inhabitants of the earth.’ ‘Multitudes’ replaces the usual ‘tribes,’ but this seems to be in accord with focusing not so much on differing components of the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ but on the vast number of people who do not accept God’s offer of grace. It is further significant that this vast horde is imagined as ‘many waters,’ the forces of chaos in creation imagery. Left to its own devices, the vast mass of humanity is chaotic, in need of a loving, merciful God.

29. Ta deka kerata... kai to therion, houtoi misesousin ten pornen – ‘the ten horns and the beast will hate the whore.’ Rogers and Rogers, acknowledging that the ‘whore’ represents Dea Roma, the goddess Rome, see in this image of the wanton destruction of the ‘protecting goddess’ by the beast, the representative of Roman Emperors, and the ten horns, representative of vassal kings. This is a representation of political forces destroying religious forces – even the idolatrous system of the Roman Imperial cult.

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449 NRSV translation.
450 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
451 Ibid.
452 Ibid.
453 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
What the image seems to carry is the inevitable rupture between a false and corrupt political system and an idolatrous religious system. The idolatrous religious system that is designed to support the Imperial power of Rome and the political system in which rulers deify themselves and support a religious system designed to bolster their power is so skewed that it cannot possibly hold together. Does the emperor control the religious system, or do the priests and oracles control the throne?

30. *Eremomenen poiesousin auten kai gynen kai tas sarkas autes phagontai kai auten katakauousin en pyri* – ‘they will make her desolate and naked and will eat her flesh and burn/consume her in fire.’ The participle, ‘desolate,’ is from the root for ‘desert/wasteland/wilderness.’ In the confrontation between the Woman and the Dragon, God prepared refuge for the woman in the desert/wilderness. Here, the political system of Rome attacks the religious system, making it desolate, barren. They render the religious system infertile, but that religious system is also what supports their power and their ability to declare themselves ‘gods.’ They render the ‘whore’ desolate and naked. In the ancient Judeo-Christian mind-set these are signs of disfavor and shame. Eating her flesh recalls the ultimate shaming and dishonoring of Jezebel and to devour her completely in fire anticipates the ‘lake of fire’ (20:10) and the second death (20:6, 14). All of this again suggests that the political system eventually gets to such a point of corruption and arrogance that it cannot tolerate even a suggestion – a false and idolatrous suggestion – that there can be any source of power other than itself.

31. *Theos edoken eis tas kardias poiesai ten gnomen autou* – ‘God has given into their hearts to do his purpose.’ About this, Harrington states that these kings and the beast himself are to be understood as instruments of God’s plan and purpose. A common theme, especially in the narratives of Judges and in the prophetic corpus, is God’s use of ‘foreign nations’ to accomplish his will and purpose. At times this is for the discipline of his people, to bring them back to devotion to him (Israel does evil in the eyes of the Lord and he hands them over to a foreign nation), sometimes for their redemption (Cyrus’ defeat of Babylon and his decree allowing the Jews to return home to Jerusalem). The purpose of God is a ‘single purpose,’ that the kings should hand over their kingdoms to the beast. This is nearly a verbatim repetition of v. 13. Harrington distinguishes between the kings referred to here, vassals of Rome, and the future kings of v. 12. But their actions are the same, to serve the evil intentions of the beast.

32. *Achri telesthesontai hoi logoi tou theou* – ‘until the words of God will be completed/finished/fulfilled.’ Harrington notes, simply, that the ‘words of God’ which must be fulfilled are his decrees against Rome (14:8, 16:19, 18:8). It is again to be noted that the accomplishment of God’s will and purpose for corrupt worldly power is not accomplished by open rebellion and warfare with those powers, but they their own self-destruction.

33. *He gyne... basileon tes ges* – ‘the woman... the kings of the earth.’ There is a sense of culmination, completion in v. 18. The vision began with the image of a whore sitting on a scarlet beast. They were described. The *angel interpres* gives an understanding of the beast and its features, its relationship to the ‘whore.’ The final statement of the *angel interpres* is that the woman IS Rome. Within the vision there are images of an unholy alliance between the political and religious systems of the prevailing culture an alliance doomed to collapse in the attempts of both systems to control mankind, to achieve absolute sovereignty.

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454 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
455 Ibid.
Commentary

At the end of the third cycle of plagues, one of the seven angels with the bowls interacts with the ‘seer,’ showing and interpreting a vision of the Whore and the Beast. What the angel presents is an unholy alliance of political and religious systems, an alliance in which each system manipulates the other to advance its own claims of ‘greatness,’ an alliance that has to collapse since both of the rival claims to sovereignty cannot be maintained. This portrait of a doomed alliance provides a transition from the plagues and proclamations of God’s judgment which have gone before, to the accounts of the ‘Fall of Babylon’ and the ‘End of Evil’ that follow. It might be tempting to move quickly through ch. 17 as a mere ‘transition,’ but this transition speaks to the very heart of self-serving evil. It penetrates the heart of manipulative systems vying for humanity’s loyalty and allegiance. It penetrates the willfulness of evil systems to manipulate and corrupt all that is good in God’s world.

What is involved in ch. 17 is not the execution of judgment on Rome, but an explanation/interpretation of the judgment to befall the empire and, by extension, all corrupt, arrogant, self-serving human power systems. The image of that power is a ‘whore sitting on many waters.’ It was a common idiom in the ancient world to characterize great cities as female. It was also a common image in the Old Testament to characterize idolatry as ‘fornication,’ as ‘whoring after other gods.’ ‘Sitting upon many waters,’ suggests being ‘enthroned.’ Throughout Revelation, waters, the sea, the beast rising out of the waters have suggested watery chaos, the state of un-creation. There is, then, a suggestion that the power wielded by Rome is chaotic, in opposition to God’s plan for order and harmony. ‘Many waters,’ first of all, suggests Babylon, located on the Euphrates and only loosely is applied to Rome, but may also suggest many peoples, many nations/kingdoms who fall under the rule of Rome, who ‘worship’ the beast, who choose chaos.

The ‘idolatrous’ nature of Rome’s rule is further described by repeating the images of 14:6-13, the Proclamation of Judgment, ideas taken up again in 16:19 in the vision of the seventh bowl. The ‘kings’ are the vassals of Rome who willingly submit to Roman rule and the Imperial Cult; they ‘fornicate with Rome.’ The people of the earth who are drunk with the wine of her fornication are the enemies of God, those who choose the worldly values of wealth, power, comfort, status – advantages supposedly available to loyal subjects of Rome, advantages that are alluring, seductive and intoxicating. Yet such advantages do not come without a price – the price of ‘worshiping’ the beast and its image.

While some commentators want to understand the transporting of the ‘seer’ literally, it seems much more likely to understand references to ‘being carried away’ as a symbolic change in vantage point, a way of giving the ‘seer’ a different perspective on the realities of the world. In this instance, he is carried away to a desert/wilderness place. Within the Bible, the ‘wilderness’ is an ambivalent image. It is a place of danger, a place hostile to humans; but it is also a place of retreat, refuge, a place to commune with God removed from the distractions and abuses of normal daily life. The desert was the place of refuge prepared by God for the Woman, a symbol of the Church, who was confronted by the dragon. Here, the image of the Harlot sitting on the scarlet beast in the wilderness strips the image of what might be enticing and allows the ‘seer’ to perceive reality at face value.

What the ‘seer’ perceives is the harlot ‘sitting on’ a scarlet beast. ‘Scarlet’ provides an association of the beast with the dragon. ‘Scarlet,’ in the Roman world was also the color of wealth and extravagance. What is significant in the image is the fact that the harlot is ‘sitting on,’ ‘enthroned upon’ the beast, an implication of sovereignty and control. The description of the beast – having seven heads and ten horns and covered with names of blasphemy – indicates that this is the first beast chapter 13. It is the symbol
of the Roman Empire. The image suggests that the harlot is not to be understood only as the city of Rome, but as *Dea Roma*, the goddess Rome, the protecting goddess of the city. Here, it is to be recalled that numerous cities throughout the empire, especially in the provinces, built temples to ‘Rome’ even before the practice of deifying emperors became commonplace. What would certainly not sit well with this beast is the idea that he is subordinate to the goddess. If the beast represents the empire and the power and authority of the emperor, and it does, the absolute power of the emperor, his self-deification, would brook no higher authority than his own. Yet, the subordination of the beast to the harlot is clearly implied. She is clothed in purple and scarlet. Purple, in the Roman world, was the color of rule, of royalty; scarlet, as noted, was the color of wealth, privilege, extravagance. She is adorned richly and holds a golden cup. That cup is full of abominations and fornication. What looks so enticing, inviting, intoxicating is that which makes one, in the liturgical practices of the Old Testament, ritually impure, excluded from authentic worship. The abominations include eating meat sacrificed to idols—a common practice in the trade guilds, actually sacrificing to idols, engaging in temple prostitution in a kind of imitative magic, athletic games celebrated in the nude, in short, embracing the social, cultural and religious practices of a world power that has set itself up in opposition to God and his will for all creation.

There is an inscription on the harlot’s head. Some commentators suggest that ancient Roman prostitutes had their names inscribed on their foreheads. However, there is not sufficient evidence to substantiate this suggestion. What seems more likely is a symbolic assimilation of the harlot and the beast. In ch. 13, the beast had names of blasphemy written on its seven heads and here written all over it. In the same way, the woman has ‘blasphemies’ inscribed on her forehead: ‘Babylon, the great mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth.’ The name ‘Babylon’ is again ambivalent. As is common in Revelation, it is a symbol for Rome, but it also implies a long history of world powers whose rule corrupts. That’s just the nature of the ‘beast’—and the one sitting on it. What is noteworthy is that this ‘mother of prostitutes’ will later be rendered desolate/barren.

The most damning image of the harlot is that she is made drunk on the blood of the holy one and the witnesses (martyrs) of Jesus. Power is intoxicating. The more one dominates, the more one craves domination. In the context of the Letters, members of the Church were succumbing to the power of the state, making compromises and accommodations with the power structure to reap the benefits of Roman life, society, and culture. ‘John’ proposes a radical form of Christianity that resists these compromises and accommodations, a resistance that he fully expects to lead to persecution, to ultimate domination, to the death of the holy ones and those who bear testimony to Jesus. It is that persecution and death that is envisioned here. This is the only place in Revelation where *martyr*, ‘witness,’ literally means giving witness by death.

The impact of the vision on the ‘seer’ is that he is awestruck—he marveled a marvel. Most commentators point out that this is a typical feature in the visions of apocalyptic literature. The amazement or wonder at what is seen leads to the *angel interpres’* explanation of the vision. Still, there is ambiguity in the awe of the ‘seer.’ Is it the case that he sees the royalty, the extravagance, the power of this goddess sitting on the beast? Is this image enticing calling for the *angel interpres* to set him straight. Does the marvel indicate to the reader how easy it is to get caught up in the false allure of the surrounding culture? Or is the author awestruck and repulsed by the sense of power feeding on power, by the feeding of power on the blood of the innocent, on the blood of those who can be dominated simply for the sake of making one feel powerful? In that case the reader is invited to go out into the desert with the author to come to see things clearly. With Revelation’s love for multi-layered imagery, it is likely that both are intended.
The ‘name’ written on the harlot’s forehead was described as a ‘mystery.’ The ambiguity of the marveling of the ‘seer’ indicates the nature of this ‘mystery.’ It does not refer to some hidden or esoteric knowledge, but to a matter of perspective. How are we to see and understand the allure of power, the allure of comfort and success, wealth and status that the woman and the beast offer?

The angel first turns his attention to the beast. It is clear that this is the first beast, the beast who rose from the sea. It represents the empire. Yet it was the second beast who shared all the power and authority of the first beast who represented the emperor. Here, the images of the two beasts merge. There is a fascination in Revelation with Nero. The number of the name of the second beast was 666, ‘Nero Caesar.’ Nero is the focus here – the one who was and is not and will come again. What first calls for attention is the parody of this title on a commonplace designation of God and his Christ in Revelation – the one who is and was and will come again. There have been several allusions in Revelation to the Nero legend that held that the suicidal emperor would rise again to reclaim his domination of the empire. However, in light of statements proclaiming judgment on Rome, this one who will rise will go quickly to utter destruction. This is a polemic contrast to the Christ who will come again to judge the earth and establish his reign. In a parody of the marveling of the ‘seer’ at the vision of the harlot seated on the beast, the ‘inhabitants of the earth,’ those whose names have not been written in the Book of Life, those who worship the beast and his image, will be amazed. As was the case with the ‘seer,’ this can be a two-fold amazement – first a marveling that the emperor is back, a marveling that will soon turn to horror when the ‘resurrected’ Nero quickly goes to destruction.

It is likely that the words of the angel interprens continue with ‘The seven heads are seven mountains...’ The phrase, ‘Here is the understanding of him having wisdom’ can most likely be understood as another frame break, a place where the omniscient narrator intrudes his voice into the narrative to call the reader’s attention to what he finds to be particularly significant. In this case, the specific identification of present historical circumstances gives way to an understanding that future kings will rise, that the struggle of the Church with evil in the world is to be an ongoing struggle. That ongoing struggle appears to be what is important to the intruding voice.

Specifically, the seven mountains are a reference to the Seven Hills of Rome. Dea Roma is enthroned on these Seven Hills where the author now focuses on seven emperors. Again the subordination of Rome and its emperors to Dea Roma, the whole, is apparent. Five emperors are from the past, one is now ruling and one is yet to come – seven. ‘The beast who was and is not, he also is an eighth’ is a clear reference to the second beast, to Nero. It is likely, then, that Nero is the first and the eighth in the sequence. He initiates a rule of seven emperors, the last who will rule only briefly after the current ruler to be followed by a return of Nero who will got to his final destruction. The oppressive power of Rome will be at an end.

While many commentators expend much effort in trying to reconstruct the exact sequence of rulers ‘John’ had in mind (see note # 21, p. 313), it is important to remember that ‘John’ was not writing a history, that what he writes is couched in symbolism, and that, for him, ‘seven’ is that all important number of perfection, completion, coming full circle. In God’s plan, the oppressive power of Rome, initiated with the violence and persecutions of Nero, will run its course and end.

The ‘ten horns’ are ten kings that have not yet received their kingdoms. They are future kings, and symbolized by ‘horns,’ they are ruthless, violent, and oppressive in the same manner as the powers of Rome. These are the concern of the omniscient narrator. For those who want to ‘calculate’ a precise time, a precise point in history when evil will be destroyed and God’s kingdom will be established, these
‘ten kings’ offer and reiterate the caution of Mt 24:36 – ‘But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.’ In a hopeful move, it is noted that the authority of these kings is but for a short time – but there is a future time when the current evil will persist. They are single minded in their drive for power and they ‘give’ their authority, their allegiance to the beast. They, like the kings mustered at Mt. Megiddo, will do battle with the Lamb who will be accompanied by the faithful, by those called and chosen, but again these faithful are simply with the Lamb. It is the Lamb who does battle with the kings. They ‘overcome’ by faithfulness and patient endurance as do the present witnesses. There is a sense here of ‘the more things change the more they stay the same.’ Yet throughout there is a promise of an ‘end.’ And there is a promise of ‘victory’ for the faithful all along the way to that end. That ‘end’ remains unknown, but the call to radical Christianity persists.

So what will this ‘end’ look like? That's the purpose of the closing verses of the section. The angel interprets returns to the beginning of the vision, creating a nice envelope structure tying the whole chapter together. The waters upon which the whore is enthroned are the inhabitants of the earth, the peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues. In the end, the horns, the rulers of the earth, and the beast the servant of the dragon and source of evil, will hate her. The ‘mother’ of prostitutes, of idolatries and abominations will be rendered desolate – barren. She will be naked, shamed, and defiled – like Jezebel. The unholy alliance of religion and power will be broken. Note the image, it is by the dominance of the whore, Dea Roma, false and idolatrous religion, that the rulers of the earth dominated the inhabitants of the earth. Yet, the ‘kings of the earth’ are ruled by Rome – by a power beyond themselves and for those lusting for power, that is intolerable. And all of this works according to the will and plan of God, the word of God moving towards fulfillment. In a world where political power manipulates religion to bolster its hold on control and religious authority exerts control over political systems, chaos is imminent. The center cannot hold.

Do religious faith and religious values have any place in the world of politics and secular power? Of course. Government exists to promote the common good and the common good is expressed in the values of the people governed. The problem comes when political, secular powers manipulate religious faith and values to bolster their own control over those governed. Eventually they are proven to be hypocrits. The problem comes when religious authority becomes rigid in attempts to compel a particular vision of faith and values to create an unholy, idolatrous ‘theocracy.’ This is another means of control, not a recognition that God’s people are chosen to bring the good things of creation to all of God’s children.

In our world, in the recent history of our world, examples of the unholy alliance of religion and power proliferate. A ‘Christian’ nation exterminated six million Jews and justified the genocide on religious principles. Jihadist Islam justifies acts of hatred and terror in the name of a loving God, a clear distortion and manipulation of the teachings of the Koran. Neo-Nazis and White Supremacists preach a gospel of hate in the name of the ‘purity of God’s people.’ An American regime decries the Syrian government’s wanton murder of its own citizens as an unholy crime against humanity while building walls against oppressed refugees and limiting travel from Islamic nations. Karl Marx called religion ‘the opiate of the masses.’ People of faith object to this, but there can be no denying that ‘religion’ has been used by those in power to suppress and oppress those they govern. It is now popular to campaign on ‘family values,’ to take a stand against abortion, but to also uphold capital punishment, to build walls to keep out oppressed refugees, to limit access to medical care for the poor, to establish economic policies that support the corporate ‘bottom line,’ while leaving millions poor, homeless, and jobless. All this is embraced under the religious/Christian value of ‘pro-life.’ Religion and the ‘teaching of the Church’ has been used to
influence elections, to encourage people to vote ‘Pro-life,’ to support candidates opposed to abortion who have horrendous records of supporting basic human rights and freedoms. Can we be ‘Pro-Life and support capital punishment? Ignore the plight of the homeless and the poor? Ignore oppressed refugees at our borders? Can we be followers of the Lamb and decide whom should be loved and whom should be hated? Can we be faithful witnesses and decide that we can be good Catholics and disagree with the social teaching of the Church? Can we be good citizens and deny the right to free speech and participation to those with whom we disagree? Whom we may fear? How does an unholy alliance of religious systems and political power impact our world? How are such alliances doomed to fail? What do religious values and civil government focused on promoting the common good have to contribute to our world? What happens when one manipulates or dominates the other?
The End of Babylon

The Fall of Babylon (18:1-8)

18:1 After these things, I saw another angel coming down from the heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illuminated from his glory. 2 And he cried out with a strong voice, saying: She has fallen; she has fallen, Babylon, the great; and she has become a dwelling place of demons and a place of banishment (prison) for every unclean spirit and a place of banishment for every unclean bird, and a place of banishment of every unclean beast and hated, 3 for from the wine of the wrath of her fornication (immoral sexual acts) have drunk all the nations and the kings of the earth with her have committed fornication (immoral sexual acts) and the merchants of the earth, from the power of her self indulgence (complacent luxury) have been enriched (become wealthy).

4 And I heard another voice from the heaven, saying: Come forth, my people, from out of her so that you might not be a partner in (be united to) her sins and so that from out of her plagues (strikings) you might not receive, 5 for they have been heaped up (literally = stuck together) her sins, as high as the heaven, and God has remembered her unrighteous deeds (iniquities). 6 Give back (render) to her as also she has rendered, and make double the double share, according to her works, which in the cup she has mixed, mix for her double. 7 As much as she has glorified herself and lived in luxury (self-indulgence), so much so give to her torment and mourning (grief), because in her heart she says that: I am sitting (as) a queen and a widow I am not and mourning (grief) not ever should I see. 8 Because of this, in one day will come forth her plagues: death and mourning and famine and in fire she will be burned (consumed), for mighty (is) the Lord, the God judging her.
Textual Notes

1. *Meta tauta...* - ‘After these things...’ This phrase, in the manner of Hebrew narrative, has been used throughout the book to indicate a change in topic, a change in setting, a basic change in the story line. Here it introduces the ‘End of Babylon.’ It will be used one last time in 19:1 to shift the focus from judgment to the Vindication of the Faithful.

2. *Allon angelon* – ‘another angel.’ Typically, the introduction of ‘another angel’ is also indicate of a shift in topic or new direction in the narrative. The shift here, as Harrington points out, is from the *angel interpretans*, the ‘guide,’ to a new proclamation. Other instances of ‘another angel’ describe that messenger as ‘mighty,’ strong enough to accomplish God’s will. This angel is described as coming down from heaven with ‘great authority.’ He has come from the presence of God and will speak with God’s authority.

3. *He ge ephotisthe ek tes doxes autou* – ‘the earth was illuminated with his glory.’ The reflected ‘glory’ of the angel reflects the glory of God from whose presence he has come.

4. *Ekraxen en ischyra phone* – ‘he cried out in a mighty voice.’ *Phone mega/megale* has typically been used in the manner of ‘Behold!’ It draws attention to what is to be proclaimed. The expression is usually accompanied for the verb ‘to speak’ or ‘to say.’ Significant changes can be noted in this expression. The verb is *kraxo*, ‘to cry out,’ ‘to scream.’ ‘Great/large’ is replaced with *ischyra* – ‘mighty.’ This adjective is regularly used to describe ‘mighty warriors.’ These subtle nuances suggest and confirm that the angel’s proclamation will be a proclamation of defeat.

5. *Epesen, epesen Babylon* – ‘Fallen, fallen (is) Babylon.’ Note that this is a nearly exact verbal repetition of 14:8, the heart of the chiastic structure found in the Proclamation of Judgment. (see notes # 4 and # 7, p. 261).

Harrington observes that, in the logic of the narrative, the fall of Babylon has been accomplished by the final plague (16:17-19). Now the condition of the fallen city is presented. The description of the ruined city echoes Old Testament prophetic texts (Is 13:15-22, Jer 50:39, Is 34:11-15, Zeph 2:13-14).

6. *Katoiketerion daimonion... phylake pantos pneumatos akathartou... orneou akathartou... theriou akathartou kai memisemenou* – ‘dwelling place/habitation of demons... prison/place of banishment for all unclean spirits... unclean birds... unclean and hated beasts’ Throughout Revelation the ‘enemies’ of God have been termed ‘the inhabitants of the earth – *katoikemenoi,* a participial form of the verb. The cognate noun, ‘dwelling place/habitation’ is used here to describe the fate of the fallen city. The ‘great city,’ ancient Babylon/present day Rome has become the dwelling place of demons and unclean spirits. Throughout the Gospels ‘demons’ and ‘unclean spirits’ function as representations of evil in the world, associates and servants of Beelzabul, the devil, the Satan. In the fall of the ‘great city,’ that’s all that is left within her – the evil on which she thrived.

There is a certain irony in the use of the term *phylake* – ‘prison/place of banishment.’ It was common practice in the Roman Empire of the late first century to banish dissenters to remote regions and small islands, away from Rome, the center of power. It can at least be suggested that the presence of ‘John’ on Patmos reflects such a banishment. The good and faithful witness is banished far away from the ‘great city’ and its evil power structure. Now all that is evil is banished within the ‘fallen city’ away from the good and faithful witnesses of the Lamb. This is an indication of a great reversal of fortunes characteristic of apocalyptic literature.

The ‘unclean birds’ and ‘unclean beasts’ are likely references to the sacrificial system. These animals were unfit for sacrificial offerings in the Jerusalem temple; they remain all that is available for the idolatrous religious system of the fallen city. While therioi primarily refers to cattle, oxen, the large animals of the field, within Revelation, the word also conjures images of the two beasts, the servants of the dragon, the source of all evil in the world.

A final observation can be made. The image of ‘fallen’ Babylon depicts the ravages of war. Carrion birds

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456 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
457 Ibid.
and beasts become the ‘inhabitants’ of the destruction, seeking sustenance from the rubble. These ‘unclean’ animals render the ruins even more dangerous and uninhabitable.

7. *Pepokan panta ta ethne... hoi basileis... eporneusan... emporoi... eploutesan* – ‘all the nations have drunk... the kings have fornicated... merchants have been enriched.’ For the third time the image of fornicating with ‘Babylon’ and drinking the blood of the passion/wrath of her fornication is used. The ‘kings of the earth’ fornicate, indulge in a godless and idolatrous greed for power and control and the inhabitants are seduced by the intoxication of power, wealth, privilege and status. The image foreshadowed the fall of the ‘great city’ in the Proclamation of Judgment (14:8), indicated the doomed nature of an unholy alliance of corrupt religious and political systems in the description of the Harlot and the Beast (17:2), and now culminates in providing the ultimate reason for the fall of the ‘great city’ (18:3). The three-fold use of the image once again carries a sense of completion over a short period of time. The image points not only to idolatry, but a lifestyle of wanton luxury built from the sufferings and oppression of others. The added element in this final use of the image is the reference to merchants. This makes explicit the notion that the allure of the corrupt system is that it supports the means for kings and businessmen to enrich themselves selfishly, at the expense of others.

8. *Allon phonen* – ‘another voice.’ This other voice indicates a shift in focus, from the fate of the ‘fallen’ city to the command for God’s people to flee from her.

9. *Exelthate ho laos mou ex autes* – ‘Come out of her, my people!’ Harrington notes that the command echoes words from Jeremiah – Jer 51:6, 45 (‘Flee from the midst of Babylon, let every man save his life... Go out of the midst of her, my people!’) He also finds a comparison with the warnings to flee in the apocalyptic discourses of both Mark (Mk 13:14-28) and Matthew (Mt 24:16-20).458 There also appears to be an allusion to the story of Sodom in which Lot and his family are instructed to flee from the doomed city, not to look back, but to be steadfast in leaving the city and its evil behind. This idea will be reflected more clearly in the next words of the command.

10. *Hina me synkoinonesete tais harmartiais autes kai ek ton plagon autes hina me labete* – ‘so that you may not be associated with/be a partner in her sins and so that you might not receive of her plagues.’ *Synkoinonesete* has the sense of ‘co-habitate.’ It can have the sense of being a ‘full partner’ in an endeavor/enterprise, but can also suggest the allure and attraction of a society or culture that leads people to seek its benefits, compromising with it, making accommodations with it for the sake of those benefits without becoming fully a part of the society or culture – a tendency on the part of a number of Christians in the Province of Asia in the late first century that the author of Revelation roundly condemns. Again the allusion to Lot fleeing from Sodom is illustrative. Within the Genesis cycle of Abraham stories, the patriarch will finally emerge is the example of faith par excellence. But it is not without a struggle. In this struggle, Abraham’s nephew, Lot, functions as a foil. Having returned from Egypt, from a foolish attempt to take matters into his own hands and avoid the hardship of a famine in the land to which God has sent him, Abraham begins to trust and rely on God, going wherever he will lead. He gives his nephew the option of choosing where he would like to settle and Lot chooses ‘city life,’ Sodom, a city notorious for its evil. Warned by God that Sodom is to be destroyed and instructed to flee the city for a safe haven in the surrounding plains, Lot bargains with God to go off to another ‘little city.’ He is instructed not to look back, to break all ties with the evil of the city where he lived and yet his wife looks back and receives a share in the city’s destruction. The message is clear: ‘Babylon has fallen! Don’t look back, don’t seek a replacement for the comforts that society afforded. Life radical Christianity.’

11. *Ekolthesan autes hai harmartiais enmenonousen ho theos ta adkemata autes* – ‘have been heaped up her sins... God has remembered her injustices.’ Note the verbal allusions to the opening of the Exodus story. There the cries of the Israelites reached the heavens and God remembered. His ‘remembrance’ made present again his election of and relationship with his people. Here, it is the sins of the ‘great city’ that have mounted to the heavens and God remembers, makes present again, not his relationship with her but her ‘iniquities.’ More specifically, the word frequently translated as ‘iniquity’ is from the same root as ‘righteousness/justice.’ It is the negative form – injustice. The ‘sins’ of the ‘great city’ center fully on injustice, on oppression of others, of denying them their inherent rights for the sake of building a

458 Ibid.
power base.
Note also the bracketing function of autes – ‘her.’ It surround and encapsulates sin, God’s remembrance, and what he rememgers – injustice. Babylon/Rome is fully responsible, is the cause of the destruction, the plagues she experiences. (see also, 16:19).

12. *Apodote autes hos aute apedoken...* - ‘give back to her what she has given out/back’ Harrington observes that the command, dependent on Jer 50:15, 29 (‘take vengeance on her, do to her as she has done... Repay her according to her deds; just as she has done, do to her – for she has arrogantly defied the Lord...’) He asserts that the command is addressed to the ministers of divine justice, the angels of the plagues and the ‘horns’ of 17:16-17, the horns of the beast used by God to bring down the corrupt, evil systems.459

Certainly by the inter-testamental period, Israel’s Wisdom had progressed to the point where Wisdom was identified with Torah. The teaching, understanding and application of Torah (teaching/law) was dealt with in this late Wisdom Tradition in the familiar patterns of duality, the two ways, the way of righteousness and the way of evil. The dualistic framework of Wisdom teaching accounts for its appropriation in apocalyptic writings, especially Revelation which shares a certain theological outlook with the Fourth Gospel, also heavily dependent on Israel’s Wisdom traditions. One ‘law’ that gives modern readers of the Bible pause is the *lex talionis* – ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ In itself, it speaks of strict retribution, leaving little room for love and mercy. What has to be understood is that the *lex talionis* represented a significant advance in an understanding of retribution and vengeance. It limited vengeance. A person could not be killed for stealing a cow. Retribution was limited to a consequence exactly matching the crime.

Throughout Revelation, the omniscient narrator has inserted his voice with the claim: ‘Here is Wisdom!’ What is then proclaimed is the fitting reward or retribution of righteous or evil acts. Such judgments are issued in the light of the opportunities people have had to return, turn back, repent. God’s mercy is present everywhere in the book, even in its most violent and vengeful images. The retribution pronounced on Babylon/Rome comes in the light of a dualistic understanding of the world in which ample opportunities have been given for kings and people to have a change of heart. God’s multiple ‘signs,’ as gruesome as they sometimes appear to be are opportunities for a change of heart. What has to be noted is not only that Babylon/Rome has refused to have a change of heart, but that the evil of the Empire has arrogantly continued to defiantly assert itself, even in the face of God’s signs. In this regard, paying her back double, mixing a double portion for her in the cup she has mixed is nothing more than holding her accountable for her actions, allowing her evil to be its own punishment. Not only was she evil and unjust, but she defiantly and willingly adhered to that evil and injustice – a double portion of evil for which there are double consequences for her.

13. *Kathemai basilissa* – ‘I sit (as) a queen.’ Harrington observes that the torment and grief are an exact reversal of fortunes for the life of luxury, extravagance and arrogance characteristic of Rome and Roman Emperors. That was exactly the aim of the plagues, to pierce the blandness of affluence and power. It is the case, then, not that the plagues failed, but that there was a ‘hardening of heart’ making Rome doubly guilty. The image of sitting as a queen is derived from Is 47:7 and speaks of arrogance, of the conviction that power can act with impunity simply because it is powerful, that ‘might makes right.’ The image of such arrogance also recalls the complacency of the Laodiceans in 3:17.460

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459 Ibid.
460 Ibid.

325
Commentary

The End of Babylon begins with the words, ‘After these things...’ The phrase is a narrative indication of a new direction, a new topic in the story being told. The judgment on the ‘great city’ was pronounced in the Proclamation of Judgment (14:6-13). With the the pouring out of the Seventh Bowl (16:17-21) the destruction of the city was accomplished. Chapter 17 functioned as a transition to the final accomplishment of God’s judgment and the establishment of a ‘New Jerusalem.’ In the vision of the Harlot and the Beast, and the words of the interpreting angel, the chapter dealt with the inevitability of the fall of the ‘great city.’ Chapter 18 deals with the final fate of the ‘great city,’ the result of the judgment on it.

Three times in Revelation, the image of Babylon as a prostitute sharing the ‘wine of the passion/wrath of her fornication’ has been used, in the Proclamation of Judgment, the portrait of the Harlot and the Beast, and in the description of the End of Babylon. This indicates the completeness of the judgment on the city and the relative speed with which that judgment is accomplished.

The announcement that the city has fallen is made by ‘another angel,’ not a strong or might angel, but one with great authority whose ‘glory’ illuminates the world. The authority and reflected glory of this angel can be understood as nothing else than the authority and reflected glory of God. God’s will is accomplished in the ‘Fall of Babylon.’ The angel cries out with a ‘strong’ voice, not a ‘great’ or ‘loud’ voice. The word, ‘strong’ is the usual term for describing a valiant warrior. Babylon’s fall is nothing short of God’s victory over the evil power structure and this is substantiated in the fact that she has become the dwelling place of demons, the place of banishment for carrion animals. This is a common image for destroyed cities – whether by war or natural disaster. The destruction renders them inhabitable and, as a result, carrion birds and beasts move in to scavenge the remains, making them more dangerous, less habitable.

The reason for her destruction is stated to be her fornications, the idolatrous practices of her rulers and vassals and the intoxicating allure she exercises over the inhabitants of the earth. In the description of the fallen city, this third use of the image of a drunken, whorish power is expanded to include the ‘merchants’ of the earth who have enriched themselves on her complacent luxury. All classes of people within the empire who benefit from Babylon/Rome’s arrogance and extravagance are included in the final fate of the city.

‘Another voice’ is heard from heaven. This voice signals a change in focus, from the fate of the fallen city to a call to God’s people to distance themselves from the city, its evil and its fate. The image is taken from Jer 51:6, 45. The verb, synkoinonesete, literally means ‘co-habitate.’ There is a certain ambiguity in the term. It can mean ‘to live together,’ to fully be absorbed into the life of the city, its social structures and culture. This is one class of Christians condemned in the Seven Letters, those who fully embraced the values of the surrounding world, remaining Christian in name only. The other is the group who maintain some form of Christian life and works but make significant compromises and accommodations with the surrounding culture in order to be included in and reap the benefits of Roman society. This is the syncretistic option and it is also condemned.

The call of God’s faithful to flee their attachments to the fallen city is reminiscent of the story of Lot who chose life in the infamous city of Sodom. Commanded by God to flee the city and not look back, not to maintain attachments to a way of life inimical to God’s will and plan, Lot’s wife does look back and merits the fate of the city she had been commanded to leave. She’s turned into a pillar of salt.
The explanation for the fall of the city is also couched in language that recalls the opening of the book of Exodus. The cries of the Israelites reach the heavens and God remembers – he remembers the people he chose and the reason he chose them. He acts to bring them to freedom. Here, it is not the cries of the city that reach the heavens, but the heaping up of its sins. Now God’s ‘remembrance’ does not focus on election and promise, but rather on the injustices perpetrated by the city. The structure of v. 5 is noteworthy:

A. of her
B. the sins are heaped up
C. God remembered
B. the injustices
A. of her

The central focus of the structure is the remembrance of God. God’s action is ‘surrounded’ by the evil of the city – her sins. Her sins are specifically identified with injustice, with a form of rule that tramples human rights and dignity. This evil the city fully owns, bears full responsibility for it – ‘of her’ giving focus to the entire structure. Everything starts and ends with ‘her.’ Faced with this evil that makes no change, that encompasses the life of Roman rule and society before a God who has lavishly sent his ‘signs’ to correct the error of her ways, how else can God act but with judgment, a judgment that allows the city to fall by its own devices.

It is to be understood that the command to pay her back in kind is not addressed to the faithful witnesses, those commanded to flee the evil city. Rather it is addressed to the angels, the messengers of God’s justice. In the fight against evil, the followers of the Lamb are with him, forming a choir, singing a hymn, as in the holy war stories of the Old Testament where Israel’s role is to blow horns and make noise. In both cases, the enemy defeats itself, and this has been a consistent theme in Revelation, that evil destroys itself. The ‘rendering’ of justice involves a ‘double portion,’ giving back to the ‘great city’ twice what she has inflicted on others. The judgment involves a reversal of fortunes, the lowly and oppressed being elevated while the great city suffers a reversal of all the opulence, luxury, power and good fortune she has enjoyed.

One instance of a ‘double portion’ in the Old Testament may be illustrative. The Book of Samuel opens with a narrative about a simple family doing what is right and just, making a yearly pilgrimage to the shrine at Shiloh to make a thanksgiving offering to the Lord. Elkanah, the father of the family, has two wives, Peninah and Hannah. Peninah, who has children, is a shrew who torments Hannah because of her barrenness. Yet Hannah’s good nature – she is a loving wife and endures the abuse of the rival wife patiently, leads Elkanah to share with her a ‘double portion’ at the yearly celebration. Hannah is faithful and lives by patient endurance, a model of the faithful witnesses. She receives her portion, she bears a child, but it can be considered a ‘double portion’ because the child she bears is Samuel, Israel’s first ‘prophet’ and the anointer of kings. By contrast, Babylon/Rome is unfaithful, oppressive, arrogant, lording it over those on whom she feeds for power and wealth. The evil of the power structure is ‘double.’ The works of the Roman Empire, of corrupt worldly powers are seen as unjust and evil. But more, the ‘signs’ of God and the witness of the Church give the power structures and idolatrous religious systems a clear, alternate view of reality, a view of the truth which they refuse to acknowledge, a ‘double’ evil that calls for a ‘double portion’ of justice.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect about the image of ‘fallen, ruined’ Babylon is the call of God to his own people to flee her, to abandon co-habitation, mutual co-existence with her, to distance themselves...
from falling under the same ‘judgment.’ In recent experience we have witnessed the fall of the Berlin wall and the demise of atheistic, totalitarian communist Russia. It has bred the oligarchs and a new movement to establish Russia as a world power. We witnessed the defeat of Hitler and have seen a proliferation of New-Nazi movements and of far right political strategies designed to purify Europe, the United States, all good ‘Christian’ countries through the oppression and suppression of different races, different cultures, different ideologies. We’ve witnessed the disgrace of presidents who abused their power to manipulate the political process and feed personal lusts and see movements to return to the political structures that made such abuses possible. In what ways is it common in our world to look back to failed systems and processes to find answers for today’s issues and problems? What is the danger in looking backwards instead of forwards? In what ways does the Church look backwards to dogma and authority rather than forward to compassion and inclusion? How do we personally, as professed followers of the Lamb, fall prey to the consequences of our own sinfulness and look back to see how we can return to what was before and avoid the consequences we have experienced? Where does the world, the Church, the inhabitants of the world need a change of heart? Is true change really possible or is there only an endless repetition of past patterns in the hope of different results? Why do we keep looking back?
329

Dirges Over Babylon (18:9-19)

9 And they will weep and beat the breast (mourn) over her, the kings of the earth, those with her having fornicated (committed sexual immorality) and lived in luxury (self-indulgence) when they should see the smoke of her burning. 10 From afar (are) those, having taken their stand because of her torment, saying: Woe! Woe! The great city, Babylon, the strong city, because (in) a single hour has come your judgment.

11 And the merchants of the earth are weeping and mourning over her because their merchandise no one buys any longer, 12 merchandise of gold and silver and precious stone and pearls and fine linen and dyed purple cloth and dyed scarlet cloth and every citrus wood and every vessel of ivory and every vessel from costly wood and bronze and iron and marble 13 and cinnamon and spice and incense and myrrh and frankincense and wine and olive oil and fine flour and wheat and cattle and sheep and horses and chariots and slaves (human bodies) and the souls of men. 14 And your ripe fruit, the strong desire (lust) of your soul has departed from you and all the costly (sumptuous) things and bright things have departed from you and not any longer will they find them. 15 The merchants of these things, those having become rich from her, from afar they will take their stand because of the fear of her torment, weeping and mourning, 16 saying, Woe! Woe! The great city, you having been clothed in fine linen and purple garments and scarlet garments and you having been adorned with gold and precious stone and pearls, 17 for in a single hour this wealth has been made desolate.

And every ship’s pilot and he sailing to any place and the sailors and whosoever works the sea, from afar they stood 18 and they were crying, seeing the smoke of her burning (destruction by fire), saying: What is like the great city? 19 And they threw dust (dirt) upon their heads and cried out, weeping and mourning, saying: Woe! Woe! The great city in which became rich all having boats on the sea, from her richness, for in a single hour she has become desolate.
The Kings’ Lament

1. basileis tes ges – ‘kings of the earth.’ These are to be understood as the vassals of Rome, those who benefited from Rome’s power. They beg the question of political alliances in the modern world and the reasons for those alliances.

Harrington observes that the whole passage, 18:9-19, mirrors Ezekiel’s lamentation over Tyre (Ezek 26-27).

2. Makrothen hestekotes – ‘standing from afar.’ Harrington cites Swete who notes that it is with a touch of grim humor that the kings are seen ‘standing from afar,’ standing at a safe distance from the conflagration and contenting themselves with idle lamentations.

It can be suggested that a parody of the judgment and crucifixion scenes of the Synoptics is also at play in the image of those observing the destruction of Babylon from afar. In all three of the Synoptic Gospels, Peter is portrayed as ‘following Jesus from afar,’ makrothen, Mk 14:54, Mt 26:58, Lk 22:54. Also, all three note the presence of women standing or watching from afar, makrothen, Mk 15:40, Mt 27:55, Lk 23:49. Both Peter following from a distance and the woman looking on from afar are ambiguous images. They are at the scene, if at a distance, which can be viewed as positive in terms of those who have run away. But they are also at a safe distance, removing themselves from immediate danger for associating themselves with Jesus. By contrast, it can be noted that in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus’ mother, her sister, and Mary Magdalene, along with the disciple whom he loved are standing right by the cross, Jn 19:25-26. Yet, if even from ‘afar’ they have followed the Lamb to his ‘victory.’ They come to see him accomplish what he set out to do. Those standing ‘afar’ and lamenting Babylon, come after the fact, come to observe the ruins, come to weep and lament over personal losses.

3. Hoti mia hora elthen he krisis sou – ‘for in one hour has come your judgment.’ Harrington notes that this phrase is repeated at the end of each of the three laments/dirges. He further observes that the ten, future kings and the beast are given authority for one hour in 17:12. This authority is to bring about the downfall of Babylon/Rome.

The Merchants’ Lament

4. Hoti ton gomon auton oudeis agorazei ouketi – ‘for their merchandise/cargo no one buys any longer.’ The lament of the merchants is obviously motivated by self-interest, because they have lost the market for their goods. The ‘fall of Babylon’ has impacted their ability to trade. Note that the lavishness and opulence of their wares demands an elite, even aristocratic class of customers.

5. Somaton kai psychas anthropon – ‘bodies and souls/psyches of men.’ Harrington notes that the distinction between ‘bodies’ and ‘souls’ most likely refers to slaves destined for work (bodies) and those destined for th amphitheaters/gladiatorial games and prostitution.

6. Opora… lipara… lampra… ouketi ou me auta eiresousin – ‘ripe fruit… sumptuous things… bright/splendid things… no longer will they find them.’ Ou me is an emphatic, double negative – ‘indeed, surely they will not find.’

Harrington observes that the ripe, autumn fruit will no longer be gathered. Rome will reap the harvest which her deeds have merited. Her luxury and her splendor have vanished forever. The section ends, again, with the notice that the destruction was accomplished in ‘one hour.’ With the tremendous loss of life, property, sources of good and wealth, the merchants sole concern remains self-interest, their loss of trade.

7. Peribeblemene – ‘clothed.’ Note that the description of the ‘clothing’ of Babylon is an exact verbal repetition of the clothing of the harlot – again pointing to luxury and extravagance. (see notes # 7-9, pp. 311-312).

461 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
462 ibid.
463 ibid.
464 ibid.
465 ibid.
The Seafarers’ Lament

8. *Kybernetes... ho epi topon pleon... nautai... hosoi ten thalassan ergazontai* – ‘shipmasters... those sailing anyplace... sailors... as many (whosoever) works (trades by) the sea’ What is envisioned here is all who make a living from the sea – fisherment, travelers, those who ship cargo. The whole enterprise of seafaring is dependent upon the city, from building ships to traveling to other parts of the empire for business, pleasure, or to exercise authority, to import and export business, to fishing. All this is gone.

9. *Ebalon choun epi tas kephalas auton* – ‘threw dirt/dust upon their heads.’ A typical sign of mourning. As with the merchants, the lament concerns personal loss of profit and livelihood – self-interest.

Commentary

The three laments or dirges over Babylon/Rome are all motivated by personal loss and self interest. The kings lament the loss of power and luxury assured by their alliance with Rome. The merchants lament the loss of the customers from whom they can earn lavish profits and the source of goods that they can peddle. Those who travel or make their living on the sea lament the loss of opportunity, the inability to move about, to obtain rich items from around the world or extend their customer base by exporting products elsewhere.

There are three laments – a complete number, but a short number. Concern for the ‘fallen’ city is not paramount, merely an occasion for the elite to bemoan their personal losses. This is carried, in each case, by the fact that those lamenting Babylon do so from a distance. They are detached and unconcerned. There is a somewhat ironic contrast between these lamenters and the Synoptic Gospels’ portrait of Peter and woman who follow or stand by Jesus from afar. They are – at a distance – with him through his ‘defeat,’ his death, but a death that proves to be his ‘victory.’ They, from a distance, risk association with Jesus even if that is risky. Those who lament Babylon, do so from a distance after the fact, and their concern is not with the fate of the ‘great city,’ but with how it impacts them. An even more significant contrast can be found in the Fourth Gospel where the mother of Jesus, two other women, and the disciple whom Jesus loved, all stand very near to his cross.

In examining the Fall of Babylon (18:1-8), the question was raised, ‘Why do people look back? Why does the end of something wrong or evil still attract people?* The Dirges Over Babylon suggest that the reason is, simply, self-interest. Within our world, arms makers need unest to make a profit. The conquest of a corrupt power leaves a gap that they need to fill. Winning rights for workers against unjust companies leads those concerned only with the bottom line, to find other workers to exploit. In what ways do we lament the end of something evil? What advantage do we lament? What personal interest do we want to restore? How does balancing the budget, nationally and in our own homes, lead us to regret the efforts to improve the lot of workers, to assure quality craftsmanship, to be just and fair that drive prices up? How much to we operate from self-interest and how easy does that make it to ‘co-habitate’ with evil?
Rejoice over her, O Heaven, and the holy ones and the apostles and the prophets, for God has judged your judgment (rendered a judgment favorable to you) against her.

And one strong angel lifted up a stone, like a large millstone, and threw (it) into the sea saying: So, with rushing (violence) will Babylon, the great city be thrown and it will no longer be found. And the sound of harpists and musicians (singers) and flute players and trumpet players let not be heard in you any longer; and every craftsman of every trade let not be found in you any longer; and the sound of a millstone let not be heard in you any longer, and the light of a lamp let not shine in you any longer, and the voice of a bridegroom and a bride let not be heard in you any longer, because your merchants were the great ones of the earth for in your sorcery were led astray (deceived) all the nations, and in her was found the blood of the prophets and the holy ones and of all those having been slaughtered on the earth.

Textual Notes

1. *Euphrainou ep’ aute ourane kai hoi hagioi kai hoi apostoloi kai hoi prophetai* – ‘rejoice over her O Heaven and the holy ones and the apostles (those sent) and the prophets.’ Note the contrast with 11:10, where the inhabitants of the earth are ‘making merry/gloating’ over the dead bodies of the witnesses. The same word for ‘rejoicing’ is used in both cases – *euphraino*. In this instance, however, with the vocative, *ourane*, the heavens are called on to rejoice. The implication is that those named – holy ones, apostles, prophets – are part of the heavenly court, those who have ‘overcome.’ There is not so much a sense of
‘gloating’ as of happy relief – the evil of Babylon/Rome has ended. Harrington observes that the call to rejoice echoes 12:12a which celebrates the Christian victory over Satan. 12b then goes on to warn of the devil’s wrath now vented on earth. The implication is that the call for the heavens to rejoice now completes the ‘victory’ on earth now to be celebrated.466

2. *Hoti ekrinen ho theos to krima hymon ex autes* – ‘for God has judged your judgment against her.’ Consistent with the ‘lawsuits’ common from prophetic literature, God has rendered a favorable judgment for the plaintiff, he has prosecuted the case against the ‘crimes’ of Rome – the sentence of ‘death’ is the very sentence she had imposed on God’s people.

3. *Eren heis angelos ischyros lithon hos mylinon megan kai ebalen eis ten thalassan* – ‘one strong angel lifted up a stone, like a large millstone, and cast it into the sea.’ *Angelos ischyros* has appeared in 5:2 and 10:1, and the angel announcing the destruction of Babylon cried out in a ‘strong voice’ – *ischyra phone*. *Ischyros* is typically used to describe mighty men, mighty warriors. The use of the word usually suggests strength in battle, the battle between good and evil. Harrington writes that the symbolic action of the angel, and his words, are reminiscent of Jer 51:63-64. Jeremiah had commissioned Seraiah, the chief priest at the time of Zedekiah, to read aloud Jeremiah’s sentence on Babylon, then tie a stone to the scroll and throw it into the Euphrates, declaring: ‘Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more.’ Such symbolic actions were more characteristic of later prophets and were particularly notable in Ezekiel. Harrington also notes that the words of the angel *ou me eurethe eti* – ‘not shall she be found any longer’ recall Ezek 26:21 – ‘I will bring you to a dreadful end, and you shall be no more; though sought for, you will never be found again.’467

4. *Ou me akousthe… ou me eurethe… ou me akousthe* – ‘will not be heard… will not be found… will not be heard.’ V. 22 deploys a simple chiastic pattern to highlight the complete collapse of Roman society and culture. Culture – the sounds of music will not be heard, trade – crafts and craftsmen will not be found, sustenance – the sounds of millstones grinding grain to make break will not be heard. In all cases the emphatic double negative is used. Harrington notes that the imagery of v. 22 is derived from Jer 25:10 – ‘I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of millstones and the light of the lamp,’ and from Ezek 26:13 – ‘I will stop the music of your songs, and the sound of your lyres shall be heard no more.’

5. *Hoi emporoi sou esan hoi megistanes tes hoti en ten pharmakeia sou eplanethesan panta ta ethne* – ‘your merchants were the great ones of the earth for in your pharmacology were deceived all the nations.’ Rogers and Rogers note that *pharmkeia*, usually translated as ‘sorcery,’ primarily means the use of drugs or substances for medicine, poison or magic.468 Harrington concludes that the merchants were proud and self-sufficient in their wealth (see 18:11-16); They were effective propagandists of the ‘sorcery/magic/medicine’ or Rome which, in the end, was a poison. For him, the word is used in the wider sense of idolatry and luxury.469

6. *In aute haima propheton kai agion eurethe… ton esphagmenon* – ‘in her was found the blood of the prophets and the holy ones… those having been slain.’ Harrington cites Swete who notes that Babylon represents all human arrogance that suppresses witness to a higher authority, from Cain to Nero. Mention of the ‘blood of the prophets’ is an image likely drawn from Jer 51:49. All those ‘having been slain’ are being assimilated to the Lamb (see 5:6) and those souls resting beneath the altar (6:9).470

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466 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
468 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
469 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
Commentary

While the Dirges Over Babylon presented a view of the destruction of Babylon/Rome from the perspective of the elite of Roman society – kings, merchants, craftsmen, seafarers – all those who ‘lost’ personal wealth, power, or status from the destruction of the ‘great city,’ the Judgment of Babylon presents a view of the destruction from the perspective of the heavens. For the elite of Roman society, the destruction of the ‘great city’ was an occasion for grieving, for looking back to what was – to what was ‘available’ to the elite – with a sense of loss and longing. The sole concern was getting back what was lost, even at the price of renewing evil, oppressive systems and policies. For the heavens and for those dwelling there – the holy ones, apostles and prophets, for God’s faithful, the destruction of Babylon/Rome is a reason to rejoice.

‘Rejoice’ is the same word that was used for the merry-making, the gloating of those who looked on the dead bodies of the witnesses in 11:10. But note the difference. With the death of the two witnesses, there was a sense of win/lose for those who looked on, for the people of the earth who wanted to benefit from the advantages of Roman society and cultural, even at the expense of the suffering of others. Here there is rejoicing not at the death of others but at the end of evil, of oppressive power, of a culture of luxury at the expense of others. Here there is joy not at pain and suffering, but that the followers of the Lamb can live free of such pain and suffering. Here, joy is a sense of relief at the removal of pain, not its infliction.

The basic imagery of vv. 20-24 is that of a trial, modeled on the ‘prophetic lawsuits’ of Israel’s prophetic literature. God has rendered a favorable judgment for his people. ‘Not to be heard any longer,’ ‘not to be found any longer’ are phrases that echo throughout these verses. The images, drawn from Jeremiah (Jer 25:10) and Ezekiel (Ezek 26:13), both of whom looked to the downfall of foreign powers as a means of freedom for Israel, a means whereby God’s people could serve their God in freedom and peace, display joy not at good things destroyed in Roman society and culture, but the demise of the corrupt and oppressive underpinnings that made these good things possible, that made them possible at the expense of others, of the marginalized, of the dissidents. As common in apocalyptic literature, this ‘judgment’ involves a ‘reversal of fortunes,’ not in a vindictive or vengeful way, but in a manner that restores balance and order to God’s creation.

It is over the fall of the merchants that most joy is expressed. In 18:11-16 an extravagant inventory of luxurious items was the focus of their grief. The merchant trade is now characterized as pharmakeia. The word literally means the use of drugs/substances for medicine, poison, for magic. There was a ‘magic’ to Roman and Roman life, a magic that catches up the possibility of wealth and luxury and peddles it to the peoples of the world. This is the allure of a wealthy and powerful society and culture. And in the end, this ‘magic’ is not a medicine for what ails the people of the world, but a poison. There is joy that this poison has been removed, that what upheld the political, social, economic and religious systems of Rome has been unmasked for the poison that it is.

The ‘Judgment of Babylon’ is not so much that all the ‘goods,’ all the benefits of the Roman world were idolatrous, but that to maintain them took the blood of the innocent, the blood of those having been slain – the witnesses, the followers of the Lamb, the holy ones, prophets and apostles, the members of the heavenly court who, having been slain, have ‘overcome.’ It is precisely in ‘having been slain’ that their lives are assimilated to that of the Christ, that they come to share in the ‘victory’ of the Lamb.
The ultimate joy expressed here is not in the demise of the wealthy and powerful in themselves; it is in the debunking of the myth that wealth and power sets people apart, makes them the elite. It is a joy that breaks down barriers between the ‘ins’ and the ‘outs’ and finds possibility and hope for all to share the good things of creation, under the guidance and rule of the Creator God, justly and equitably.

We’ve asked the question, ‘Why, when an evil and corrupt system fails, do people look back with longing for what was?’ The answer appears to be found in greedy self-interest, in wanting to hang on to past favors and advantages no matter what the cost. An alternate view is to find joy in the failure of unjust systems, not from a sense of vindication and vengeance, but out of hope for moving forward, hope for sharing wealth, power, status among all people in a just and impartial way. So where, in our world can we see signs of letting go of past patterns to move towards the creation of a more just and equitable society for all? How is this ‘Godly?’ What forces and movements impede such progress? What forces and movements work to reverse progress in favor of some ‘elite’ group? Who are those who have ‘overcome’ patterns of injustice and oppression? What can we learn from them? In the face of evil, corruption and self-serving power, what does Revelation’s call to endure patiently have to offer? Does that mean to be silent? How can enduring patiently lead to ‘victory?’ What would that look like in our world? Can we realistically believe, can we realistically hope that the ultimate ‘battle’ is already won? How do we witness to the Gospel without polarizing the world into two camps and ‘fighting’ those who are ‘wrong?’ Is it our battle to fight?
The Vindication of God’s People (19:1-10)

19:1 After these things, I heard a loud voice, like a numerous multitude, in the heaven saying: Alleluia! Salvation and glory and power (are) of our God! 2 For true and righteous (are) his judgments, for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her fornication (immoral sexual acts) and he has avenged (procured justice for) the blood of his servants (slaves, bondsmen) from her hand. 3 And again (a second time) they had said: Alleluia! And her smoke arises to the ages of ages (forever).

4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell and worshipped the God sitting upon the throne, saying: Amen! Alleluia!

5 And a voice from the heaven came forth: Give praise to our God all you his servants and you fearing him, the small and the great. 6 And I heard as the sound of a numerous multitude and as the sound of many waters and as the sound of strong (powerful, loud) thunder claps saying: Alleluia! For the Lord, our God, has reigned (exercised kingship), the all-powerful one.

7 Let us rejoice and let us be glad and we will give glory to him because has come (arrived) the wedding feast of the lamb and his bride (woman) has prepared herself.

8 And it was granted to her that she should be clothed (clothe herself) in bright, pure linen; indeed the linen is the righteous deeds of the holy ones.

9 And he says to me, Write “Blessed are they having been called (invited) to the banquet of the wedding of the lamb.” And he says to me: These true words are of God. (These are God’s true words.) 10 And I fell before his feet to worship and he says to me: See that not (idiomatic = Don’t do that!) Your fellow servant am I and of your brothers, those having the testimony (witness) of Jesus; to God pay homage (worship God). Indeed the testimony (witness) of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.
Textual Notes

1. **Meta tauta** – ‘after these things.’ This is the final occurrence of the phrase in the book. It indicates the final shift in scene, the denouement of the entire book. There is a pattern in the use of this phrase. At the beginning of the vision of the temple and the scroll vision, after the letters to the Seven Churches, which sound a note of judgment, 4:1 shifts the scene to the heavens and a heavenly liturgy that precedes the opening of the seven seals – the unleashing of God’s judgments, his ‘signs,’ his plagues. At the end of the judgments of the first six seals, before the seventh seal is opened and the seven angels with seven trumpets come on the scene, in 7:1, the words shift the scene back to the heavens for the sealing of the faithful. In 7:9 the phrase is used to introduce the Song of Victory that precedes the sounding of the trumpets. In 15:5, it begins a heavenly liturgy introduces the angels with the bowls and the final plagues. In 18:1, it initiates the proclamation of the Fall of Babylon comes in the context of a heavenly voice and a heavenly celebration over the fall of evil. In 19:1, it introduces the vindication of the faithful which presages the end of evil and the forming of a new heaven and a new earth. The pattern is that a heavenly ‘liturgy’ initiates judgment enacted on earth, culminating in some vindication of the just, aligning them with the heavenly court. The repeated pattern is to begin with a heavenly ‘liturgy’ that impacts the earth with judgment whose purpose is to align the people of earth with the servants of God in heaven. The context of the alignment is ‘liturgical.’ ‘Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ It seems the purpose of Revelation is to make this a reality and the means is by living what is proclaimed liturgically. 18:20 called on the heavens to rejoice. What unfolds now is a response to that call.

2. **Phonen megalen ochlou pollou** – ‘great sound of a vast (many) crowd/multitude.’ This echoes the ochlos pollos chanting the Song of Victory, 7:9-10.

3. **Hallelouia** – ‘Hallelujah!’ Harrington writes that this is a transliteration of the Hebrew phrase meaning, ‘Praise Yahweh!’ It is found in many psalms and was used in both synagogue worship and early Christian liturgy. In the New Testament, the word occurs only in Revelation.

4. **Soteria… doxa… dynamis…** - ‘Salvation… glory… power/might’ These are attributes of God that recur regularly in the doxologies of Revelation (see 4:11, 5:12, 7:10, 7:12, 12:10). Harrington observes that soteria should, more properly, be translated in this context as ‘victory.’ The salvation of God’s people from the forces of evil in the world is the precise nature of the ‘victory’ of the Lamb.

5. **Ephtheiren** – ‘she corrupted.’ A Greek-English Lexicon of of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature lists the primary meaning of the word as ‘to destroy,’ ‘to ruin,’ ‘to corrupt,’ ‘to spoil.’ In terms of outward circumstances, the word can mean ‘to cause financial ruin,’ or ‘to destroy property’ causing dire circumstances; it can suggest the transitoriness of life – ‘to be doomed,’ ‘to be ruined’ by illness, injury or old age; it can suggest the ‘defilement’ or ‘seduction’ of a virgin, of that which is clean and pure; in the moral/religious sense, it indicates ‘to corrupt or defile’ one’s inner being, integrity. It would seem that all elements of corruption and defilement carried by the verb are included in the evil worked on the world by the Whore.

6. **Ho kapnos autes anabainei** – ‘her smoke goes up/arises’ A similar phrase was used in the Proclamation of Judgment, 14:11, suggesting a parody of a liturgical service – the smoke of incense rising up. In either case, the rising of the faithful people’s prayers, carried on the smoke of incense, or the rising smoke of God’s judgment on the ‘great city,’ both actions ‘praise’ God and acknowledge his dominion over the created world. (see note # 12, p. 263)

7. **Epesan hoi presbyteroi... kai ta zoa kai prosekyanesan** – ‘The elders fell down... and the living living creatures and worshipped.’ A typical response to the proclamations of doxologies in the heavenly liturgies of Revelation is the prostration of the elders and the living creatures and their answering acclamation. Harrington observes that the ‘elders’ and ‘living creatures’ were last mentioned in 14:3; as those being nearest to the throne, they typically add their ‘Amen’ to the proclamation of the angels (see 5:14). He

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471 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
472 Ibid.
473 Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, *op. cit.*
further notes that 19:4-6 demonstrates close correspondences with the vision of the Seventh Trumpet, 11:15-19. Both passages refer to the end. In each there is a declaration of God’s sovereignty (11:15, 17 corresponding to 19:4, 6). The ‘servants who fear your name, both small and great’ are acknowledged in each (11:18 corresponding to 19:5). Peals of thunder appear in each (11:19 corresponding to 19:6).474

8. *Ainetei ton theon hemon* – ‘praise our God.’ A. A. Anderson notes that the call to praise God and a communal acclamation of that praise is characteristic of certain Psalms which are termed ‘Hallel Psalms.’ Traditionally these Psalms were used at the great annual festivals which included the Passover celebration. These psalms typically list those attributes and actions of God that are worthy of praise.475 These psalms include Pss 113, 134, 135, and 146-150. The heavenly liturgies throughout Revelation, generally, fit the pattern of these Psalms.

9. *Ekousa hos phonen ochlou pollou kai hos phynon hydaton pollon kai hos phonon bronton ischryon* – ‘I heard as the sound of a vast multitude and as the sound of many waters and as the sound of strong thunders.’ Harrington observes that the ‘vast multitude’ here differs from that of 19:1. The ‘vast throng in 19:1, was a ‘heavenly choir.’ Typical of ‘Hallel Psalms’ there is an invitation to praise God that is taken up by all those assembled. This ‘vast multitude’ corresponds to the ‘vast multitude’ who took up the Song of Victory in 11:17. That crowd was made up of the witnesses, those who had ‘overcome,’ the 144,000. Here, that same multitude takes up the invitation to join in praise of God.

The ‘sound of thunders’ has echoed throughout Revelation. It appears in the opening of the first seal (6:1) and in the vision of the Open Scroll (10:3-4). In those two instances, ‘resounding thunder’ was suggestive of the might and power of God, perhaps even suggesting the elements of a Theophany. It appears again in 14:2, in the passage describing the Companions of the Lamb, along with the ‘sound of many waters’ and ‘the sound of harpists.’ Here there is a suggestion of the vast number of companions, the many waters, along with heavenly sounds from the ‘temple’ of God designating those who have ‘overcome’ those who are worthy of entering that temple.

The ‘sound of many waters’ also featured in 1:15 to describe the ‘voice of God’ and indicating his power and control over the forces of nature.

10. *Chairomen kai agalliomen kai dosomen teb doxan auto* – ‘Let us rejoice and exult/be glad and we will give glory to him.’ Harrington observes that the call to ‘rejoice and be glad’ is likely an allusion to Mt 5:12 – ‘Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven.’476 The call to ‘give glory’ to God is a repeated refrain in Revelation, (see 11:13, 14:7, and 16:9). The idea of attributing glory to God is an acknowledgement that it is God who rules, who is powerful, who is loving and merciful, not the dragon, not the beast, not the harlot, not ROME. It is also an acknowledgement of dependence on God – he and his Christ have won the victory; the ‘victors,’ those who have ‘overcome’ are those who have lived by faith and patient endurance, not those who have won the battle by their own strength.

11. *Elthen ho gamos tou arnioukai he gyne autou hetoimasen eauten* – ‘the marriage/wedding feast of the Lamb has come and his woman (bride) has made herself ready.’ Of this image, Harrington writes that Israel is characterized as the bride of Yahweh consistently in prophetic literature (see Hos 2:16, Is 54:6, Ezek 16:7-8). In the New Testament, Jesus is represented as referring to himself as the bridegroom in Mr 2:19-20 and Mt 22:1. Paul transferred the imagery to Christ and the Church in II Cor 11:2. The theme is further developed in Ephesians (Eph 5:25 ‘Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’) and in Revelation which characterizes the ‘bride of Christ’ as those who have been redeemed by the ‘Blood of the Lamb’ (5:9, 7:14, and 14:3-4),

Harrington also notes that, in conformity with the author’s style, the ‘bride’ is introduced quite suddenly. The image will only be explained more fully in 21:9-14. That she has made herself ready, Harrington suggests, reflects Eph 5:26-27, where Christ has prepared his bride by washing her in the bath of baptism and making her immaculate. In both cases it is the preparation of the ‘bride’ for union with Christ that is the focus.477

474 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
476 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
477 Ibid.
12. *Edothe aute hina peribaletai byssinon lampron katharon* – ‘it was given to her to clothe herself in bright, pure linen.’ *Edothe* is another instance of the ‘divine passive.’ The subjunctive ‘that she might clothe herself’ is in the middle or reflexive voice. There is a subtle indication of a partnership between God and the Bride of Christ, the Church.

Harrington notes that in Eph 5:26 Christ ‘sanctified/made holy’ his bride. Here she ‘is given’ the white bridal dress of holiness. Always her sanctity is Christ’s achievement— but she still has to choose to put the dress on. In 15:6 the ‘bright and pure’ fine linen is a representation of the holy lives of God’s people. Here, the ‘fine linen’ is identified with the *diakomata*, the ‘righteousness/the righteous deeds’ of the holy ones.

13. *Grapson makarioi hoi eis to deipnon tou gamou tou arniou keklemenoi* – ‘Write: Blessed are they to the supper/feast of the wedding of the Lamb having been invited.’ There are seven Beatitudes running as a red thread through Revelation. ‘Blessed are they having been invited…’ is the fourth such Beatitude. (see note # 8, p. 300). It can also be noted that the command, ‘Write,’ is similarly deployed word. It occurs twice in the Inaugural vision. In 1:11, the ‘seer’ is commanded to write what he observes and send it to the Seven Churches. This is given further explanation in 1:19 where he is commanded to write what is about to happen. In a type of command/execution pattern, the command to ‘write’ is repeated in the opening line of each of the letters to the Seven Churches. At roughly the half-way point in the book, there is a subtle turning point where the ‘seer is commanded ‘Don’t write’ (10:4). This occurs in the vision of the Open Scroll which appears to be a final statement of God’s wrath and intended destruction of evil. The command not to write and to seal up the scroll was seen as an indication of God’s wrath and intended destruction of evil. The command to ‘write’ precedes two of the Beatitudes, ‘Blessed are the dead’ (14:13), a statement from the Proclamation of Judgment, and ‘Blessed are those invited to the wedding of the Lamb’ (19:9). The final occurrence of the command comes near the end of the book in the vision of the new heaven and new earth, the command to write, ‘These words are true.’

In the New Testament, the ‘marriage feast’ is a common image for the Kingdom of God (see Mt 7:11, 22:1-14, 25:1-13, and 26:29).

14. *Epesa emprosthen ton podon auto proskynesai auto* – ‘I fell before his feet to worship/pay homage to him’ The image, likely drawn from Dn 8:17, is a mixed image. ‘To fall before/prostrate oneself before’ is both a religious act of humility before God and an act of deference before earthly kings. A problem emerges when the kings/emperors are taking on themselves divine attributes and insisting on being honored as gods. *Proskynesai* literally means ‘to bend the knee – genuflect.’ It can again simply be an act of deference and honor, but in the New Testament is regularly used to signify ‘worship.’ As such, the image conveys the idea of how easy it is to move from due honor and respect for a being of some nobility to crossing the line and ‘worshipping,’ treating that being as something more than he is or ever could be.

15. *Hora me* – ‘see (that) not.’ This is an idiomatic expression meaning, ‘Don’t do that!’ Harrington notes that the expression is repeated in a parallel situation in 22:9, may be intended as a warning against angel worship, a practice known in Asia Minor, as evidenced in Col 2:18 – ‘Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels.’ Heb 1:5-14, however, makes clear that angels do not outrank Christians; in worship, humans and angels are equal and subordinate to Jesus as God’s Son. This equality of worship offered to God and his Christ seems to be reflected in the heavenly liturgies of Revelation.

16. *Syndoulos sou eime kai ton adelphon sou echonton ten martyrian Iesou* – ‘your fellow bondsman am I and of your brothers, those holding the testimony/witness of Jesus. It has been noted that *doulos* can mean ‘servant’ but in the sense of one ‘bound to serve.’ As such it is also the word for ‘slave.’ In particular, the word is used in the New Testament to indicate those ‘bound’ to God and his Christ. This is not meant to indicate oppressive ‘slavery,’ but a bond of service freely entered, a bond of service that is clearly subordinate to the divine. *Syndoulos* means those bound together with – fellow servants, bondsmen. Within the New Testament, in terms of the servants of God and his Christ, this word suggests community,
fellowship. The angel claims fellowship with the ‘seer’ and his brothers, the witnesses to the Christ. Together they offer fitting worship; together they serve the divine; together they share in the victory of the Lamb; together they exercise a prophetic role (martyria Iesou estin to pneuma tes propheteias – ‘the testimony/witness of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy’).

Harrington writes that the ‘testimony of Jesus’ employs a subjective genitive; it refers to the witness Jesus bore in his life, teaching, and death. The Christian prophet bears witness to Jesus by speaking his word.\textsuperscript{480}
Commentary

With the words, ‘after these things...’ the reader moves forward to the climax of the narrative of the Book of Revelation. The use of these words has uniformly shifted attention back to a scene enacted in the heavens. With the scene change, a regular pattern unfolds. A liturgical celebration in the heavens yields to the enactment of God’s judgment on earth, followed by a sealing, a victory song, a vindication of the faithful on earth. The pattern speaks to a movement to align the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ with the heavenly court and the context of that alignment is ‘liturgical.’ In the Lord’s Prayer, the Christian community prays, ‘Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ The repetitive pattern of the narrative of Revelation offers an indication that the purpose of the book is to make that prayer a reality. The context of that reality is ‘liturgical.’ If the Christian community can be led to live in the world what they celebrate in the liturgy, the alignment of heaven and earth will become a reality.

The judgment on Babylon has been accomplished. This is a typical feature of apocalyptic literature, to point ahead to the accomplishment of God’s will and celebrate it as already accomplished. It is God’s will, it will happen. What the ‘seer’ hears is the sound of the vast multitude of the heavenly court raising a great doxology. Doxologies are acclamations of praise that cite the attributes and actions of God. The first action/attribute is ‘salvation.’ The Greek word for ‘salvation,’ soteria, first and foremost means ‘to extricate someone from a threatening situation.’ The situation can be legal, medical, economic, or spiritual. For the author of Revelation, ‘spiritual’ is the key element of life threatened by the legal, economic, social and religious policies of Rome. In this sense, the ‘salvation’ that belongs to God is ‘victory.’ Rome is and can be ‘overcome.’

God’s judgments, through which he accomplishes his salvation, are true and just/righteous. In a manner typical of the Psalms of Praise, assertions of God’s justice, his right judgment, are bolstered by the citing of specific examples, and it is these examples that, in general, lead to the recognition of the attributes of God and become the occasion to give praise. The motivation for praise in this doxology is the judgment God has executed on the whore. Specifically, he has procured justice for the blood of his servants, for those who have suffered, even died for remaining faithful, for witnessing to the truth, for standing against the power of Rome. That the central focus of the doxology is the procurement of justice for God’s servants is highlighted by a chiastic structure of the motivation for praise:

A. He has judged the whore who seduced the earth.
B. He has procured justice for the blood of his servants at her hands.
A. Her smoke (destruction) rises up forever.

Within the structure, God’s servants are completely surrounded, engulfed in the power of the whore/Rome. Yet there is a movement from her seductions to her destruction. Smoke rising recalls the image of incense rising, carrying the prayers of God’s faithful servant to the heavens. For the faithful, the prayers are for release, freedom, salvation, and their prayers are answered – carried aloft with the smoke of God’s judgment on Rome.

Also, in the manner of Psalms of Praise, the initial acclamation is answered by a ‘choir,’ those who hear the words of praise. This is conveyed in the familiar pattern of heavenly liturgies throughout the book. The twenty four elders and the four living creatures echo the praise – ‘Amen! Alleluia!’ (Note that ‘Alleluia’ is repeated at the beginning, middle and end of the opening doxology, emphasizing praise of God for his being and his works.)
Within the Book of Psalms, there is a close affinity between Psalms of Thanksgiving and Psalms of pure praise. The association, in general, centers on the motivation. In Psalms of Praise, the motivation more properly focuses on attributes of God – He is just, He is true, He is faithful, He is loving and sustaining, though specific examples of these attributes may be the occasions of the praise. In Psalms of Thanksgiving the motivation more often than not focuses on specific actions of God on behalf of the individual or community offering the prayer. In either case, those assembled in the temple are invited to gather together to share in the thanksgiving and/or praise. That pattern is in evidence here with the command/call issued from heaven and addressed to all the faithful: ‘Give praise to our God!’ It is here that the purpose of God’s judgment becomes most clear, to bring into alignment and unity his faithful on earth with those in his heavenly court. The call is issued to all God’s servants, great and small. There is no distinction between the poor and the rich, the powerful and the powerless, all are bound to God. There is no distinction between the heavenly court and God’s faithful witnesses on earth. The call is issued to all who ‘fear’ God, who have a right relationship with him. The invitation is accepted and the ‘seer’ hears resounding praise, like the sound of many waters – both literally and symbolically, the rushing waters of potential chaos praise God as their Lord and Master, like thunder claps – symbolically a sign of God’s presence in power with his people.

The response of ‘Alleluia’ is followed by a motivation, ‘The Lord our God, the all powerful one, has established his rule.’ The verb, ‘to rule,’ is in the past tense. In this tense, the verb does not so much mean that he ‘was king,’ that he ‘ruled’ in the past, but that in the past ‘he established his rule’ whose effects are now being felt. Because God’s rule has been established, the great multitude of those praising God mutually encourages each other, ‘Let us rejoice and be glad,’ familiar words from the ending of the Beatitudes in Matthew’ Gospel (Mt. 5:11). The reason for rejoicing is that the wedding feast of the Lamb has now arrived, the bride has prepared herself, it has been granted to her (divine passive) to clothe herself in the righteous deeds of the holy ones. Having prepared herself, having been given by God the ability to respond to him in faith and to perform the just/righteous deeds that flow from that faith, the Church, the bride of Christ, is NOW ready to be fully united to her Lord and Savior – NOW, no matter in what situations and circumstances she finds herself. NOW is the moment of salvation, NOW is the moment the heavenly and earthly realms are bound together. NOW is the wedding feast of the Lamb.

The heavenly voice that began the praise of God now addresses the ‘seer’ directly. He is commanded to write a beatitude, ‘blessed are those invited to the wedding feast.’ This is the fourth of seven beatitudes that run through the book, seven statements of the ‘blessedness’ of the faithful servants, the witnesses to the faith, the servants of God and his Christ. He punctuates and emphasizes this notion of blessedness by proclaiming: ‘These are the true words of God.’ This what God intends for his creation.

The Vindication of God’s people ends with a somewhat strange image, an image drawn from Dn 8:17. The ‘seer’ falls at the feet of the angel in a gesture of subservience and, perhaps of worship. The verb, proskynesai, literally means to bend the knee. Within the New Testament it is regularly translated as ‘worship’ and is reserved for the proper response to and relationship with God. In general, the word means ‘to revere,’ ‘to pay homage to,’ ‘to show proper respect.’ This can apply to deference before kings and nobles and due respect to persons of higher status. It appears that the author of revelation used the image at this point in his narration to emphasize the unity, the proper alignment of heaven and earth. Angels and humans are fellow creatures of God – maybe ‘great’ and ‘small,’ but together subordinate to God. In a world where such gestures could misconstrued as attributing divine honors to the emperor, the angel commands the ‘seer’ to stop. Together with the ‘seer’ and his fellow witnesses on earth, the heavenly court has the same role of ‘witness,’ a role that is the spirit of prophecy, a role
that critiques present situations, emphasizing where truth and justice and a right relationship with God are to be found and where truth and justice and right are corrupted, manipulated for the sake of personal power or personal gain, where individuals stand out from and above their fellows. That cannot be. All creation stands before the throne of God; all are to pay homage, due reverence, worship only to the one sitting on the throne.

The Vindication of God’s People is the realization that the wedding feast of the Lamb is NOW. This is the moment of salvation. God’s rule has been established and those who experience God’s salvation, his ‘victory’ are those who ‘overcome’ right NOW. From the perspective of the world, there can be a temptation to set others apart, to see special reverence/deference due to them. But that is an aberration. In God’s plan, all are equal, all are brothers and sisters, all are fellow servants. Rev 19:1-10, the Vindication of God’s People, suggests that the great leveler is Liturgy. In the Liturgy, all have roles, but the whole focus of the ritual is to bring people together, to create an earthly counterpart to the heavenly court, to accomplish God’s will on earth as it is in heaven. Does our Liturgy bring about the unity of heaven and earth? Does it forge the unity of fellow servants? Are there factions that stand out in the Liturgy, factions that cannot be ‘overcome,’ but function as ends unto themselves? Where do people sit? Does the position of people in the Liturgical celebration speak of unity or of a privatization of liturgical prayer? Is there unity in Liturgical acclamations? Do some voices stand out – dominate, speaking/singing faster or slower than the voice of the congregation, loudly sounding different accents on the words being acclaimed? Do we celebrate what Christ has accomplished for me or for us? Do we come forward to receive communion as a personal act of unity with Christ, or as a communal act? Is he there for me or for us? Do we hear and attend to the prayer of dismissal, a commission to go out into the world and live what we have just celebrated? Is that call a commission of individuals or of the community – or both? How do we live the liturgy in day to day life? What does that even mean? How does living in the larger world what we celebrate in Liturgy constitute ‘overcoming’ the world? What does it mean to gather as ‘fellow servants’ of one master? What does it mean to go forth as fellow servants to live the will of that master? How can celebrating the Liturgy bring about an alignment of the heavenly and the earthly?
The End of Evil

The end of the Beasts (19:11-21)

11And I saw the heaven having been opened and, behold, a white horse and one sitting upon it, having been called faithful and truthful and with righteousness he judges and wages war. 12His eyes, indeed, like a flame of fire and upon his head (are) many diadems (royal crowns), having a name having been written which no one knows except him (if not he), and having been clothed in a garment having been dipped in blood and his name has been called “The Word of God.” 14And the armies, those in the heaven, were following him on white horses, having clothed themselves in pure white linen. 15And out of his mouth comes forth a sharp sword so that with it he might strike the nations and he will shepherd them with an iron staff and he treads on the wine press of the wine of the wrath of the burning anger of God, the all powerful, and he has upon his garment and upon his thigh a name having been written: King of kings and Lord of lords.

17And I saw a single angel, having taken his stand in the sun, and he cried out in a loud voice saying to all the birds, those flying in mid-heaven: Come here! Be gathered together to the great banquet of God, so that you might eat the flesh of kings and the flesh of commanders of a thousand and the flesh of the strong (warriors) and the flesh of horses and those sitting on them and the flesh of all the free and also the slaves and the small and the great. 19And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies having gathered together to make war with him sitting upon the horse and with his army. 20And the beast was captured and with him the false prophet having performed (done) signs before him in which were led astray those having received the mark of the beast and those worshipping the image of it; being alive, they were thrown, the two, into the lake of fire burning with brimstone (Sulphur).

21And the rest were slaughtered with the sword of the one sitting upon the horse, the one having come forth from his mouth, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.
Textual Notes

1. *Eidon ton ouranon eneogmenon* – ‘I saw the heaven having been opened.’ In 4:1 there was an ‘open door’ in the heaven (see note #4, p. 106); in 11:19 the temple of the heaven was thrown open; in 15:5 (see note #2, p. 285), the temple of the tabernacle of heaven was opened to allow the seven angels with the seven bowls to unleash their plagues. The open door, which corresponds to the door set before the Church in Philadelphia, a door that no one can close – access to the heavenly realm for the faithful. In 4:1, the ‘seer,’ and perhaps the faithful, get a glimpse of the heavens. After the re-commissioning of the ‘seer’ in 10:11, where he is commissioned to be a prophet to all the inhabitants of the earth, the glimpses into heaven become more wide open and offer access to all to look on the heavenly court and temple, the model for what God’s creation can be. The open vision of the temple in 11:19 corresponds to the witnesses being able to hear the voice from the heavens inviting them to ‘Come up.’ It is the vision of 15:5 that is particularly significant. That the inner sanctum of the heavenly temple is open so that the angels with the bowls can be seen implies that the plagues/signs they unleash should be obvious to all the inhabitants of the earth of God’s truth, of his power, of his will for his creation. Harrington, following Sweet, observes that heaven is now wide open and God breaks out into the world in the form of a white horse and him who sat on it. The ‘parousia’ of Christ is God’s word of the Cross which confounds the world.481

2. *Idou hippos leukos kai ho kathemenos ep’ auton* – ‘Behold! A white horse and the one sitting on it.’ Harrington notes that the words are a repetition of 6:2, the opening of the first seal. In both cases, ‘white’ us the symbol for ‘victory,’ but this is where the similarity ends. The rider is not the personification of victorious warfare on 6:2, but the Word of God of 19:13.482

3. *Pistos kai alethinos kai en dikaiosyne krinei kai polemei* – ‘The faithful on and true and in justice he judges and makes war.’ In 1:5, the salutation of the general letter to the Seven Churches, Christ is characterized as the ‘faithful witness.’ In 3:7, ‘John’ is instructed to write the words of Christ to the Church in Philadelphia. Here, Christ is characterized as the ‘holy one,’ ‘the true one.’ In 3:14, he is instructed to write to the Church in Laodicea the words of ‘the Amen, the faithful and true witness.’ It is clear that it is Christ who is the faithful and true one mentioned here. The role of Christ at his coming is judgment. Judgment, in this case, would appear to mean ‘discrimination,’ separating the good from the evil. The ‘just war’ that he wages will be a war of words, the Word of God vs. the falsehoods of worldly values. Harrington observes that the idea of ‘judgment’ here is derived from Is 11:4 – ‘with righteousness he will judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.’ In particular, Ps 45:4 looks to a king, who can be understood messianically, who rides forth victoriously for the cause of truth and to defend the right.483

4. *Ophthalmoi autou hos phlox pyros* – ‘his eyes like fire.’ This descriptions of Christ appears in 1:14, and 2:18. Harrington observes that, like ‘faithful and true’ this offers a cross-reference and backwards glance to the letters – forging a unity to the work as a whole.484

5. *Epi ten kephalen autou diademata polla* – ‘upon his head (were) many crowns/diadems.’ Note that the word for ‘crown’ is *diadema,* a royal crown, and not *stephanos,* a crown/wreath of victory. The dragon wears seven such crowns, 12:3, and the beast ten, 13:1. The ‘many crowns’ of the horseman represent royalty beyond any earthly rule – he is ‘King of kings’ and ‘Lord of lords’ (see v. 16).

6. *Echon onoma gegrammenon* – ‘having a name having been written.’ There is both a similarity and contrast between the ‘written name’ of the Christ and the name of the whore written on her forehead, the seal on the foreheads of the 144,000 and those bearing the seal of the beast. The contrast is that no one knows this name other than the horseman himself. In ancient Hebrew thought the ‘name’ is equivalent with the person. To give a name to someone, even to know the name of someone essentially gives the one who knows power or control over the one named. Note that in the Genesis account of

481 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
creation, *ha adam*, ‘the man’ is given authority to ‘name’ all the creatures of the earth. He is given control, dominion over them. But this name, no one knows. No one has higher authority than the Christ.

7. *Peribeblenenos imation bebammenon haimati* – ‘having been clothed/having clothed himself with a garment having been dipped in blood.’ Harrington concludes that this image is drawn from Is 63:1-3. This is the same image that was deployed to describe God’s judgment in the vision of the Vintage (see note #6, p. 276).

8. *Ho Logos tou Theou* – ‘the Word of God.’ Harrington finds here an allusion to Wis 18:15 – ‘Your all-powerful word leaped from the heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior.’ In context, the stern warrior had come down from heaven to destroy the first born of the Egyptians. In this case, Egypt, like Babylon, stands for Rome. Beyond this, it seems impossible not to find an allusion to the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel – ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (Jn 1:1-5).

9. *Strateumate ta in to ourano* – ‘the armies that are in heaven.’ While it is possible to think of the heavenly army as the angelic hosts, this ‘army’ refers to the ‘called and chosen and faithful’ of 17:14. It was noted there that these were ‘companions’ and ‘followers’ of the Lamb, not combatants. This vast host ‘overcomes’ the world not with strength of arms, but with faith and patient endurance. They are clothed in fine linen, as was the ‘bride’ in vv. 7-8, where it is explicitly stated that the fine, bright/white linen was the righteous/just deeds of God’s people.

10. *Ek tou stomatos autou ekporeuetai rhomphaia oxeia* – ‘and from his mouth goes forth a sharp sword.’ This image mirrors the image of the ‘son of man’ in the inaugural vision. There the ‘sword’ was specifically characterized as a two-edged sword (see note #16, p. 28). In the portrayal of the Christ, here, he is specifically named the Word of God and it is likely that the image of the sword associated with the Word of God reflects Heb 4:12 – ‘Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joings from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.’

11. *Pataxe ta ethne kai autos poimanei autous en rhabdo sidera* – ‘he might strike down the nations and he himself shepherd them with an iron rod.’ This image has been used twice before, in 2:27 where it applies to Christ (see note #20, p 65) and in 12:5 where it applies to the child born to th woman and, by implication to the faithful who ‘overcome’ the world and share in Christ’s rule (see note #11, p. 212). The recurring theme suggests that the rule of God and his Christ is a guiding, merciful rule, but also a rule that requires strict discipline – for the sake of the sheep, for the sake of those ruled.

12. *Patei ten lenon tou oinou tou thymou tes orges tou theou* – ‘he treads the winepress of the passion of the wrath of God.’ This image is a combination of the image of the ‘cup of God’s wrath,’ 14:10 (see note #8, p. 262 and #10, p. 262) and the winepress, 14:19 (see note #6, p276). The cup of God’s wrath is an exact answer to the intoxicating seduction of the cup from which Whore Babylon gave to all the nations to drink; the treading of the winepress is also an exact and reciprocal punishment on those who fall prey to the allure of the ‘beast.’

13. *Basileus basileon kai kyrios Kyron* – ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’ This is not the secret name of v 12. In the Old Testament, ‘Gird your sword on your thigh’ and ‘Gird up your loins’ were calls to action, calls to battle. In place of the sword, the Christ has titles of power written on his thigh and the garment covering it. His supremacy does not require a weapon. His ‘sword’ is the Word of God. While the title is not the secret name – no one can know it, can have control over the ‘King of kings’ – it is another polemic challenge to the authority of the Roman emperors and, by extension, all corrupt worldly rulers.

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486 NRSV translation.
487 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
488 NRSV translation.
489 NRSV translation.
14. *Eidon hena angelon hestota en to helio* – ‘I saw one angel standing in the sun.’ On several occasions in the visions of Revelation, the proclaiming angel has ‘taken a stand.’ These positions have always served a symbolic purpose – one foot on the sea, one on the land, the right hand extended to heaven; on the shore of the Euphrates; flying in the mid-heaven. Typically, the symbolic importance of the positions draw on creation imagery. On the fourth day of creation, Gn 1:14-19, God created the greater light, the sun, to rule the day and the lesser lights, the moon and stars, to rule the night. When this imagery is combined with the dualism of good and evil, light and darkness, life and death, characteristic of apocalyptic writing, the ‘works’ of the beast and his minions are seen in the light for what they are and the angel, standing in the sun commands the birds to feast on the defeat of the forces of evil. Light conquers darkness.

15. *Legon pasin tois orneois... deute synachthete eis to deipnon to mega tou theou* – ‘saying to all the birds... Come! Gather yourselves to the great supper of God.’ Harrington observes that this image is derived from Ezekiel where the destruction of the forces of God, king of Magog, is pictures as a sacrificial feast – ‘As for you, mortal (son of man), thus says the Lord God: Speak to the birds of every kind and to all the wild animals, “Assemble and come, gather from all around to the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you, a great sacrificial fest on the mountains of Israel, and you shall eat flesh and drink blood. You shall eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the princes of the earth – of rams, of lambs, and of goats, of bulls, all of them fatlings of Bashan. You shall eat fat until you are filled, and drink blood until you are drunk, at the sacrificial east that I am preparing for you. And you shall be filled at my table with horses and charioteers, with warriors and all kinds of soldiers, says the Lord God.’” (Ezek 39:17-20). As in Ezekiel, the proclamation here is the announcement of the final battle.

16. *Phagete sarkas* – ‘you might eat the flesh.’ The image here represents a reversal of the image of the two witnesses left dishonored in the street. As was the case with Jezebel, leaving dead bodies unburied and as prey to carrion birds and beasts was considered a great dishonor. There is a sense of finality to this gruesome image – not only have the powers of the world been defeated, they have been seen for what they really are and are so dishonored that no one would want to ‘resurrect’ what they stand for.

17. *Eidon to therion kai tous basileis tes ges kai ta strateumata auton synegmena* – ‘I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies having been gathered together.’ The ‘kings of the earth’ are all the forces of worldly power who have been mustered for the final battle with the Lamb at Armageddon. Rogers and Rogers again note the symbolic value of Armageddon. The beast, the political leader described in ch. 13, assembles his forces for war and the battle is to take place at the hill/mountain of Meggido overlooking the fertile valley of Jezreel. Megiddo was the important stronghold guarding not only the valley, but also the famous trade route, the *Via Maris*, from Egypt to Damascus.

18. *Epiasthe to therion kai met’ autou ho pseudoprophetes... zontes eblethesan hoi dyo eis ten limnen tou pyros tes kaiomenes en theio* – ‘And was captured the beast and with him the false prophet... and living/being alive the two were cast into the lake of fire, the one burning with brimstone.’ Harrington observes that, for all the great build-up to the battle at Armageddon, victory is immediate and total. The beast and the false prophet, the two beasts of ch 13, are not cast into the bottomless pit, the abyss. It is a place of detention, but rather into the lake of fire, the place of final punishment. The association of the lake of fire with the ‘final death’ will be taken up in ch. 20.

19. *Hoi loipoi apektanthesan en te rhomphaia tou kathemenou epi tou hippou* – ‘the rest were slain with the sword of the one sitting upon the horse.’ ‘The rest’ are all those who have been deceived by the beast, who worshipped in and its image, who bore the mark of the beast. They are slain by the sword that came out of the mouth of the one sitting on the white horse – that is, they were slain by the Word of God. Once again it is the Christ who ‘wins the battle.’ His army, the faithful, the holy ones, are merely with him. And the ‘sword,’ the overwhelming weapon that brings about the immediate defeat is the Word of God. In the face of God’s word of truth, the kings of the earth, their armies, those deceived by the beast are defeated and dishonored, left for the carrion birds.

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490 NRSV translation.

491 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

Commentary

The Book of Revelation is structured by a complex series of anticipations and retrospectives. The author introduces a theme, an image, and idea that is later developed and explained. The nature of the Christ, the essential nature of the Church, the community of the faithful witnesses, the prophetic holy ones, the inherent evil of self-serving, corrupt and greedy human power structures— all these are expanded and explored by looking back in the narrative, repeating words and phrases introduced earlier, and providing details about an ongoing conflict between good and evil, between the Word of God and the values of human self-sufficiency that are inimical to God’s Word.

As the reader approaches the end of the book, he is forced to recall the beginning. The first of the seven beatitudes is proclaimed by the voice of the omniscient narrator, the voice through whom we encounter the words of the ‘seer:’

‘Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and those paying attention (observing, keeping) to the things having been written in it, for the time is near.’ (1:3)

In this book, the reader can find the path to blessedness, to a fortunate, happy life, to a life lived as a holy one, as a witness, as a prophetic voice, as a follower of the Lamb. In the Inaugural Vision, the reader finds an image of what the Church is meant to be, a community of believers standing as lampstands in the presence of God, standing before the throne, a community of witnesses in whose midst the presence of Christ can be found. This ideal, presented at the beginning, is the goal towards which the whole narrative moves. But along the way there are problems. The Church finds itself in the middle of a world whose values conflict with God’s Word, a formative word that makes the Church what it is intended to be. The very existence of the Church is threatened. Along the way individual members of the Church face problems—making a living in a culture that demands the adoption of conflicting values, the allure of perceived comforts, benefits, advantages to those who embraces values contrary to God’s Word and will. And from the very beginning, the Church and her members are confronted with Christ’s rebuke:

However, I hold against you that your love, the first (= your first love) you have forsaken. Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen and change (turn back, repent) and do the first works; (2:4-5a)

With 19:11 the theme of ‘overcoming evil’ is brought to a rapid conclusion— the End of the Beasts, the End of Satan, and the Last Judgment. The pattern of ‘three’ is noticeable—a coming to completion in a short period of time. In Israel’s prophetic literature there is a recognizable pattern of three that also features in the Book of Revelation. In general, prophetic books feature oracles against Israel, oracles of God’s divine discipline to bring his people back to faithfulness. In the pattern of Crime-and-Punishment stories, when God’s people ‘turn back,’ when they realize their unfaithfulness, God’s mercy prevails. In prophetic literature this is carried in oracles pronounced against the foreign nations, the nations God has used to discipline his unfaithful people. In the end, there are oracles, promises, of salvation and restoration, of starting over, of returning to the beginning with a new opportunity to live as God’s Covenant people. This pattern, in general, informs the narrative of Revelation.

The vision of the End of the Beasts focuses on the image of Christ. The heavens are thrown open, a sign that this vision is not reserved for the ‘seer,’ but is what all on earth should be able to see and
understand. Coming from the heavens is one seated on a white horse, white being the symbol for victory, one wearing many royal crowns, one proclaimed as ‘King of kings’ and “Lord of lords.’ As in Hebrew tradition where ‘hwh’ is the unutterable name of God, the name of the rider is a mystery, unknown to anyone but himself. From his mouth comes a sword with which he defeats the nations and kings of the earth and this ‘sword’ is identified as the Word of God. Everything in the description of the rider, the Christ, is familiar, symbols and images already used in the book. He comes to battle evil and he comes to judge the earth. His judgment, at this point in the book, is not so much condemnation and destruction, but ‘doing justice for,’ ‘setting things right.’

In the manner of a prophetic/apocalyptic ‘oracle of salvation’ a single angel takes his stand in the sun. Throughout the book, angels taking their stands have served to introduce particular proclamations of judgment, of God’s will for good. The positions they have taken have been symbolic, moving to a vision of all creation as one, complete whole – heaven, earth, seas. At the dawn of creation, God separated light from darkness and set the great light, the sun, in the sky to rule over the day and the lesser lights, the moon and stars, to rule over the night. In the dualistic perspective of apocalyptic literature, all of creation is divided into good and evil, light and darkness, life and death, justice and injustice. The angel takes his stand in the sun to proclaim life and light and truth and justice. He calls on the carrion birds of the heaven to feed on the dead bodies of the beasts and their followers, those who worshipped the beasts, their images, and bore their marks. Leaving the dead unburied as food for carrion birds and scavenging animals was the epitome of dishonor, disrespect. The powerful kings, their mighty armies, the great and small from the nations of the earth found ‘honor’ in darkness, in paying homage to evil and the sources of evil. The gruesome image of defiling the bodies of the dead functions merely to ‘shed light’ on what is really honorable, just and true. The command to the birds to share in the feast of God’s victory over evil, a victory won by the one riding the white horse, will be executed exactly at the end of this vision.

The vision moves from the highest heaven, from which the horseman appears bearing the Word of God, to the realm of creation where the angel takes a stand in the sun to illumine what is true on the earth. Finally the ‘seer’ looks to the earth where he sees the kings of the earth and their armies mustered for battle. The image is of Armageddon and the battle is of no importance or interest to the author at all. The result is a foregone conclusion. Nothing of the ‘battle’ is narrated, only its conclusion. The Beasts were captured and thrown into the ‘lake of fire’ – a divine passive. God overcomes evil. In the vision of the Final Judgment, the ‘lake of fire’ will be identified as ‘the second death,’ the final death from which there is no return, no opportunity for repentance, the final recompense for how one’s life has been lived.

In the end, ‘the rest,’ those of little consequence who followed and worshipped the beast will be slain by the one riding on the white horse, by the sword that comes out of his mouth. They will be defeated by the Word of God, a sharp sword that cuts to the heart of the matter, that opens up the true motivations and intentions of men and, defeated by God’s Word, they will be dishonored, seen for their true selves – self-serving, corrupt, unjust and oppressive – dead meat for scavengers.

The Book of Revelation begins with the proclamation of the ‘blessedness’ of those read and hear the words of the book and pay heed to them. An opening vision of what is possible then unfolds. This vision is followed by the Letters to the Seven Churches, messages that begin with the rebuke that the Church has abandoned its ‘first love,’ lost its initial fervor. After the Letters, the narrative unfolds with a series of images centering on God’s judgment of the created order, images that depict how alluring and intoxicating evil can be. Balanced against these images are images of faithful witnesses, holy ones,
prophetic voices who, by perseverance and patient endurance come to share the ‘victory of the Lamb.’

What is it, then, that the reader of the book is to understand? What are they to pay heed to and observe?

On January 28, 1986, 73 seconds into its mission, the space shuttle Challenger exploded. When you saw the television image of the explosion, what was your initial reaction? Over the course of the day, how many times did you see that image? By the end of the day, what was your reaction to seeing the image? Was it the same as the first time you saw it? On April 20, 1999, two students at Columbine high school, kill 12 students, one teacher, and wound more than 20 others before killing themselves in the school library. How did news of this tragedy impact you? On November 19 of the same year, a 12 year old student at Deming Middle School shot and killed a 13 year old classmate; on February 29, 2000 a six year old boy shoots and kills a classmate and Theo J. Buell school with a stolen gun kept in his home; on May 26, 2000, honor student Nathaniel Brazill shoots and kills his teacher on the last day of school at the Lake Worth Community Middle School; on March 5, 2001, Charles Williams opens fire in Santana High School, killing two and injuring thirteen others; on September 24, 2003, John McLaughlin, a freshman at Richland High School shoots and kills two classmates; on March 21, 2005, Jeff Weise shoots and kills his grandfather and a friend of his grandfather, then goes to the Red Lake Senior High School where he kills five students, a teacher, and a security guard; on November 8, 2005, Kenneth Bartley kills his assistant principal and two other administrators at Campbell County Comprehensive High School; on August 30, 2006, former student Alvaro Castillo kills his father then opens fire in the parking lot of Orange High School, wounding two – two pipe bombs and two rifles were found in the van he was driving; on October 2006, a 32 year old milk truck driver isolates girls in West Nickel Mines Amish School, killing five and wounding others before committing suicide; on April 16, 2007, 23 year old Seung-Hui Cho kills two in a Virginia Tech dormitory and later kills 30 in an academic building before turning a gun on himself; on February 14, 2008, a shooter enters a lecture hall on the Northern Illinois University Campus, killing 5 and wounding 18 before killing himself; on Oct 26, 2008, two students are shot and killed by intruders at the University of Central Arkansas; on February 27, 2012, three students are killed by T. J. Lane who opened fire in the cafeteria of Chardon High School; on December 14, 2012, Adam Lanza kills his mother and proceeds to Sandy Hook Elementary where he kills 26 people, 20 of whom are first graders, then kills himself; on June 7, 2013, John Zawahri, 23, kills his father and brother, sets their house on fire, and proceeds to Santa Monica College, randomly shooting cars, killing 3 and wounding others before his is killed by police; on October 21 2013, Jose Reyes, a student at Sparks Middle School shot and killed a teacher, wounded two students and took his own life; on June 10, 2014, a student at Reynolds High School killed another student and wounded a teacher. These made the news. Other than Columbine and Sandy Hook, how many do you remember? Do we become numb, inured to evil? Do we accept lies, theft, cheating, backstabbing because that’s how you get ahead in business? Because that’s how the game is play? Because everybody does it? Do we expect politicians and elected officials to lie? Is recreational sex acceptable? Understandable?

In terms of my relationship with God, my experience of faith and religion, what was ‘my first love?’ Has the fervor dimmed? Why? How easy is it to condone evil in our present world, to just ‘mind our own business’? What’s the price for resisting what is wrong, for refusing to go along with the crowd, for actually standing against the crowd? As the Book of Revelation is drawing to a close, what are the words I am to hear and heed? Can I comfortable live the message of Revelation in my world? In my church? In my home? It is a truism to say that you can’t recapture past feelings? Is regaining first ferver about recapturing initial feelings of faith and love of God? If not, what is it? How can I get there?
The End of Satan (20:1-10)

[Satan Bound]

20:1 And I saw an angel coming down out of the heaven, holding the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. 2And he exercised power over (seized) the dragon, the ancient serpent who is the Devil and Satan (the Adversary) and he bound him for a thousand years. 3And he hurled him into the abyss and shut (it) and sealed (it) over him so that he might not lead astray the nations any longer until should be completed the thousand years. After these things, it is necessary that he be loosed (set free) for a little time.

[Reign with Christ]

4And I saw thrones and they (those who) sat upon them and judgment was given to them and (I saw) the souls (life essence) of those beheaded because of the witness of Jesus and because of the word of God and those who did not worship (pay homage to) the beast nor its image and did not receive the mark upon the forehead and upon their hand and they lived (came to life) and they reigned with the Christ for a thousand years. 5And the rest of the dead did not come to life until should be completed the thousand years. This is the first resurrection. 6Blessed and holy are they having a share in the first resurrection; over them the second death does not have authority (power), but they will be priests of God and of the Christ and they will reign with him for the thousand years.

[End of the Dragon]

7And when the thousand years should be completed, the Satan will be set free from his prison 8and he will go forth to deceive (lead astray) the nations, those in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them to war, the number of whom (is) as the sand of the sea. 9And they came up upon the breadth of the earth, and they encircled the camp of the holy ones and the beloved city and fire came down out of the heaven and consumed them. 10And the devil, he leading them astray, was hurled into the lake of fire and brimstone (Sulphur), where also (are) the beast and the false prophet, and they will be tormented, day and night, to the ages of the ages.
[Textual Notes]

[Satan Bound]

1. *Eidon angelon katabainonta ek tou ouranou echonta ten klein tes abyssou kai halysin megalen* – ‘I saw an angel coming down from the heaven having the key of the abyss and a great chain.’ As is typical, ‘I saw’ introduces a new aspect of the unfolding vision; the object of sight, the ‘angel coming down from heaven’ serves the usual function of providing ‘authority’ for what the angel will say and do – he is a ‘messenger’ from the realms of God. The ‘key to the abyss’ appeared in the vision of the fifth trumpet where a star falls from the heavens and given to it (divine passive) was the key to the abyss. Opening the abyss unleashed the plague of locusts – a damning vision of the horrors of war. From that vision and 11:7, it appears that the ‘abyss’ is a place of detention for the forces of evil. It was by God’s design, that the abyss was opened so that God’s signs could be carried out. (see note #2, p. 160). The ‘great chain’ is a new element to the vision. In this case, the pit is not opened to unleash God’s judgment, but to chain up and imprison the dragon, Satan.

2. *Ekratesen ton drakonta ho ophis ho archaios hos estin diabolos kai ho satanas* – ‘he seized the dragon, the ancient serpent who is the devil and the Satan.’ This is nearly an exact verbal repetition of the description of the dragon cast out of heaven in 12:9. There, ‘deceiver of the whole world’ was added. It is likely omitted here because the role of the dragon as a deceiver has come to an end.

3. *Edesen auton chilia ete* – ‘he bound him for a thousand years.’ Harrington observes that ‘a thousand years’ is a symbolic number related to vv. 4-6. It is the ‘time’ between the ‘first death’ and the ‘second death,’ the fate of those who served evil at the ‘Final Judgment.’

4. *Ebalen auton eis ten abysson kai ekleisen kai esphragisen epano autou* – ‘he cast him into the abyss and shut and sealed (it) over him.’ The three verbs are indicative of the fact that the subjugation of the dragon is accomplished in short order. Combined with ‘he seized… he bound…’ there is a five-fold expression of verbs through which the dragon is completely dominated and rendered powerless. This may again recall the five-fold commands issued to humanity at the dawn of creation in which mankind is to fill and master the world of God’s creation. This pattern was repeated at the beginning of Exodus with the Israelites completely dominated by the corrupt power structure of Egypt. Here, the five-fold subjugation of the dragon signals a return to the pristine order of creation intended by God from the beginning.

Harrington observes that the three verbs, ‘cast down… shut… seal’ have a similar effect to the English expression, ‘signed, sealed, and delivered.’

5. *Hina me planes e eti ta ethne* – ‘that he might not and longer deceive the nations.’ This corresponds to the final element in the description of the dragon from 12:9. In the scene where the dragon is cast out of heaven, the names are coupled with his ultimate power – to deceive. He is hurled to the earth to carry out his evil designs. Here, the power of the dragon is separated from the description, the listing of names. Grammatically, there is an indication that the dragon has now been ‘stripped’ of his power.

6. *Dei lythenai auton micron chronon* – ‘it is necessary to release him for a short time.’ Harrington, following Swete, notes that *dei* – ‘it is necessary’ – regularly indicates the necessity of something according to the mystery of God’s plan. He is to be released, but only for a short time. This is a confusing image about which, perhaps, the best that can be done is to speculate. There is a ‘symbolic’ thousand year period between the binding of the dragon and the ‘Final Judgment’ at which time, the ‘rest of the dead’ will experience the ‘second death.’ Perhaps the dragon is released at this time only to share the fate of those who had been loyal to him.

[Reign with Christ]

7. *Eidon thronous kai ekathisan ep’ autous kai krima edothe autois* – ‘I saw thrones and they (those who) say on them and judgment was given to them.’ Harrington observes that this vision of thrones set up for ‘holy ones’ in the heavenly court is loosely connected to the vision of Dn 7. There, thrones are set up

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493 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
494 Ibid.
495 Ibid.
around the throne of the Ancient One who defeats the adversary of the 'holy ones' and judgment finally issues from both the throne of the Ancient One and the thrones surrounding his. He also notes the correspondence of this image with the promise that ends the Letter to the Church in Thyatira – ‘And the one persevering (overcoming) and keeping (observing, guarding) until the end my works, to him I will give authority over the nations and he will shepherd them with an iron staff; like earthenware vessels he breaks (crushes), 2:26-27, and the promise that ends the Letter to the Church in Laodicea – ‘The one being victorious (overcoming), I will give to him (allow him) to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat with my Father on his throne, 3:21.496

That the ‘victorious’ will share the rule of Christ has been a consistent them in Revelation. This is at least suggested in Rev 7, the Sealing of the Faithful and the Song of Victory. This is also the case with the vision of the Two Witnesses, 11:4-13, in which the ‘martyred’ are called to ‘Come up’ and take their place in heaven. The ‘victorious,’ those who ‘overcome’ are the faithful, the holy ones, the prophetic voices, those who have endured patiently, those who ‘testify’ to the truth.

8. *Kai kríma edothe autois* – ‘and judgment was given to them.’ The divine passive indicates that the judgment/right to judge has been granted to them by God. Harrington notes that the authority to judge mirrors the vision in Dn 7:22. He notes also that they will function as priests and kings in v. 6. What is presented here is the achievement of their true status as ‘victors.’497 (see Commentary p. 196 on the use of baptism imagery in the description of the Two Witnesses.)

9. *Ebasileusan meta tou christou chilia ete* – ‘they ruled with the Christ for a thousand years.’ The promise to the ‘victors’ is that they will share with Christ in his rule/reign. The long list of attributes of the ‘victorious’ reflects cumulative retrospective views of every instance in which the ‘victors,’ the ‘followers of the Lamb’ have been described. Specifically, εζεσαν, ‘they lived, came to life’ associates them with both the Lamb (1:18, 2:8) and the two, symbolic witnesses (11:11). Note that there is an immediate ‘reward’ for the ‘victorious,’ setting them apart from the ‘rest of the dead.’

Harrington observes that *ho christos*, ‘the Christ’ appears only four times in Revelation – 11:15, 12:10, 20:4 and 20:6. He suggests that each instance is probably a recollection of Ps 2:2 – the Lord’s Anointed, against whom the kings of the earth had conspired, has triumphed, and his victory assures that of his faithful. This certain accords with the constant theme in Revelation that the final victory has already taken place on the Cross of Jesus Christ.498

Rogers and Rogers note that the Rabbis made a distinction between the days of the Messiah and the eternal kingdom, and debated the length of days of the Messiah. Some said 600 years, others 1,000 years, still others 2,000 or 7,000 years. A very old tradition going back to Rabbi Elizer Hrykanus (about 90 AD) or earlier, taught that the rule of the Messiah was 1,000 years. This tradition is likely reflected in the Book of Revelation.499

10. *Hoi loipoi ton nekron ouk ezesan achri telesthe ta chilia ete* – ‘the rest of the dead did not live until should be completed the thousand years.’ In the dualistic thinking of apocalyptic literature, the dead are the faithful followers of the Lamb and ‘the rest.’ It’s an all-or-nothing proposition. Harrington observes that these are the dead who await the general resurrection dealt with in 20:12-13.500

11. *Haaute he anastasis he prote* – ‘This (is) the first resurrection.’ Harrington notes that the standard Jewish view was that of a general resurrection of the dead at the end. Revelation is alone in dealing with the idea of two resurrections. The ‘first resurrection’ means that the holy ones, the faithful witnesses, the followers of the Lamb already reign with Christ – the first-born of the dead. As such the millennium, the thousand years, is nothing other than a special resurrection of Christians that precedes the general resurrection of the dead.501

Rogers and Rogers note that Jewish tradition claimed there would be a resurrection of those in the land of

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499 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
500 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

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Israel, and after than a general resurrection for the Last Judgment. The idea here seems to correspond, to some extent, to the Jewish view, where the first resurrection refers to the resurrection of the righteous. Note how this idea will influence later Christian thought and teaching in which all the dead immediately enter, at least spiritually, into eternal life for reward, damnation, or temporary purification. At the final resurrection, the judgment will be physical and final in a new heaven and a new earth.

12. *Merarios kai agios ho echon meros en te anastasei te prote* – ‘Blessed and holy is he having a part/share in the first resurrection.’ It can be noted that the seven ‘beatitudes’ of Revelation are concentrated more towards the end of the book, focusing more on those who live in such a way as to ‘overcome’ the world and share the reign of Christ. It would appear significant that the ‘blessed/fortunate’ here are identified as ‘holy.’ The Hebrew concept of ‘holy’ primarily refers to ‘being set apart,’ ‘reserved for what is sacred, of God.’ The vessels in the temple are ‘set apart’ from the cups and plates used in homes for simple meals. The people of Israel are set apart for God, given a special mission by God to bring his ‘blessings’ to all the people of the world. They are a ‘holy’ nation. Those who have ‘overcome’ the world are ‘set apart’ to reign with Christ from heavenly thrones, separated from the rest who are marked from exclusion from the presence of God and his throne in the general resurrection.

13. *Epi touton ho deuteros thanatos ouk echet eouxian* – ‘over these the second death does not have authority.’ Already, in the conclusion to the Letter to the Smyrnians, the ‘second death’ is introduced. At that point in the book, it at least implies an eternal punishment, a ‘final death’ in the face of the light and life offered by Christ.

Harrington notes that the concept of a ‘second death’ is derived from images in Jer 51:39 and 57. Jeremiah warns that the inhabitants of Babylon, objects of divine chastisement, will sleep a perpetual sleep and not wake. While there was as yet no concept of eternal life and resurrection in Israel’s prophetic literature, the later *Targum of Jeremiah*, a Rabbinic paraphrase and interpretation of the book, written in Aramaic towards the end of the first century B.C., renders the phrase in the original Hebrew as ‘they shall die the second death and shall not live in the world to come.’ This means exclusion from the Resurrection; they will remain in the grave. The ‘second death’ is identified with the ‘lake of fire’ in 20:14 and 21:8. In all cases it means annihilation, or, at the very least, may justifiably be interpreted in that sense.

Rogers and Rogers suggest that the ‘second death’ may be a ‘spiritual death’ beyond physical death. They note that Rabbinical teaching said some would be excluded from the resurrection and be delivered over to eternal destruction, which amounted to the ‘second death.’

14. *Esontai hierois tou theou kai tou christou kai basileuou tin met’ autou* – ‘they will be priests of God and of the Christ and they will rule with him.’ In the New Testament, Christ is regularly presented as a ‘priest in the order of Melchisedek.’ It is significant that the name, Melchisedek, means ‘my king is righteous/just.’ In Israelite tradition, in the Deuteronomic history, Samuel is the last of the judges – a ruler; he is the first of Israel’s prophets – one who addresses God’s words to the people to correct their waywardness; and he offers sacrifices on behalf of the people – he functions as a priest. The Deuteronomic History makes clear that with the rise of kingship in Israel, these three offices can no longer be hold by a single person. There is an established system of checks and balances. With Christ, however, a ‘royal priesthood’ is established. He is the king who can offer fitting sacrifice to God because he rules with justice. This is a return to the original plan of creation where humanity is to have dominion over creation in such a way as to offer fitting service to God. The faithful who have died in Christ, then, are the first fruits of the redeemed. They take part in a privileged manner, in the royal priesthood of Christ and his followers – to offer fitting service to God by ruling with justice.

[End of the Dragon]

15. *Lythesetai ho satanos* – ‘the satan will be set loose.’ Harrington writes that the purpose of setting Satan free is so that he can instigate and be defeated in the following verses. This battle is the same as the battle referenced in 19:11-21 – the battle at Armageddon. There are four references to this

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502 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
503 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
504 Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
eschatological battle in the book – 16:12-16, 17:14, 19:11-21, and 20:7-20. This fits the pattern of anticipations and retrospective view that is characteristic of Revelation. This same pattern can be observed with the several references to the destruction of Rome – 14:8, 16:19, 17:16-17, and 18:21, as well as descriptions of the final judgment in 14:14-20 and 20:11-15.\(^{505}\) Beyond these observations by Harrington, it is worth noting the overlapping of these themes in which they are played off against each other and, ultimately, seen as part of a broader whole – the resolution of the conflict between good and evil in all its aspects. It can also be noted that the setting loose of Satan serves to highlight a last, great act of defiance, an act of utter futility.

16. *Exeleusetai planesai ta ethne* – ‘he will go forth to deceive the nations.’ The ‘Satan’ is uniformly characterized as the ‘deceiver’ throughout biblical literature. In 20:3, the ‘Satan’ is bound in the abyss so as not to be able to lead astray or deceive the nations until the thousand years should be complete (see note #5, p. 352.) In another purpose clause, he is let loose for the explicit purpose of deceiving the nations. This ‘deception’ proves to be a rallying of those who would still choose to stand against God and his will for justice and good, and it results in the final destruction of such evil.

17. *En tais tessarsin goniais tes ges* – ‘in/to the four corners of the earth.’ In 7:1, four angels were dispatched to take their stand at the four corners of the earth in preparation for unleashing destructive winds (see notes #2-4, p. 137). In the same way it appears that the ‘Satan’ exercises his decelption to the four corners of the earth to muster to his cause the destructive forces, the warlike kings from the ends/corners of the earth.

Harrington also observes that the image likely drawn on Ezek 7:2 – ‘An end! The end has come upon the corners of the earth.’\(^{506}\)

18. *Gog kai magog* – ‘Gog and Magog.’ Ezekiel 38-39 envision the destruction of Gog, the king of the land of Magog. That is likely in mind here, but, as the king and kingdom in Ezekiel represented the ultimate enemy of God, later tradition reflects these names as two rulers, two evil enemies of God and his will.

19. *Synagagein autous eis ton polemon* – ‘to gather them for war/battle.’ Again, what is envisioned is the mustering of the kings of the earth for the great battle between good and evil at Armageddon. (see note #5, p 299).

20. *Arithmos auton hos he ammos tes thalasses* – ‘the number of them (is) like the sand of the sea.’ The phrase, ‘their number (is) as the sand of the sea’ reverberates throughout biblical literature. In the first place it is reflected in God’s promises to the patriarchs where he promises to make their descendants as numerous as the sands on the shore of the sea. In a second way, the phrase is used to suggest the vast hosts from time to time arrayed against Israel. Typically, in the battle stories of the Deuteronomic History, it is God who wins the battle and the vastness of the enemy demonstrates the overwhelming power of God and his intimate care for his people – a vast enemy mustering against God’s people is but a sign of God’s mercy and care. It cannot stand before him.

21. *Anebesan epi to platos tes ges* – ‘the marched up the breadth of the earth.’ Harrington notes that this image of Israel’s enemies is common enough, reflected in Ezek 38:18, 21-22; Hab 1:6; and II Kings 1:12. More particularly, he cites I Enoch 56:6-7 as a likely source for this image – ‘And they will go up and trample upon the land of my elect ones... But the city of my righteous ones will become an obstacle to their horses.’\(^{507}\)

22. *Ekykleusan ten parembolen ton agion kai ten polin egapemenen* – ‘they encircled/surrounded the camp of the holy ones and the city having been loved.’ Harrington writes that the two terms, ‘camp of the holy ones,’ Palestine, and ‘beloved city,’ Jerusalem, both represent the people of God. Moreover, ‘camp’ is the word used in Exodus for Israel’s wilderness home. This suggests that the Church, like former Israel which represents it, is still a pilgrim Church, a community ‘on the way.’ Also, the ‘beloved city,’ the Church, the ‘bride of Christ’ stands in contrast to the ‘great city,’ Babylon, the whore. The ‘beloved city’ is here also an anticipation of the ‘New Jerusalem.’\(^{508}\)

\(^{505}\) Wildrid Harrington, *op. cit.*

\(^{506}\) Ibid.

\(^{507}\) Ibid.

\(^{508}\) Ibid.
23. *Katebe pyr ek tou ouranou kai katephagen autous* – ‘fire came from the heaven and consumed them.’ ‘Fire from heaven’ is a conventional biblical image for God’s power, his waging of war against evil. Again, the battle is won by God, not the military force of his elect people. The overcoming of evil is another example of God’s mercy.

Specifically, Harrington notes the correspondence of this phrase with II Kgs 1:10 – ‘The fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty,’ the captains and troops sent to arrest Elijah. Similarly, the destruction of Gog by fire from heaven, with the resurrection following immediately, 20:9, 11-15, corresponds to the *Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan* on Nm 11:26. An original of this Targum existed in the late first century BC, but the final form of the document dates from Medieval times. The pertinent passage reads – ‘And they (God and his forces) wage war in the land of Israel against the sons of the captivity. The Lord, however, is near them (the Israelites) in the hour of affliction and kills all of them by a burning breath, by a flame of fire, that goes out from beneath the throne of glory.’

24. *Ho diabolos ho planon autous eblethe eis ten limnen tou pyros kai theiou* – ‘the devil, the one deceiving them, was cast/hurled into the lake of fire and brimstone.’ The ‘lake of fire and brimstone’ is equated with the ‘second death.’ Note the three-fold repetition of ‘deceiver/deception.’ The great deceiver is first bound for a thousand years, then released to engage in one final deception. That final ‘deception’ is the last great act of defiance. Those who are deceived/choose the deception are subject to the final judgment and the second death. But in the end, so is the ‘Satan,’ being cast into the lake of fire with the two beasts forever.

Harrington observes that ‘for the ages of ages’ = ‘forever and ever’ is a ‘liturgical phrase. The image is highly ironic; the would-be deceiver and conqueror of God and his will for good, is conquered and this conquest gives glory to the God of heaven.’

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509 Ibid.
510 Ibid.
Commentary

Israel’s most ancient Wisdom traditions set out to examine the two ways, the way of righteousness/justice and the way of evil, the way of wisdom and the way of foolishness, the way of the godly and the way of the godless. Wisdom’s dualistic approach to life informed the worldview of apocalyptic writing. As the Book of Revelation draws to a close, the author describes the end of evil, the end of the beasts – the corruption and injustice of power structures based on the ‘ungodly’ values of the secular world, and the end of the ‘Satan,’ the great deceiver, the underlying force that is so opposed to God and his will for the good of all. In describing the inevitable end to all that is unjust, evil and ungodly, he forms a contrast with the fate of those who ‘overcome’ the world, those who reign with Christ. To understand and appreciate this contrast, the simple words of a wise father to his child at the beginning of the book of Proverbs are instructive:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
Hear, my child, your father’s instruction, and do not reject your mother’s teaching, for they are a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck.
My child, if sinners entire you, do not consent.
If they say, “Come with us. Let us lie in wait for blood; let us awantonly ambush the innocent; like Sheol let us swallow them alive and whole, like those who go down to the Pit. We shall find all kinds of costly things; we shall fill our houses with booty. Throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse” – my child, do not walk in their way, keep your feet from their paths; for their feet run to evil, and they hurry to shed blood. For in vain is the net baited while the bird is looking on; yet they lie in wait - to kill themselves! and set an ambush for their own lives. Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain; it takes away the life of its possessors. (Prv 1:7-19)  

The contents of Revelation 20 demonstrate the truth of this father’s words.

Rev 20:1-10 falls into three distinct sections: 1) The Binding of Satan; 2) Participation of Those Who ‘Overcome’ in the Reign of Christ; 3) The End of Satan/the Dragon. A key element in the section is the Thousand Year Reign of the Christ, the Messiah, before the final culmination of God’s plan for his created universe. The images are drawn from Jewish Messianic expectations. The coming of the long-awaited Messiah will usher in a long period of peace and justice (a thousand years) during which the forces of evil, the corrupt and self-serving power structures of the world will be subdued. When God is satisfied that his creation knows how to live in peace, knows how to promote what is just and good for all people, when all can live by faith and witness to the truth, the final, general resurrection will occur.

511 NRSV translation.
and the righteous will live in unity with God while those who choose to live selfishly, who choose to live for themselves rather than for God, will suffer the ‘second death,’ eternal separation from God.

For those who want to see the end of time and the Final Judgment as a cataclysmic wreaking of the righteous anger and vengeance of God on a fallen world, chapter 20 speaks an alternate view. The end of God’s plan is not to be ushered in with blazing anger and destruction, with is to be a transition to a ‘New Heaven’ and a ‘New Earth’ when the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ fully participate in the ‘Reign of Christ’ and are ready for resurrection, are ready for the transformation what will bring the just, the righteous, the holy ones into the presence of God in the ‘New Jerusalem.’

In the logic of Revelation, there has been a cosmic battle between good and evil. The Dragon, the Satan, the great ‘deceiver’ has been expelled from the heavens and given a limited time to work his deceptions on the earth. This is exactly the premise of the beginning of the Book of Job. God points out to ha Satan, the adversary, his servant, Job. There is no one like him on all the earth, blameless and upright, a man who ‘fears God,’ has a right relationship with him and turns away from evil. Against this, the adversary points out that Job is wealthy and comfortable, healthy – he enjoys God’s blessings. He lays before God a challenge: Let Job experience hardship and see if he remains blameless, see if he blesses God in hard times or if he will, instead, curse him. And the drama of the book begins.

This same drama is played out in the Fourth Gospel in which the author lays out seven possible responses to Jesus, ranging from a full and loving commitment to outright rejection. One of the possible responses is ‘Signs Faith,’ responding to Jesus when he acts to bless and benefit people, but turning away when they don’t get what they want. It’s the response of a ‘fair-weather friend.’ The same challenge is present in the Fourth Gospel as in Job: Can righteous servants of God remain blameless and turn away from evil in hard times, in times of suffering, or will they turn away to find relief, satisfaction, ease in the values and power structures of the world? Will they ‘fear God’ and embrace his son, or look elsewhere for comfort?

This same drama, a choice between two ways of living in the world, is at the center of the Book of Revelation. Will the Church, the followers of the Lamb, remain faithful and bear witness to the truth within in the context of the deceptions of the values of their world, the promises of the social, economic, cultural and political milieu in which the Church exists? The author of Revelation calls for a radical Christianity, a response of the Church that not only stands against the deceptions of the world, but in so doing even brings about more hurt and suffering and even death. Can the members of the Church embrace the option of Job? Can they endure when the ‘signs’ of God’s love and care are not obvious? Can they freely embrace a life of faithfulness, witness, endurance in the face of hardship? Can they ‘overcome’?

Within the logic of the drama, in the vision of the Fifth Trumpet, a star falls from heaven and was given the key to open the abyss and unleash the plague of warlike locusts. It was noted that the ‘fallen star’ likely represents the ‘fallen angels,’ the companions of the dragon in the cosmic battle. It appears that the abyss is a place of containment for the ‘fallen angels’ and forces of evil, a prison. With the two beasts, the one rising from the sea and representing the chaotic impulses of worldly drives for power, wealth, comfort, and domination, and the one rising from the earth, the false prophet, the representative of world leaders who enforce the false values, having been finally dispatched to the ‘second death,’ to the lake of fire, an angel descends from heaven with the authority of God to lock up the abyss, to ‘reverse’ in loosing of evil on the world. The dragon is bound and locked away for a
thousand years. The deceptions the dragon unleashed on the world are destroyed and the dragon is bound and contained.

The binding and containment of the dragon corresponds to the Messianic Reign, the millennium. This idea represents a refinement of older Jewish thought in which the coming of the Messiah would usher in the final consummation of God’s plan. The Messianic Reign represents an ‘in between’ time, a time of justice and right in preparation for the final consummation. In Christian tradition, the Messianic Age dawns with the birth of Jesus Christ. His sacrificial death on the cross and resurrection are the key events, in an apocalyptic framework, that change everything, that overcome the evil of the world and inaugurate the Reign of the Messiah. For the followers of the Christ, there is a price to pay for bringing about the Messianic Reign, a price paid in suffering, in blood. Many will suffer at the hands of those who wield power in the world, many will die because of their faithful witness to the truth of Jesus Christ, to the truth of God’s vision for his world.

The Book of Revelation draws a distinction between a ‘first’ and ‘second’ resurrection. This distinction is based on late Jewish tradition in which the people of Israel will rise first and share in the kingdom of God. There will be a later, general resurrection in which all those not of God’s people will rise to eternal punishment, eternal separation from God. Recalling the fate of the Two Witnesses, over whom the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ gloated, but who were called soon after their deaths to ‘come up’ and share in the heavenly court and liturgy, Revelation conceives of a first resurrection in which those who ‘overcome,’ those who are faithful witnesses will live/rise to be seated on thrones around the throne of God in heaven. They will share in the judgment and rule of the Christ. The description of those who have ‘overcome,’ who are included in the ‘first resurrection’ is detailed. It is the exact opposite of those who do not share in the ‘first resurrection,’ those who have worshipped the beast and its image and have born the beast’s mark. The ‘rest,’ those who did not follow the Lamb, those who did not ‘overcome’ the false allure of the deceiver, the beasts and the world, will live again at the final resurrection, after the thousand year reign of the Christ, but will live a life separated forever from God and his blessings – the ‘second death.’

20:6 records the fifth of the seven ‘Beatitudes’ in Revelation. It is significant, in this ‘blessing,’ that the blessed, the happyfortunate are identified with the ‘holy ones.’ It is important, here, to recall the concept of ‘holy’ in Hebrew tradition. ‘Be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy’ is a constant refrain in the Book of Leviticus, repeated six times. The Hebrew word for ‘holy’ is qadosh, rendered as hagios in Greek. The basic meaning of the word is ‘set apart,’ ‘separated from normal, secular use.’ The concept of ‘holiness’ is another means of dividing the world into two camps, the holy and the unholy, those set apart for God and those not. Those who are ‘set apart,’ will function as ‘priests;’ they will offer fitting service to God, not sacrificial animals, but, as with Christ, they will offer themselves in the service of God’s will and plan. And they will reign with the Christ for a thousand years. A constant image of right and just rule in Revelation has been ‘shepherding with an iron rod.’ This implies compassionate care for those ruled along with a strong sense of discipline. It implies a kind of ‘tough love,’ as a father would discipline his child. Rule is a kind of ‘shepherding,’ so it cannot be absolute domination, but real care for those ruled does also imply ruling with a strong hand to assure right and justice and peace.

An image of the Church, especially an image of the Church as she exists in the larger world, is beginning to take on some clarity. In the vision of Revelation, the Church has existed in the context of the world where the ‘Satan,’ the ‘Great Deceiver’ has been served by the beasts and together they allure the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ to choose what is evil, corrupt, self-serving and unrighteous/unjust. From the perspective of the author, that time is soon to end. Rome will fall by its own evil devices and the
deception of the Satan will be bound and locked away. That will usher in the thousand year rule of the Christ, the Messianic Age, a time to set things right in the world in preparation for the final resurrection, the final judgment on all those who have lived. This all sounds ideal, but Revelation also offers a reality check. Some, maybe many, among the inhabitants of the earth will look backwards to what was, to power and comforts and personal satisfactions that they had before and want to ‘re-create’ the past, to choose self-reliance and self-satisfaction over service to God and neighbor. They will choose to deceive themselves. The millennium is the time allotted to the Christ and to his holy ones to purify the world, to return things to the state that God intended at the dawn of creation. There is no place for a sense of ‘triumphalism’ in this vision, but only for a sense of dedication to serving God and others, for spreading the Good News, for ‘shepherding’ all of God’s people. It is a time of preparation for the end.

Beginning in 19:11, the vision of the End of Evil has unfolded from an initial observation that ‘the heaven had been opened’ and the rider on the white horse was seen. It has been noted that the open door, the open temple, the open heaven all imply that the vision is not reserved just for the ‘seer,’ but, in some way, is available for all to see. What all can perceive is an alternate view of reality, a second way on which to navigate through life. This alternate way, the way of the Christ, defeats the beasts and binds up the ‘Great Deceiver.’ At the end of the Messianic Age, at the end of the thousand year reign, the Satan is released. It would seem that the purpose for his release is not so much to challenge the authority of the Christ, to continue the battle between good and evil, but to give the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ who have chosen to ‘look back,’ to lust after former power, glory and wealth, one last chance to see the face of evil, one last chance to choose evil and self-interest over God and his plan for the good of all creation. There is a sense here that people are invited to look at the rider on the white horse, look at the face of the dragon and to choose.

In the end, it appears that the ‘Great Deceiver’ musters the remnants of the earth who have chosen self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency to what appears to be the ‘final battle,’ to be Armageddon. But this ‘battle’ has already played itself out; Christ has overcome the world. Those who surround the camp of the holy ones, who lay siege to the ‘beloved city’ engage in an exercise in futility. They are no threat at all and the Satan is quickly dispatched to the ‘lake of fire’ to join his servants, the beasts, for eternal torment.

We live in the Messianic Age. Whether our time continues to look for the end of the beasts and the dragon, or whether our time is characterized by the evil in the world of those who choose to look back to older, corrupt and self-serving possibilities makes little difference. We have a call to ‘rule’ with Christ, to shepherd our brothers and sisters with compassion and kindness, but to do so in a way that promotes peace, justice, equal sharing in the good things of creation, human dignity and mutual respect — and to do with strongly. It is our role to prepare all people for the end time, not by terrorizing them with images of divine vengeance, but with the Good News of the possibility of living together as the holy ones, those set apart of ‘bring God’s blessings to the nations of the earth.’

How do we live in this Messianic Age? Do we adopt a conspiracy of silence, concerned for ourselves, our own relationship with God, choosing to ignore and be apart from the world around us? Do we adopt the ‘live and let live’ option? Can that be an option for? Do we share the Good News? Do we present the world with an alternative possibility of living as followers of the Lamb? Do we ‘fight’ evil and injustice? Are we more concerned about the ‘iron rod,’ about forcing people to our way of living, our values? Or are we more concerned with ‘shepherding?’ Who would we choose as a model for shepherding with an iron rod? Why? What can we learn from that person or persons? Does the way we live prepare the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ for the final judgment? What responsibility do we have to do this?
11 And I saw a great white throne and the one sitting upon it, from whose face fled the earth and the heaven, and a place was not found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, having taken their stand before the throne and books were opened and another book was opened which is (the book) of life and the dead were judged from the things written in the books (scrolls) according to their works (deeds). 13 And the sea gave (up) the dead, those in it, and death and Hades gave (up) the dead, those in them, and they were judged, each according to their works (deeds). 14 And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire; this is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone was not found, having been written in the book of life (to have been written), he was hurled into the lake of fire.
Textual Notes

1. *Thronon megan leukon kai ton kathemenon ep’ auton* – ‘a great, white throne and the one sitting on it.’ Rogers and Rogers comment on the obvious: The great white throne marks the final judgment of the unbeliever and takes place after the millennial reign of Christ and the judgment of Satan. The absolute purity of this supreme court is symbolized by the white color of the throne. Rogers and Rogers, op. cit. Harrington observes an echo of 19:11, the appearance of a white horse and the one sitting upon it. Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.

The association of the white horse and its rider, the Christ, and the white throne at least makes it possible to understand this scene as the ‘Parousia,’ the second coming of Christ to judge the world, though Harrington would suggest that the one sitting on the throne is the Almighty Father.

2. *Hou apo tou prosopou ephyn gen he kai ho ouranos* – ‘from whose face fled the earth and the heaven.’ Harrington’s observations here are pertinent and illuminating. Earth and heaven (sky) flee from the presence of the judge; material creation itself has been contaminated by the sin of humankind (see Gen 3:17 and Rom 8:19-22). The old order must make way for a new creation (21:24-26). The boundaries of the old order disappear – there is nothing between men and God, no place to hide.

3. *Topos ouk eurethe autois* – ‘a place was not found for them.’ Citing a similar passage in Dn 2:35 – ‘... so that not a trace of them could be found,’ Harrington states that these words likewise could be rendered as ‘no trace of them could be found.’ The vanished sky and earth will be replaced by a new heaven and a new earth (21:1). Elsewhere, the New Testament speaks of a renewal or rebirth of creation (Mt 19:28), or the setting free of creation (Rom 8:21). One way or another, the old creation must be transformed in the new age: ‘heaven and earth will pass away’ (Mk 13:31). The vanishing of earth and sky before the judgment is also a feature of II Enoch 65:6 – ‘When the whole of creation, which the Lord has created, shall come to an end, and when each person will to the Lord’s great judgment.’

4. *Nekrous… estotas enopion tou thronou* – ‘the dead… standing before the throne.’ The vision is of the final judgment so the ‘dead’ are the ‘rest of the dead’ from v. 5. The ‘faithful’ have already been vindicated in the first resurrection.

5. *Biblia enoichthesan* – ‘books were opened.’ Rogers and Rogers observe that the sentence of the judge will rest on written evidence recorded in the ‘opened books.’ It is implied that these books contain a record of the deeds of the dead standing before the throne. Harrington considerably expands on this observation. He notes first of all that open books were presented to the Ancient One sitting on the throne of judgment (Dn 7:10). IV Ezra 6:20 states, ‘When the seal is placed upon the age which is to pass away, then I will show these signs: the books shall be opened before the firmament, and all shall see it together.’ In I Enoch 90:20, it is recorded: ‘he took all the sealed books and opened those very books in the presence of the Lord of the sheep.’ II Baruch 24:1 says: ‘For behold, the days are coming, and the books will be opened in which are written the sins of all those who have sinned.’

6. *Kai allon biblio enoixthe ho estin tes zoes* – ‘and another book was opened which is (that) of life.’ The ‘Book of Life’ has appeared several times in Revelation. It is the book in which is written the names of the faithful, the residents of the ‘heavenly Jerusalem.’ It appears that the other books, those in which the deeds of men are written, provide the criteria for whether one’s name is inscribed in the Book of Life. Rogers and Rogers, op. cit. Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.

7. *Edoken he thelassa tous nekrous tous en aute kai ho thanatos kai ho hades edokan tous nekrous tous in autois* – ‘the sea gave up the dead which (were) in it and death and hades gave up the dead which (were) in them.’ Harrington notes that the resurrection of the dead, the general resurrection, implied in v. 12 is described here. It was widely believed that those lost at sea had no access to Sheol, the realm of the dead, generally rendered by *hades* in Greek. In specifically referring to the sea, it is clear that what is
envisioned is the *general* resurrection. Death and Hades are personified. They appear as two voracious and insatiable monsters who have swallowed all past generations, but are now forced to disgorge their prey. That all the dead are judged each according to their works stresses personal responsibility. ‘The Devil made me do it!’ simply will not work. *Ha Satan* may be a great deceiver, but humanity has the means to discriminate between truth and lies, between honesty and deception. Those who have been deceived have chosen to be deceived.  

8. *Ho thanatos kai ho hades eblethesan eis ten limnen tou pyros* – ‘Death and Hades were hurled into the lake of fire.’ Being cast into the Lake of Fire is here identified as the ‘second death,’ eternal punishment. Harrington observes that the immersion of this symbolic pair in the Lake of Fire parallels that of the Beast and the False Prophet in 19:20. What is indicated is the annihilation of death itself. It can be noted that this triumph over death itself is an idea familiar from St. Paul. In I Cor 15:26, death is identified as the last enemy to be destroyed. See also I Cor 15:54-57, where Paul claims that death has been swallowed up in victory, that the sting of death is sin, but that sin has been defeated by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.  

518 Ibid.  
519 Ibid.
Commentary

The scene depicting the Last Judgment concerns 'the rest of the dead,' those not included in the 'first resurrection,' those who do not share in the reign of the Lamb. A key feature in the scene is the 'Book of Life.' The 'Book of Life' is mentioned five times in the Book of Revelation. It a five-fold use of the image is intentional, it is likely to suggest the Five Books of Moses, the Torah, that most sacred core of Hebrew Scripture. The books of the Law of Moses, in Jewish tradition, are the key source of 'life,' of living a right relationship with God. Again, if the five-fold use is intentional, it can suggest the five commands given to humanity at the dawn of creation. Those whose names are written in the 'Book of Life' are those who have fulfilled these commands, who have lived in accordance with God's plan for his created world.

The first use of the image comes in the concluding promise in the Letter to the Church in Sardis, 3:5. Christ promises that the 'victorious' will clothe himself in white garments and his name will not be erased from the 'Book of Life.' The implication would be that everyone's name is written in the 'Book of Life,' but, according to his deeds, it is possible for someone's name to be removed from the book. God's plan, his will is for the salvation of all. It is the actions, the way of life of individuals that determines whether their names remain in the book or are erased, whether they accept God's offer of love and salvation or reject it.

The next two appearances of the 'Book of Life' are in the image of the first beast, 13:8, and the vision of the Harlot and the Beast, 17:8. In both cases, it is noted that those who 'worship the beast' are those whose names have not been written in the 'Book of Life' from the foundation of the world. A cursory and uncritical reading of the text could suggest that there are those, from the beginning of time, who have been pre-destined to be damned. Such a reading, however, is diametrically opposed to the notion of salvation throughout the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. The image of the beast consistently includes its role as the 'deceiver,' the one who lures people to by 'intoxicating' means. This is the role of the serpent in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. From the foundation of the world, from the beginning of time, there have been those who have opted for the deception of evil, who have chosen to carry out works opposed to God's plan. The purpose of the stories of the Primeval History are to depict this inclination to evil from the very beginning – Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit; Cain kills his brother; the inhabitants of the earth have 'intercourse' with the 'gods,' again crossing boundaries, human limits; people gather in one place to create a self-sufficient society and build a great tower encroaching on the realms of heaven. They depict what went wrong with God's original plan for creation resulting in the need for God to choose a people, devoted to him, to get things back on the right track. In sum, from the start there have been those who have opted for deception, who have chosen to ignore God in favor of a set of human values that allow people to act as if they were gods, sufficient unto themselves. From the beginning, because of their choices and their deeds, their names were not included in the 'Book of Life.'

The fourth instance is 20:15, in the Last Judgment scene. Coupled with the ‘books’ in which the deeds of men are written, it becomes clear that inclusion in the 'Book of Life' depends on how people live, on whether their works are good or evil.

The final instance comes in the Vision of the New Jerusalem, 21:27. Only those whose names are written in the book will be allowed to enter the New Jerusalem.
The vision of the Last Judgment begins with the sight of a pure, white throne and the one sitting on it. This clearly recalls the image of a white horse and the one sitting on it in 19:11. In both instances, 'white' refers to what is pure, undefiled, wholesome and holy, set apart from evil. In both instances, the one sitting is the Christ. In the vision of the End of the Beasts, a sword came forth from the mouth of Christ, identified with the Word of God. By God's very Word, he judges, discriminates between good and evil. The sword of God's word cuts to the heart. In the final, general resurrection, Christ, wielding the Word of God, will separate the good from the bad, the good to enter into eternal bliss, the evil into eternal damnation (see Mt 25:31-46).

The image of the earth and sky fleeing before the presence of the one judging from the white throne is, again, reminiscent of the Adam and Eve story. After they had sinned, they attempted to hide from God in the Garden – to no avail. The image of the earth and sky fleeing removes the option of hiding from the inhabitants of the earth; there is 'literally' no place to hide from the justice of God.

Death is the great leveler. All die, the great and the small. Status, power, wealth – none of that matters. When all is stripped away, all people stand before the throne of God with nothing other than a record of their choices, with a record of how they have lived. The Book of Revelation is clear – death is not the end of the story, but a transition, a transition totally dependent on how one has lived, on the direction of one’s life. No matter their status in life, did they live for God or for themselves? Does the record of their deeds include them in or exclude them from the ‘Book of Life.’ The is the determining factor in the transition.

In the Last Judgment scene, the Sea, Death, and Hades (Greek)/Sheol (Hebrew) are all personified. Sheol, in Israelite thought, was the ‘abode of the dead.’ Before any concept of resurrection and an afterlife was developed, Sheol was conceived of as a place of rest after a long life well lived or a place of unrest for those who had not lived well. By the late second century BC, the concept of the afterlife and resurrection had developed in Wisdom and Rabbinic circles, though the Sadducees rejected this belief. Now Sheol was a ‘holding station’ for the dead until the final judgment.

It can be noted that there was an ancient belief that those who were lost at sea were denied entrance into Sheol/Hades. The image in the Last Judgment scene depicts Death, which claims all people, Sheol/Hades, the abode of the dead awaiting final judgment, and the Sea, which denies entrance into Sheol/Hades, all ‘give up’ their dead to the final judgment and with that, death itself is destroyed – hurled into the ‘Lake of Fire.’ With the Last Judgment, there will no longer be any death, physical death. There will be only the ‘two ways’ of living with God or in separation from him, the great transition from life to eternity. The ‘Lake of Fire’ is the ‘second death,’ the fate of those, who because of their recorded deeds, have been excluded from the ‘Book of Life.’

What is my image of standing before the Throne of Judgment? Is it something to be feared or anticipated with joy? What is the basis for judgment? Is it based on individual actions, any one of which could exclude me from the ‘Book of Life?’ Or is the ‘record of deeds’ cumulative? Are we judged by the general direction of our lives? Images of the ‘Last Judgment’ tend to be black and white, all or nothing. Is there room for God’s mercy in judging his people? Is my image of God more judgmental or merciful? Edward Schillebeeckx has suggested that if joy of eternal life with God is the fate of the faithful, for him it is inconceivable that an eternity of suffering and torture apart from is the fate of others. Eternal life is communion with God and its opposite is non-eternal life. The ‘second death’ means not entering into eternal life, passing from existence. Would I agree with this? Is it merely wishful thinking? Is it consistent with belief in the mercy of God?
The New Jerusalem

The New Heaven and Earth (21:1-8)

21:1 And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for indeed the first heaven and the first earth passed away (moved on) and the sea is no longer. 2And the holy city, the new Jerusalem, I saw coming down out of the heaven from God, having been prepared as a bride having been adorned for her bridegroom. 3And I heard a loud voice from the throne/heaven saying: Behold! The tent (tabernacle) of God with men and he will tabernacle (tent, dwell) with them and they will be his people and he will be God with them, their God. 4And he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death will no longer be, nor mourning, nor weeping, nor pain will there be any longer, for the first (former) things have passed away.

5And he said to me, he sitting upon the throne: Behold! I am making all things new; and he says: Write that these words are faithful and true. 6And he said to me: They have happened (These things are done). I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I, to the one thirsting, will give from the spring of the water of life freely (without cost). 7He being victorious (overcoming) will inherit these things and I will be for him God and he will be for me a son. 8But to the cowardly and the unfaithful and those having been defiled (having become an abomination) and murderers and fornicators (committers of sexual immorality) and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their share is in the lake burning in fire and brimstone, which is the second death.
Textual Notes

1. *Eidon ouranon kainon kai gen kainen gar protos ouranos kai he prote apelthan* – ‘I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.’ Rogers and Rogers note that in Rabbinical literature some taught that the world would be renovated and made new so that it would return to its original state after creation, cleansed from sin and evil. Others taught that the earth would return to the original chaos and would then be recreated with a new existence. Others taught that the earth would be completely destroyed and the new heaven and new earth would be a totally new creation. At this time the purpose and plan of God’s creating mankind will be fulfilled through redemption. Created in the image of God, mankind is to have unbroken fellowship with God, to rule the earth, and to be God’s representative on earth. Sin, however, did not allow these purposes to be completely realized; but the Messiah came as the Redeemer (*goel*) and paid the price for the release from the slavery of sin to restore the broken fellowship. Now he has defeated the enemies of God and restored the earth to God’s complete possession and provided for mankind to be the true representative of God on the new earth. Harrington cites a number of parallels to the idea of ‘a new heaven and a new earth.’ In Third Isaiah, 65:17 and 66:2, images of a new heaven and earth, in the context of the return from Exile and the restoration of Jerusalem, indicate a renewal of God’s created order, a new possibility for living God’s plan for creation. The image of the old heaven passing away and a new heaven appearing features in the apocalyptic writing of I Enoch (91:16). I Pet 3:10-13 offers a close parallel to the passage in I Enoch. Like the author of Revelation, the author of I Peter is sure that the end of this world will mark the emergence of the ‘new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells.’ Harrington, following Schillebeeckx, concludes that it will still be heaven and earth – a dwelling for humankind. The ‘new’ will be a transformation of the ‘old.’ It is not, and cannot be considered, as ‘another world.’ That would mean contempt for and rejection of the original good creation. It refers to our earthly world redeemed from being disordered.

2. *He Thalassa ouk estin eti* – ‘the sea was no more.’ Harrington concludes that the ‘sea’ refers to the primeval ocean, symbol of chaos; its disappearance is assurance of God’s total victory. He also cites Caird’s observation that the formula ‘was no more’ dismisses seven elements of the old order: sea, death, mourning, crying, pain, every accursed thing, and night (see 21:1, 4; 22:3, 5).

3. *Ten polin again ierousalem kainen eidon katabainousan ek tou ouranou apo tou theou* – ‘the holy city, the new Jerusalem, I saw coming down from the heaven from God.’ Harrington states that, structurally, 21:1-2 is modeled on Is 65:17-19: ‘For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.’ Both passages speak of the appearance of a new world, the disappearance of former things, and the manifestation of a New Jerusalem.

Recall that Jerusalem was a Jebusite city, belonging to neither of the tribal groups that would merge to form the nation of Israel. It was captured by David and made his capital – a shrewd political move in merging the tribes as it had not belonged to either tribal group. Traditionally, the name is taken to mean ‘the city of peace.’ It was on Jerusalem’s hill, named Mt. Zion, that the temple was built, the place where God chose to dwell with his people. As such, in Isaiah and other late prophetic writings, the idea of a ‘New Jerusalem’ indicated a restoration of the right relationship between God and his people. Harrington observes that the idea of a ‘New Jerusalem’ in Revelation and in other early Christian writings

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520 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
521 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
522 Ibid.
523 NRSV translation
524 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
becomes much more redemptive. She comes down from heaven, so the ‘New Jerusalem’ is of heavenly origin, built by God.  

4. *Hetoimassenen hos nymphen kekosmemenen to andri autes* – ‘having been prepared as/like a bride having been adorned for her husband.’

The image of the ‘bride’ was introduced in 19:7 in the call to rejoice at the wedding feast of the Lamb and the coming of the bride.

Harrington notes, in particular, that the image of the bride applied to Jerusalem is familiar from Is 61:10 – ‘He has clothed me with the garments of salvation... and as a bride adorns herself with jewels.’ In Third Isaiah, this is an image of the restoration. The double image of ‘city’ and of ‘bride’ is traditional and common. The image of ‘city’ comes from an apocalyptic strand going back to Ezekiel 40, the city being a personification of God’s people. The image of a ‘bride’ is frequent in both the Old and New Testaments. Again, for good or bad (in Hosea, the unfaithfulness of the prophet’s wife mirrors the unfaithfulness of God’s people), the image of the bride represents God’s people.  

Rogers and Rogers focus on the actual marriage imagery. In preparation for marriage and the arrival of the groom the bride was bathed and oiled, perfumed, her hair was fixed, and she was adorned with her wedding garment.  

Beyond these observations, it can again be noted that the two perfect participles are of mixed form – both passive and middle voice. The passive would imply the ‘divine passive’ by which God prepares and adorns the Church, the Bride of the Lamb, the people of God. The middle voice would mean that the ‘bride’ prepared and adorned herself. It is likely that the image draws on an interplay of both possible voices for the participle. It is through the instrumentality of God, that the Church is prepared to be the ‘bride of Christ,’ but this is not merely a passive acquiescence to the will of God; the ‘bride’ shares in the preparation, she accepts the ‘proposal,’ as it were, and readies herself. This is a somewhat constant theme in the Bible, that God chooses people to do his will, he chooses them to be free to serve him and to freely serve him. People respond by freely choosing. The reverse of the image is contained in the image of the wedding feast in Mt 22:11-12 – the man answering the king’s invitation to the wedding feast but coming unprepared, without a ‘wedding garment’ is then cast outside.

5. *Ekousa phones megales ek tou thronou legouses idou* – ‘I heard a great voice from the throne/heaven saying, Behold!’ The introduction to the message from the ‘voice from the throne/heaven’ deploys double literary features for pointing out that what is said is of significance. The first word of the message is ‘Behold!’ a common biblical indication of heightened or intensive perception, a change of viewpoint, a surprise, or the like. Combined with this, the author of Revelation regularly uses a ‘loud/strong/great voice’ to call attention to what follows. After all the horrific plagues and gruesome images, after all the statements of judgment, a sharp turn of focus now occurs, a perspective that looks at what is ‘new,’ how in the new age God will relate to his people.

6. *He skene tou theou meta ton anthropon kai skenosei met’ auton* – ‘the tent/tabernacle of God (is) with men and he will tent/tabernacle/settle down with them.’ Several things are immediately apparent. The word *skene* is used to describe the tent of meeting during the wilderness wanderings. Here, God was present to his people, through the mediation of Moses. In Jewish tradition, the basic plan of the moveable tents was the same plan used for the construction of the Jerusalem Temple on Mt. Zion – the place where God chose to dwell with his people. While the image certainly recalls the wilderness journey and the great Temple of Jerusalem, in this new age God’s presence is with ‘men,’ all men, not just his Chosen People. In the restored order of creation the relationship between God and all people is restored. The original plan of creation is in effect.

Rogers and Rogers note that the verb *skenoo*, ‘to tent,’ ‘to pitch one’s tent,’ implies, primarily, an abiding

525 Ibid.  
526 Ibid.  
527 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
presence with men. Harrington believes that this word and imagery may also recall the idea of the shekinah (see http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13537-shekinah)

7. Kai autoi laoi esontai kai autos ho theos met’auton estai, auton theos – ‘And they, his peoples will be and he himself the God with them will be, their God.’ The statement, in a variety of forms, ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’ is a motif running all through the Old Testament. It first appears in the promises to the Patriarchs. These are a three-fold promise combined with a commission, a responsibility laid upon the recipients of the promise: 1) I will make your descendents numerous; 2) I will give you the land of your sojourning; 3) I will be your God and you will be my people. These promises are followed by a commission: In you all the nations of the earth will find blessing. The promises refer to social well being – becoming a numerous people, physical well being – having a homeland, and spiritual well being – having a unique relationship with God. The motif is also repeated in Israel’s legal traditions, providing the basis for Israel’s ‘covenant relationship’ with God, especially in Leviticus. It also appears in prophetic writings, especially in the later prophetic writings which envision the restoration of Israel. The basis of the restoration is to be a renewed relationship with God, a purified relationship.

A number of scholars note the unusual plural form of laos, ‘people,’ and argue for emending the text in line with variant manuscripts which substitute the usual singular form of the word. The overwhelming evidence of serious text-critical studies does not allow for making such a change in the received text. Further, internal features of the text, the ‘loud voice’ and the use of the command, ‘Behold!’ alert the reader to look for something new, something different, something novel. This ‘new’ and ‘surprising’ element is to be found precisely in the plural form of laos. The dwelling of God is with ‘men,’ all men. He will be their God and they will be his peoples – not a single, Chosen People commissioned to bring God’s blessings to all the nations of the earth, but all the nations of the earth, all the nations and tribes, and peoples and tongues united in one relationship with one God making his abiding presence available to all. This is the ‘new heaven and new earth.’

8. Exaleipsei ton dakryon… ho thanatos ouk estai… oute penthos oute krate oute pone ouk estai… ta prota apelthan – he will wipe away the tear… death will not be… nor mourning nor crying nor pain… the first(former) things have gone/passed away.’ Harrington observes a contrast and a pattern in these words. First, there is a contrast to the fate of Babylon. If, in her, the sounds of Joy have ceased forever (18:22), in the ‘New Jerusalem,’ sorrow and pain will have no place. Second, he sees in these reversals a fulfillment of the Beatitudes in Matthew. It might perhaps be better to suggest that the overall imagery draws more on Luke who divides the ‘Beatitudes’ into five ‘blessings’ and five ‘woes’ – the blessings on the New Jerusalem and the woes on the old order, the rule of Babylon/Rome. Once again a pattern of ‘five’ is apparent, recalling the five verbs of command from the creation story: ‘Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it and have dominion over it.’ Tellingly, at the beginning of Exodus (1:7), the Israelites in Egypt had been fruitful and multiplied, were prolific, they grew strong and the land was filled with them. There is a five-fold pattern of verbs, but there is no indication of the Israelites having any power, of subduing and having dominion. In large part, this represents the situation of the Church in the late first century Roman Empire. Another five fold pattern of verbs is used to launch the story of Israel’s origins as a nation in Exodus (2:23-24), ‘The cry of the slaves rose up… God heard the groaning… God remembered his covenant… he looked on the Israelites… and God knew…’ Significant in this sequence is God’s remembrance, making his covenant with Israel present and effective again, and that he ‘knew.’ In Exodus, ‘to know’ always leads to live, ‘not knowing’ always leads to death. God’s five-fold pattern initiates a process of freeing his people for the purpose of serving him, a process that includes the multiplication of God’s ‘signs,’ just as they have been multiplied in Revelation. The five-fold pattern of God’s actions in 21:4 represents the culmination of God’s action, not only on behalf of the Church, his people, but for the sake of all people so that the original design of creation can be fulfilled.

528 Ibid.
529 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
530 Ibid.
9. *Eipen ho kathemonos epi to throno idou kaina poio panta* – ‘the one sitting on the throne said: Behold! I am making all things new.’ A typical feature of apocalyptic writing is the expectation that God will intervene and act decisively in the history of mankind, overthrowing and destroying the old, evil order and establishing a new order, a new creation, as it were in which the downtrodden are on top and the oppressors are crushed. Significantly, God does not say, ‘I am making new things,’ but ‘I am making all things new.’ Contrary to the apocalyptic expectation that God will tear all things down and start over, what is implied here is a restoration, a renovation. God is bringing all things back into alignment with his original design for creation – a creation in which all ‘peoples’ are in a right relationship with him. There is a universal outlook here, worthy of an Isaiah or a Luke.

10. *Kai legei grapson – And he says, Write!* Many biblical commentators have wasted lots of paper and ink debating whether or not ‘and he says’ represents a new voice speaking to the ‘seer.’ In ancient narratives, very common in biblical narratives, characterization is accomplished in conversation, in what the speakers say and how they interact with each other. In a conversation, repetitions of ‘he said’ with no response on the part of the person being addressed, introduce the ‘pregnant pause.’ In note #5, it was suggested that the ‘loud voice’ and the use of ‘Behold!’ were indications that what was about to be spoken would offer a new perspective, that it might be surprising. In note #9 it was noted that ‘Behold!’ made what was new, different, unexpected clear. God did not follow the apocalyptic expectation of destroying everything and starting over. He made all things new, fresh, renovated, restored. This restoration included all ‘peoples,’ not only the ‘Chosen Ones.’ In a conversational mode, the one hearing these words is dumbfounded, struck speechless. (Note the ‘Covenant with Abraham’ in Genesis 17. Three times it is noted that ‘God said...’ (vv. 3, 9, and 15). Abraham is now 99 years old and God promises that he will father a multitude of nations, commands him to circumcise all of his male descendants, and that Sarah, known to be barren, will have a child. Through all of this, Abraham is speechless and at the end of God’s three-fold speech, he falls on his face and laughs. For him, there is a utter sense of incredulity. What he hears is too good to be true. How can he possibly respond?) The same kind of incredulity comes into play here. In this case, however, it appears that the ‘seer’ is dumbfounded by the inclusiveness of God’s plan to make all things new, much as Jonah is dumbfounded and even angered when the Assyrians repent and experience God’s mercy. In much the same was as Jonah was ‘coerced’ to carry out his mission to Nineveh, the ‘seer,’ struck speechless by the unexpected inclusiveness of God’s restoration, is commanded, ‘Write this down! Whether you like it is not, this is what I want to say. This is what I want recorded for people to read.’ Contrary to what the ‘seer’ may have expected, the words God has spoken are ‘faithful and true’ a recurring phrase in Revelation and a characterization of its whole content.

11. *Kai eipen moi gegonan – and he said to me: It is finished/done/completed/has happened.* It can again be noted that ‘he said’ has met with no response on the part of the ‘seer’ to the command to ‘Write!’ There is a sense of solemnity and finality to the perfect tense of the verb used. There is correspondence to the solemnity and finality here and with Jesus final words on the Cross in the Fourth Gospel: ‘After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished (tetelastai), he said, in order to fulfill (teleiothe) the scripture: I am thirsty. A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said: It is finished (tetelstai). Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.’ (Jn 19:28-30)

Note that the word for ‘being finished/fulfilled’ used in the Gospel is teleo. This verb carries the sense of ‘accomplishment,’ of ‘completing’ what one set out to do. The verb used here is ginomai – ‘to happen,’ ‘to become.’ Teleo carries a sense of finality while ginomai connotes more of a sense of ‘coming into being,’ ‘that which has happened/been finished that endures, impacts the present moment.’ It is a subtle difference. In the logic of Revelation, the decisive event that changes everything has already happened in the Cross of Jesus Christ. It is ‘finished.’ ‘It has happened,’ ‘it has become,’ in the present context suggests that the ‘end’ of Christ mission and ministry ushered in the Messianic age – the thousand years. At the end of the Messianic age, and with the Final Judgment, everything has been ‘fulfilled/completed’ having the effect of inaugurating the ‘Kingdom of God,’ the present and eternal reality of the ‘New

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531 NRSV translation.
Heaven and New Earth,’ the ‘New Jerusalem.’ This subtle distinction is the same as was seen in the use of the verb, ‘to rule,’ ‘be king.’ In the aorist (past) and perfect tenses this, by context, can connote a past exercise of rule/kingship – Nero ruled from 54 to 68 AD. In other contexts, the aorist (past) and perfect tenses of the verb can mean, ‘he began to rule,’ ‘he assumed the throne/rule,’ a past action with implications for the present.

12. Ego eimi ho alpha kia to o he arche kai ho telos – ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.’ Recall 1:8 – ‘I am the Alpha and the Omege, says the Lord, God, the One who is and he who was and the one who is coming, the Almighty.’ Words that were used at the beginning of the book are repeated – with variation – at the end. There is a sense of closure. At the beginning, God makes a claim; at the end that claim is verified and validated. What ‘has happened,’ what ‘has become’ proves his claim. It is to be noted that some manuscripts eliminate the verb eimi, ‘to be’ in the first person, singular, indicative, present. The best manuscript traditions include it. The use of the personal pronoun with the verb is emphatic – ‘I myself am.’ Ego eimi statements are used in the Fourth Gospel by Jesus in making statements about himself. On the surface, these are simply emphatic statements. However, it is also an allusion to hwh, the ancient Hebrew name for God. The statement is a claim to divinity. (See Ex 3:13-14 – “But Moses said to God: If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses: I am Who I am. He said further: Thus you shall say to the Israelites: I am has sent me to you.”

A number of scholars follow the variant reading of 1:8 and include ‘the beginning and the end.’ It was noted that the best manuscript evidence does not include the phrase in 1:8. Most commentators understand ‘Alpha’ and ‘Omega’ in the light of ‘the beginning and the end’ as a temporal reference. This God is the God of all time; his rule totally encompasses human history. The idea that God totally encompasses human history is certainly reflected in the text. ‘The one who is and he who was and the one who is coming’ at the beginning of the book is ‘the beginning and the end’ at the end. Notice the subtle change from beginning to end. ‘The One who is coming’ suggests that the story is not over and, in Christian tradition, there was always an expectation of the Parousia, of the coming of Christ to judge the world and usher in the final establishment of God’s kingdom. At the end, this has happened. God has come. He is now ‘the beginning and the end.’ The New Heaven and New Earth have been established. Symbolically, ‘Alpha’ and ‘Omega,’ the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet can suggest this temporal ‘completeness’ of God. Beyond this, it is to be noted that the author of Revelation likes multi-layered symbols. The first of the seven Beatitudes in Revelation comes at the very start of the book, 1:3 – ‘Blessed is he who reads and those hear the words of the prophecy and those paying attention to the things having been written in it.’ Throughout the book the words of God are characterized as ‘faithful’ and ‘true.’ God reveals himself in his words – ultimately in his son, the word made flesh. Words are composed of letters; God, revealed in his Word, is the ‘Alpha’ and the ‘Omega.’ His ‘word’ is total and complete. He says all that needs to be said, all that can be said. The implication is that Christians have been given everything they need to live a faithful and true relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Read the Book!

13. Ego to dipsonti doso ek tes peges tou hydatos tes zoes dorean – ‘I, to the thirsty, will give from the spring of the water of life freely.’ Once again the use of the person pronoun ego, ‘I,’ is emphatic. This suggests a contrast with all that has gone before. All the powers of the world have been portrayed as greedy, as taking from those ruled what they want to live lavishly. This God, on the other hand, gives freely, without cost, from the refreshing streams of water – the source of life. Harrington cites Is 55:1 as the source of the image: ‘Every one who thirst, come to the waters; and he has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.’ It is to be noted that this image from Isaiah is used to describe the ideal conditions of the Messianic Age. This image was anticipated in 7:16-17 in the Song of Victory: ‘Not will they be hungry any more nor will they thirst anymore and indeed not should fall upon them the sun nor any scorching (heat), for the lamb in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them along the way to living fountains (springs) of waters and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’ This again provides a sense of closure in a

532 NRSV translation.
promise/fulfillment pattern. Harrington further notes that the idea of ‘freely, without cost’ suggests ‘giftedness’ consistent with Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith. (See Rom 3:24 – ‘They are justified by his grace as a gift (dorean).’) It can also be noted that ‘water of life’ always suggests baptism, dying and rising with Christ, and entering the community of God’s people, the Church. In particular, recall Jesus’ words to the Samaritan woman: ‘Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ (Jn 4:14) Ho nikòn kleronomèsei taúta – ‘the victor/one overcoming will inherit these things.’ Harrington observes that the promise to the victor recalls the promises made in each of the Seven Letters – the antecedent of ‘these things.’

The seven promises are:

a. EPHESUS: To the victor, I will give to him to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.
b. SMYRNA: The victor, surely not will he be harmed by the second death.
c. PERGAMUM: To the one enduring, I will give to him (some) of the manna having been hidden and I will give to him a white stone and upon the stone (will be) a new name having been written which no one has known except him receiving it.
d. THYATIRA: And the one being victorious and keeping my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations and he will shepherd them with an iron staff; like earthenware vessels he crushes (them); just as even I have received from my father I will give to him the morning star.
e. SARDIS: He being victorious thus will clothe himself in white garments and surely I will not wipe out his name from the Book of Life and I will acknowledge his name before my Father and before his angels.
f. PHILADELPHIA: The one being victorious, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God and surely he will not go forth outside anymore and I will write upon him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, Jerusalem, that coming down from the heaven from my God and my new name.
g. LAODICEA: The one being victorious, I will give (grant) to him to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat with my father upon his throne.

15. Harrington also observes that the idea of ‘inheritance’ alludes to the last judgment scene in Matthew: ‘Come, O Blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’ (Mt 25:34). He also cites Paul’s idea of being children of God and co-heirs with Christ: ‘if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.’ (Rom 8:17).

16. Esomai auto theos kai autos estai moi huios – ‘I will be for him God and he will be for me a son.’ These words echo Nathan’s prophecy, I Sam 7:14. Within the Deuteronomic history, Nathan’s prophecy marks the establishment of the Davidic Monarchy and was adapted and adopted to express Messianic expectations – a Messiah from the line of David to rule over God’s people with justice. Harrington writes that the author of Hebrews maintains that Nathan’s prophecy is perfectly realized in Christ (see Heb 1:5 and 5:5). Revelation expands the range of the prophecy to embrace all the elect of God who have borne faithful testimony to Christ. He suggests that this is perfectly in line with Paul’s words in Rom 8:23 – ‘We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as children (of God), the redemption of our bodies.’

17. Deilois… apistois… ebelygmenois… phoneusin… pornois… pharmakois… eidololatrais… pasin tois pseudesin – ‘to the cowardly… the unbelieving/unfaithful… those having been defiled/become abominable… murderers… the sexually immoral… sorcerers/those who mix potions… idolators… and all liars/those who speak falsely…’ In the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, early Christian writers whose works date beginning shortly after New Testament times, ‘vice lists’ are a common feature. What is

533 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
534 NRSV translation.
535 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
significant in this list is that the ‘vices,’ with the exception of ‘cowardly,’ have all been detailed in the Letters to the Churches under the heading, ‘I hold against you...’ or in the portrayal of the dragon, the beasts, the harlot and those who follow and worship them. ‘Cowardly,’ at the beginning of the list, serves to characterize those, especially those Christians, who have made compromises and accommodations with the Roman Empire for the sake of personal safety, financial benefit, status in the social order, power and influence. They are the people in the empire who have succumbed to the allure of the harlot, who have embraced the other vices in the list.

18. *Meros auton* – ‘their share/part.’ *Meros,* in context, can mean ‘part’ or ‘share’ of an inheritance. This is the way the word is used in Lk 15:12, the parable of the Prodigal Son: ‘Father, give me the share (*meros*) of the property that will belong to me.’ V. 8, then, sets in opposition to the ‘victorious’ who will ‘inherit’ in v. 7, the list of all those who will not inherit, whose hereditary share is the Lake of Fire, the second death. They are excluded from the New Heaven and the New Earth, from the New Jerusalem.

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*NRSV translation.*
Commentary

There is a general feature in apocalyptic writings in which it is expected that God will enter into the sphere of human history, topple the oppressors and create a ‘new’ world order in which there is a grand reversal of fortunes. The general supposition is that the purpose of apocalyptic writings is to give hope to people in hopeless situations. At this point, in the narrative of Revelation, the Final Judgment has occurred and the expectation is that the downtrodden faithful will now triumph. God will make something new and different.

Initially it appears that what the ‘seer’ observes is just such a new creation. He sees a ‘new heaven’ and a ‘new earth,’ for the old heaven and earth had passed away. What is significant in the vision is that the ‘sea is no more.’ In the mythology of creation, the sea was the source of chaos that God defeated to bring about order and stability. It was from the sea that the first beast arose, after the manner of Leviathan, the watery chaos monster of creation. Yet there is a problem with viewing the ‘new heaven’ and the ‘new earth’ in this way. Such a perspective assumes that God created a flawed, evil and corrupt world order and, in the the slogan of the Marriage Encounter Movement, ‘God don’t make junk!’ How could the original order of creation be viewed as completely corrupt and in need of annihilation? Moreover, in the logic of the Book of Revelation, the decisive action that changes everything has already happened in the Cross of Jesus Christ. The corrupt and painful situation of the Church at the end of the first century was a situation that stood under the Cross of Jesus Christ and the transformation accomplished by that sacrifice.

Next the ‘seer’ observes a ‘holy city,’ a ‘new Jerusalem’ coming out of heaven from God. Coming ‘from God,’ this city has obviously been constructed according to God’s design. It is a ‘holy city,’ a city specifically set apart for God. It is a city prepared and adorned as a bride for her bridegroom. It is common in biblical literature to imagine God’s people in both the images of a ‘holy city’ and of a ‘bride.’ Revelation combines these images. Jerusalem, and the temple on Mt. Zion were considered to be that special place in the world of human history where God chose to dwell with his people – it is sacred space, but holy sacred space set apart of a ‘holy’ people. This ‘holiness,’ ‘separateness’ is conveyed in the image of a bride set apart for her bridegroom.

The image of the bride is another of Revelation’s multi-faceted images. The words for ‘prepared’ and ‘adorned’ are both perfect participles, and both of a mixed form. The words can be either passive or middle voice. As passives, they imply the ‘divine passive’ that has been employed frequently in the book. God himself has prepared and adorned his bride, the holy city, the ‘new Jerusalem,’ the new people of God. As participles in the middle voice, however, they are reflexive – ‘having prepared and adorned herself.’ The two ways of viewing the image of the bride suggests a partnership between God and his people, the Church. It is through the instrumentality of God, that the Church is prepared to be the ‘bride of Christ,’ but this is not merely a passive acquiescence to the will of God; the ‘bride’ shares in the preparation, she accepts the ‘proposal,’ as it were, and readies herself. This is a somewhat constant theme in the Bible, that God chooses people to do his will, he chooses them to be free to serve him and to freely serve him. People respond by freely choosing. The reverse of the image is contained in the image of the wedding feast in Mt 22:11-12 – the man answering the king’s invitation to the wedding feast but coming unprepared, without a ‘wedding garment,’ is then cast outside.

Vv. 3-4 are key elements in understanding what is ‘new.’ The ‘seer’ hears a ‘loud voice,’ a typical ‘heads up’ flag in the narrative of Revelation. ‘Loud voice’ always indicates, ‘Pay attention. Something important is about to be communicated.’ Beyond this, the first word of the proclamation is ‘Behold!’ In
biblical narrative, ‘Behold!’ always indicates an intensification or heightening of perception, a change in perspective, something surprising or unexpected. The first thing that is said is that God intends to ‘tent’ with men. It was in the ‘Tent of Meeting’ on the wilderness journey that God met with his people. He was considered to be present with them in the ‘Holy of Holies’ in the Jerusalem temple, built on the same plan as the desert sanctuary. The word ‘to tent,’ ‘to dwell/settle down’ indicates an ‘abiding presence’ of God with his people. Both the verb, skenoo, and the noun, skene, suggest the shekinah, the ‘glory of God’ overshadowing his people. In Judeo-Christian tradition, nothing in this proclamation seems to be particularly new.

A closer look at the wording, however, reveals what in no way could be expected. The ‘tent of God is with men.’ The Greek word Anthropos is used here. Anthropos is the general term of ‘men,’ ‘humanity,’ ‘mankind.’ God’s abiding presence is not restricted to his elect, but is given to all. These anthropoi with whom God will abide will be his ‘peoples.’ The plural laoi is specifically used. This recalls the way that the ‘inhabitants of the earth,’ as opposed to the Church, to God’s people, have been designated throughout the book: nations and tribes and peoples and tongues. There is a broadening of perspective, a broadening of God’s people(s) in the new heaven and the new earth. All those who did not worship the beast and his image, all those who have shown by their works that their values are not corrupt, evil and self-seeking are included here.

The universality of God’s saving will is emphasized in an allusion to Isaiah in v. 4:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts
will for all peoples
a feast of rich food,
a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food will with marrow,
of well-aged wines strained clear.
And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cat over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations.
He will swallow up death forever.
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken. (Is 25:6-8)

The nature of the ‘New Heaven and New Earth,’ the nature of the ‘New Holy City, Jerusalem,’ is made abundantly clear in the words of God in v. 5: ‘Behold! I am making all things new.’ God does not say, ‘I am making new things,’ but rather, ‘I am making all things new.’ The idea is that of restoration and renovation, not wiping everything out and starting all over. It is a renovation and restoration of creation to its original, pristine state. It is a return to the beginning in which humanity now can fulfill its purpose, can live a relationship with its Creator, can have dominion over, manage the good things of creation for the benefit of all.

In this vision, and in all the visions of Revelation, there is an interplay between what is seen and heard and its impact on those who see and hear it. The interplay between words and actions, the interplay between those who speak and those who respond, how they respond, is a subtle means of

NRSV translation.

537
characterization. What people say and don’t say, what they do and don’t do offer clues to understanding them and their roles in the story. The interplay opens up a level of meaning that goes beyond the words spoken. This technique is artfully employed in the vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth.

A. V. 3 – ‘I heard a loud voice saying: Behold! The tent of God is with men (anthropoids)’
B. V. 5a – ‘He sitting on the throne said: Behold! I am making all things new’
C. V. 5b – ‘and he says: Write!’
D. V. 6 – ‘and he said to me: These things have happened.’

While conversation is very rare in Revelation, it does occur, usually in a question/answer form. In other instances, what is said simply leads to some response on the part of the one addressed. In the Inaugural Vision, the ‘seer’ hears a voice commanding him to write. He turns and sees the appearance of the one speaking and falls on his face in awe and fear. The speaker gently touches him on the shoulder, eases his fear and commands him again to write whatever it is that he will see. In Ch. 5, in the Vision of the Lamb and the Scroll, a strong angel poses the question: ‘Who is worthy to take the scroll and open its seals?’ There is no answer and the ‘seer’ cries and mourns. In response to this, one of the elders around the throne comforts him, telling him not to weep, that the ‘lion of Judah’ was victorious. In response, the ‘seer’ looks around and sees the ‘Lamb having been slain.’ In the Vision of the Open Scroll in ch. 10, a strong angel takes his stand and cries out in the roaring voice of the seven thunders, apparently presaging violence and destruction. In response to what he has heard, and if full compliance with the commission given to him, the ‘seer’ sets out to write. But another voice from heaven (God?) commands him instead to seal what he has heard away and not write it – an intimation of mercy.

In v. 3, the loud voice proclaims something surprising, unexpected. God’s abiding presence is with humanity – not the elect, not the Church, not the ‘victorious.’ This is met with silence, a kind of pregnant pause, a reaction of ‘Huh?’ In response to the ‘lack of response,’ the heavenly voice declares, ‘Behold! I am making all things new!’ Still no response. Still silence and inactivity. So the voice has to get more explicit. ‘Write this down! This is your commission. You’ve been told that the words you will hear and the things you will see are the true words of God! So, get to it!’ And apparently there is still
silence and inactivity. The ‘seer’ is dumbfounded. He expected to hear that his side had won, that God would wipe out everything and make a ‘paradise’ for those who have ‘overcome.’ He expected that the ‘victorious’ would be an exclusive community of the elect, of the Church. Finally, the heavenly speaker proclaims: ‘It has come to be.’ There is almost a sense of ‘Here’s the new reality. Deal with it!’

I would suggest that this is the heart of the whole vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth. For members of the Church who might conclude, ‘I am working for the salvation of my soul,’ the vision says, ‘You’re wrong.’ For members of the Church who might conclude, ‘I/we are working for the triumph of the Church, the community of the elect, over all other people, all unbelievers,’ the vision says, ‘You’re wrong.’ When God makes all things new, he will return the world to its original state and the original plan and design for his creation – that all will be his people and he will be their God, that all with share in the blessings of creation, that his elect will live their mission that in them all the nations of the earth will find blessing/blessedness. Especially in an apocalyptic writing, this conclusion is unexpected and can ‘dumbfound’ the readers.

The rest of God’s words in vv. 6-8 function as a kind of exclamation point to what has been revealed in the vision. The book began with the proclamation: ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord, God, ‘the One who is and he who was and the one who is coming.’ Now the voice of God proclaims, ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.’ This is another instance of repetition with variation. ‘It has happened.’ God has come; the final days are here. He is no longer the ‘one who is coming.’

It is commonplace to read ‘Alpha and Omega,’ the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, as representations of the beginning and the end. God encompasses and is sovereign Lord over all of human history, over all time. But it is also to be noted that God reveals himself in his Word – the Word of Scripture. Moreover, the ‘words’ of the Book of Revelation are, throughout, characterized as ‘faithful and true.’ God’s word, from beginning to end, Alpha to Omega, encompasses all truthfulness, all faithfulness, all that is right and just and real. There is nothing temporal here; God is the eternal, ever present truth.

In an image drawn from Isaiah, God promises refreshing drink from the springs of life giving water to all who thirst. In the larger context of that image, the mountain where God offers springs of life giving waters to the thirsty is Mt. Zion, and to it the nations will be drawn to learn righteousness, to respond to the life-giving sustenance of God. They will be drawn to share with the elect the abiding presence of the God of all.

The promise to the ‘victorious’ that they will inherit ‘these things’ is, in itself, somewhat ambiguous. What things? First of all, it is to be noted that ‘victorious’ is, in the light of the universal outlook of the entire vision, not to be understood in the narrow sense of some chosen or elect group, but all who have ‘overcome’ the enticements of the beasts, the enticements of corrupt and self-seeking worldly values. What they ‘will inherit’ or be given has been mentioned throughout the book. Most commentators look specifically to the seven promiss with which each of the seven letters end. These promises include:

a. **EPHESUS:** To the victor, I will give to him to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.

b. **SMYRNA:** The victor, surely not will he be harmed by the second death.

c. **PERGAMUM:** To the one enduring, I will give to him (some) of the manna having been hidden and I will give to him a white stone and upon the stone (will be) a new name having been written which no one has known except him receiving it.
d. THYATIRA: And the one being victorious and keeping my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations and he will shepherd them with an iron staff; like earthenware vessels he crushes (them); just as even I have received from my father I will give to him the morning star.

e. SARDIS: He being victorious thus will clothe himself in white garments and surely I will not wipe out his name from the Book of Life and I will acknowledge his name before my Father and before his angels.

f. PHILADELPHIA: The one being victorious, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God and surely he will not go forth outside anymore and I will write upon him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, Jerusalem, that coming down from the heaven from my God and my new name.

g. LAODICEA: The one being victorious, I will give (grant) to him to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat with my father upon his throne.

The promises, what the ‘victorious’ will inherit are summed up in the words, ‘I will be God for him and he will be a son for me.’ These words echo Nathan’s prophecy to David in II Sam 7:14. This is the promise to David that his line would be a lasting dynasty. In later tradition, the words were adapted and adopted to give voice to messianic expectations. In Christian tradition, Jesus is portrayed as a member of the Davidic line in whom the messianic age dawns. In the logic of Revelation, as stated in the final of the seven promises, all those who ‘overcome’ the world will share in the ‘reign’ of the Christ, the anointed Messiah. The promise looks back to God’s original design for creation in which humanity is commanded to ‘subdue the earth and have dominion over it.’ In the ‘New Heaven and the New Earth,’ the transformed creation will be such that humanity will manage it in such a way that the good things of creation are shared by all, that all will experience ‘blessedness.’

The vision of the ‘New Heaven and New Earth’ ends with a listing of those excluded from the restored creation. The listing of those excluded is similar to short ‘vice lists’ that are common in the New Testament and especially in the writings of the Apostolic Father shortly after New Testament times. It is immediately obvious that all the ‘vices’ in the list, except the first, recur frequently in Revelation to describe the unjust, the wicked ones, those who accept the false value system of the world and worship the ‘beast.’ ‘Cowardly,’ at the beginning of the list, serves to characterize those, especially those Christians, who have made compromises and accommodations with the Roman Empire for the sake of personal safety, financial benefit, status in the social order, power and influence. They are the people in the empire who have succumbed to the allure of the harlot, who have embraced the other vices in the list. There ‘share,’ meros, is the ‘second death.’ The word meros is used to denote an hereditary share. It is used in this sense in the parable of the Prodigal Son who requests of his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ (Lk 15:12). It has already been noted that the ‘second death’ does not necessarily mean an eternity of suffering and torture, but possibly oblivion, an exclusion from eternal life shared with God.

The dualistic outlook of Revelation consistently divides the world into the good and the bad. In the vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth, the ‘bad’ are eliminated. This is the abode of the good, the ‘victorious.’ What is challenging in the vision, what goes counter to usual apocalyptic expectations, is its inclusivemess, in its refusal to limit the ‘good’ to a certain group of the ‘elect.’ It is just about impossible to realistically look at our world and not identify people we judge to be evil. Can I accept the possibility that God might view these people differently? Can I accept the possibility that I might share eternity with...
people I find despicable? Where is the dividing line? Can harmful, hateful actions spring from good intentions? Can good works flow from bad intentions? Is sin the committing of objectively evil acts? If I do good for the wrong reasons, is that sinful? Can I, or others, be wrong in what we do and not be sinful? What if I believe that the teaching of the Church is wrong in some area? Can I ignore it? What if I agree with the teaching of the Church in some area in general, but don’t think it applies to me in my particular circumstances? Can I act contrary to it? In the end, is the world black and white, or are there gray areas? What are some examples? If I consider the world black and white, what implication does that have on who will be included in eternal life? If I consider the world to be shades of gray, what implication does that have on who will be included in eternal life? If I can accept that it is not my place to judge whom God will choose to welcome home to him for eternal life, can I still pick and choose whom I want to be associated with in the workplace? In my neighborhood? In my Church community? Do I find the vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth as surprising and dumbfounding as the ‘seer?’
And there came one from the seven angels having the seven bowls having been filled with the seven plagues (strikings), the last, and he spoke with me saying: Come here! I will show you the bride, the wife (woman) of the lamb. And he carried me away in the spirit to a large and high mountain and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of the heaven from God, having the glory of God; the radiance (brilliance) of it (was) similar to a most precious stone, as a stone of jasper, sparkling like crystal. Having a great and high wall, having twelve gates and on (at) the gates, twelve angels, and names having been inscribed which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons (children) of Israel, from the east, three gates and from the north, three gates, and from the south, three gates, and from the west, three gates, and the wall of the city having twelve foundations and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the lamb.

And he speaking with me had a measure, a golden reed so that he could measure the city and its gates and its wall. And the city is laid out four-sided and its length (is) the same as also the width; and he measured the city with the rod at twelve thousand stadia (1 stadion = apprx 607 ft; the city would be about 1,400 miles to a side), the length and the width and the height of it is all the same. And he measured its wall, one hundred forty four cubits (the length of a forearm – apprx 14 miles high), in the measure of man, that is, of the angel. And the structure of its wall is jasper and the city (is) pure gold, like pure glass. The foundations of the wall of the city (were) adorned in every precious stone; the foundation of the first, jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, agate (chalcedony); the fourth, emerald; the fifth, onyx; the sixth, carnelian; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, topaz; the tenth, chrysoprase; the eleventh, jacinth; the twelfth, amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each one of the gates (was) from one pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like clear glass.

And I did not see a temple in it, for the Lord, God, the all-powerful is its temple, and the lamb. And the city has no need of the sun or the moon, that they might illuminate it, for indeed the glory of God enlightens it and its lamp is the lamb. And the nations will walk about because of (in) her light and the kings of the earth are bringing their glory into her. And her gates indeed should not be shut each day (of a day); for indeed night there will not be there. And they will bring the glory and honor of the nations into her (it). And not should there enter into her any profane thing nor an abomination nor a lie, but only (if not, except) those having been written in the book of life of the lamb.
22:1 And he showed me a river of the water of life, clear like crystal, flowing out from the heaven of God and of the lamb. 2 In the middle of its street and of the river, from here and from there (on this side and on that side) (was) the tree of life producing twelve fruits, according to each month giving forth its fruit, and the leaves of the tree (are) for a healing for (of) the nations. 3 And every curse will no longer be, and the throne of God and of the lamb in it will be, and his servants will worship by serving him. 4 And they will see his face and his name (will be) on their foreheads. 5 And night there will no longer be and they have no need of the light of a lamp (lampstand) or the light of the sun, because the Lord, God will shed light upon them and they will reign (exercise kingship) unto the ages of ages.

Textual Notes

1. *Eis ek ton hepta angelon* – ‘one from the seven angels.’ That the speaker in the opening of the new vision is one of the seven angels with the bowls of plagues shows a continuity. The ‘seven bowls’ contained the ‘last plagues.’ The signs and judgment are complete. The appearance of one of the seven angels confirms that the ‘New Heaven and New Earth’ aren’t ‘new things,’ but the old order transformed.

2. *Deuro* – ‘Come here!’ The command initiates an interplay between characters – the angel and the ‘seer.’ It echoes the command given to the ‘seer’ in the Scroll Vision, ‘Come up here!’ (4:1), and to the two ‘resurrected witnesses’ in 11:12. In the case of the ‘resurrected witnesses,’ they are called to their reward, inheritance. In both cases where the command is given to the ‘seer’ he is immediately ‘carried away in the spirit.’ Being transported in the spirit most likely is not a reference to some sort of ecstatic experience, but to inspired, heightened insight. What is significant to note is that in both 4:1 and 11:12,
the command is ‘Come up here!’ ‘Up’ is significantly missing from this command. In the new order, heaven meets earth. God abides with men. The separation of the realms of heaven and earth is removed and the two realms merge.

3. Ten nymphen ten gynaika tou arniou – ‘the bride, the woman/wife of the Lamb.’ The ‘bride of the Lamb’ has already functioned in Revelation as a symbol of the Church and has already been identified with the ‘New Jerusalem.’

4. Oros mega kai hypselon – ‘great and high mountain.’ Harrington observes that the image is drawn from Ezekiel (see Ezek 40:2 and 28:14-16). It refers to the cite of the Holy City, Jerusalem, that is to Mt. Zion. As Levenson has pointed out, Zion is primarily a symbol of sacred space.

5. Ten polin ten hagion ierousalem katabainousan ek tou ouranou apo tou theou – ‘the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down from the heaven from God.’ Harrington again observes that the whole vision of the ‘New Jerusalem’ is dependent on the similar vision in Ezekiel (Ezek 40:1-47:12, 48:30-35). He notes that the expression ‘coming down from heaven’ is peculiar to Revelation (see 2:2,10 and 3:12). The ‘heavenly’ origin of the city describes its permanent characteristic.

6. Echousan ten doxan tou theou – ‘having the glory of God.’ The shining radiance of the city is symbolic of the glory of God that is attached to it. This ‘radiance’ is described as shining jasper and Harrington observes that, in 4:3, the One seated on the throne appeared ‘like jasper.’ Here, the heavenly city reflects that divine radiance. It main feature is God’s glory, the ‘abiding’ presence of God’s very nature. Rogers and Rogers observe that ‘glory’ refers to the shining radiance coming from the presence and glory of God, an allusion to the tradition of the Shekinah. They further observe that in antiquity the designation ‘jasper’ was used for any opaque precious stone. The point of the comparison is the brilliance and sparkle of the gem, and the reference could be to a diamond.

7. Pylonas dodeka… angelous dodeka… onomata epigegrammena… ton dodeka phylon huion Israel – ‘twelve gates… twelve angels… names having been written… the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel.’ The description of the Holy City proceeds with the recording of minute details. For the reader, this creates the impression of being on a tour of a great cathedral or synagogue during which the guide points out all the details and intricacies of craftsmanship in the structure. There are twelve gates, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel, whose names are inscribed on the gates. There is a subtle implication in this detail: entrance to the city is through the long history of God’s relationship with his chosen people. In them all the families of the earth were to find blessing and through them, all nations have access to God’s presence in the holy city. In this light, it would then seem that the angels at the gates fulfill two functions: 1) Angels have issued invitations/commands ‘Come up!’ and ‘Come here!’ They stand at the gates to welcome the righteous, those who have ‘overcome;’ 2) Angels have unleashed the signs and judgments of God. They stand at the gates to keep out ‘evil.’ In this regard, it can be noted that in the next verse it will be stated explicitly that there are three gates on each of the four sides of the city, north, south, east and west. It was at these ‘four corners’ of the earth that the four angels took their stand, ready to unleash the four destructive winds – something harmful, evil. Now, the angel at the gates guard against such destructive force.

On the positive, welcoming side, Harrington notes Lk 13:39 – ‘And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at the table in the kingdom of God.’

8. Themelious dodeka… onomata dodeka apostolon tou arniou – ‘twelve foundations… names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.’ If entrance to the city is through ‘election,’ through the long history of God’s relationship with his Chosen People – and it is through them that all nations are to find blessedness, then the foundation of the city is the Church, solidly grounded on the ‘Apostles,’ the witnesses to Jesus Christ. Revelation maintains the continuity and validity of both the Old and New Testaments as the ‘full’ Word of

539 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
540 Jon D. Levenson, op. cit.
541 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
542 Ibid.
543 Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
544 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
God, the Alpha and Omega, as it were.
In particular, Harrington cites Mt 19:28 as background for the image – ‘In the new world, when the Son of Man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’ He sees Eph 2:20 as even more relevant – ‘...built upon the foundation of the prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone.’

9. Metron kalamon chrysoun – ‘a golden measuring reed/rod.’ Again, the image is drawn from Ezekiel, as was the image of Rev 11:1. In both Ezekiel and in Rev 11:1, the ‘seer/prophet’ is given a rod to measure the temple. Significant in both passages is that, for Ezekiel, the First Temple lay in ruins, and for the ‘seer’ of Revelation, the Second Temple had been destroyed by the Romans. In each case, what is envisioned is a ‘restoration.’ (see notes #1 and #2, p. 183). In this case, the measuring is done by the ‘angel’ speaking to the ‘seer,’ the measuring rod is gold, and it is not the Temple, but the Holy City that is measured. In the New Jerusalem, there will be no temple; God will simply abide with his people in the city, the symbol of the Church. This represents a culmination in biblical through centering on the presence/availability of God to his people, a process in coming to understand God’s presence in which Ezekiel played a significant role. In Monarchic times, Jerusalem came to be regarded as the place where God met with his people. Because of syncretistic practices, Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic History emphasized the centralization of cult in the Jerusalem Temple. As such, the temple took on crucial importance in the lives and faith of the Jewish people. In the exile and restoration, the Jewish Diaspora was born. It became necessary to stress God’s presence with his people wherever they were to be found, but Jerusalem and the restored Temple still maintained a certain ‘primacy’ – the ‘special’ place to worship and encounter God. In Revelation, God’s abiding presence is not in the temple, but in the Holy City, the symbol of the Church wherever it is to be found. There is no ‘primacy’ of place to encounter God; he is met wherever the Church authentically is present.

For the next several verses, the reader is treated to a ‘tour’ of the New Holy City, a look at its dimensions and adornments. The dimensions of the city make it a perfect cube, just as the Holy of Holies in Solomon’s temple was a perfect cube (see I Kgs 6:20). A cube is a symbol of perfection. The length, width and height of the city are each 1200 stadia – 12 X 1000. This again is a reference to the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles. The numbers are obviously symbolic. 1200 stadia would roughly equal between 1400 and 1500 miles. As was the case with the sealing of the 144 thousand, the vast dimensions are indicative of the vast number of the ‘victors’ who will inhabit the city with their God. The wall of the city stands 144 cubits high, approximately 14 miles (144 = 12 X 12, again symbolic). The wall is made of ‘jasper’ and the city is pure gold. The point is that the city, in itself and in all its elements reflects the glory of God.

In vv. 19-20, Harrington notes that the description of the foundation stones appears to be a development of Is 54:11-12 – ‘O afflicted one, storm-tossed and not comforted, behold, I will set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of agate, your gates of carbuncles, and all your wall of precious stones.’ This image of a restored Jerusalem is also reflected in Tob 13:16-17. Though it may seem that the images is of the foundation stones adorned with precious gems, it is more likely that the image is that the foundation stones themselves are precious gems. While no exact correspondence can be found among various lists, it is obvious that the twelve gems are meant to correspond with the twelve jewels on the high priest’s breastplate, each jewel inscribed with the name of one of the twelve tribes. In a merging of Christian and Jewish traditions, however, these foundation stones are identified with the Apostles rather than the Twelve Tribes. He also notes that the gems offer a contrast to the Whore and the jewels with which she was adorned. (on the symbolic meaning of the stones and their colors, see note #13, p. 107).

Harrington also notes, in v. 21, that the gates are pearls. While pearls are not mentioned in the Old Testament, in the Hellenistic age they were highly valued, giving rise to the parable in Mt 13:46 concerning a ‘pearl of great price.’

In the end, the whole image of the city is extravagant, glorious, but not the wealth of a select few. This

545 Ibid.
546 Ibid.
city is the home of the ‘victorious’ – a great reversal of fortunes – and the place where God abides with those who have ‘overcome.’

10. *Naon ouk eidon* – ‘I did not see a temple’ Here is a line before which an *idou* – ‘Behold!’ might be expected. The Temple, on Mt. Zion is symbolic of sacred space, that place where people go to commune with God. In the ‘New Jerusalem,’ there is no specific place for such communion. God and the Lamb are the ‘temple;’ they are accessible everywhere within the city, the symbol of the Church, the people of God wherever they are. All space is sacred space. And in the logic of Revelation, this is only what is to be expected.

11. *He polix ou chreian echei tou heliou oude tes selenes...* – ‘the city had no need of the sun nor the moon...’ Harrington notes that the image employed here directly alludes to Is 60:19 – ‘The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.’ The glory of God and of his Christ, the Lamb, fill the city with radiance, with eternal light.\textsuperscript{547} It is worth noting here Jesus words to Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night: ‘The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil’ (Jn 3:19).\textsuperscript{548} Lit with the glory of the abiding presence of God, there will be no darkness in the New Jerusalem, not so that men have no place to hide, but because the judgment is complete; the residents of the New Jerusalem are those who have overcome the world – they have nothing to hide.

12. *Peripatesousin ta ethne... hoi basileis tes ges pherousin ten doxan kai timon...* - ‘the nations will walk about... the kings of the earth bring glory and honor...’ Harrington notes the similarity of this image with that of Is 60:3 – ‘And the nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.’\textsuperscript{549} It is to be noted that the Book of Isaiah, in all three of its parts dating from monarchic times, exilic times, and the time of restoration, reflects a ‘Jerusalem Theology.’ This is an outlook shared by both the Yahwistic and Priestly sources of the Pentateuch. It is a theology that stresses the unconditional covenant, that stresses God’s promises, his election of his Chosen People. In all three of these collections of writings – narrative traditions of origins and an ongoing relationship with God based on the unconditional covenant in the Yahwist writings, legal traditions in the Priestly writings, and prophetic traditions in Isaiah, it is stressed that Israel is ‘chosen’ to fulfill a role, to bring God’s blessings to all the families of the nations of the earth. In Isaiah, especially in Second and Third Isaiah, a common image is of Israel as a beacon, as a light drawing all the nations of the earth to Mt. Zion, to the Holy City, to a right relationship with God. While the kings and nations of the earth are the objects of God’s judgment in Revelation, it is also true that the ‘seer’ is re-commissioned to be a prophet to/for/concerning the inhabitants of the earth. There are indications that there are kings and nations, apart from the Church, who do not necessarily align themselves with the corruption of Rome. There is an indication that these kings might join together to topple the Roman Empire. This was hinted at particularly with the Parthians. In the end, it is conceivable that in the New Age, the time of the New Heaven, the New Earth, the New Jerusalem, there will be those still outside the Church who did not succumb to the intoxicating enticements of the Whore, who did not buy into the corruption of Rome. It is conceivable that these kings and nations, observing God’s Wisdom written in the design of the world, have attempted to be right and just and good. So it is conceivable that in the New Age, the role of the Church, the community of God’s people will still be to act as a light, a beacon drawing those outside the Church who seek justice and right and peace into the larger community of the elect.

13. *Hoi pylones autes ou me kleithosin...* ‘her gates should surely not be shut.’ The double negative is emphatic. The text notes that the gates of the New Jerusalem would not be shut by day and that there is no longer any night – they never close. This is again reminiscent of Is 60:11. The image, in a subtle way, is powerful. The gates face the four corners of the world, the corners from which the destructive winds emanate. But there is no threat in this New Age. The open gates also recall the image from Lk 13:29 – \textsuperscript{547} Ibid.\textsuperscript{548} NRSV translation \textsuperscript{549} Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*
people coming from the four corners of the earth to share in the banquet in the Kingdom of God. Again, what is stressed in the image is the universality of the New Jerusalem – all who ‘overcome’ have a place. God’s ‘election’ is not narrow and restricted.

14. Oisousin ten doxan kai ten timon ton ethne eis aute – ‘they will bring the glory and honor of the nations to her.’ Harrington observes the connection with Is 60:11 which speaks of people, with their kings, bringing the wealth of the nations to the newly restored Jerusalem. But he asks, without giving an answer, ‘But where are these nations and kings of the earth to be found? They have been wholly destroyed in the battle of Armageddon!’

Against Harrington, it can be argued that, while the image of Armageddon envisioned a vast coalition of kings allied with Rome and, probably, kings and nations beyond the scope of the Roman Empire who also ‘worshipped the Beast,’ nowhere does the text state that all the kings of the nations of the earth were gathered for the battle. The dualistic outlook of Revelation does divide the world of creation into two camps, the good and evil, the just and unjust; the Church and the inhabitants of the world. Yet it remains true that the mission of the Church is to bring the Good News to all the nations of the earth. In this light, the ‘seer’ was commissioned to be a prophet to the inhabitants of the earth. So it is at least possible to conceive of a middle ground, a subset of the inhabitants of the earth ‘on the road to salvation,’ but not yet members of the community of the faithful. Why else would one of the ‘rewards’ of the ‘victorious’ be that they should have authority over the nations to shepherd them with an iron rod. The idea of sharing Christ rule, imagined as ‘shepherding’ speaks to the mission of the Church to perform works of justice, compassion, charity and mercy. To ‘shepherd with an iron rod’ speaks of discipline, a rule that will no longer brook any compromise or accommodation with corrupt powers and evil self-interest. To exercise this rule, there has to be somebody to rule. The implication appears to be that, while the rule of ‘evil’ has been completely defeated, in the New Heaven, New Earth, and New Jerusalem there is still work to do. The mission of the Church is still in effect, to bring the Good News to all the families of the earth – the New Earth, to bring all the families of the earth into the sheepfold completely, to assure – with an iron rod of discipline – that there is no looking back to what was, no lusting after the intoxicating enticements of wealth, power, status and glory for its own sake, for selfish, self-seeking interests.

15. Ou me eiselthe… pan koinon… hoi poion bdelygma… pseudos… – ‘not should enter… any profane thing… those doing abominations/detestable things… a lie.’ Recall the vice list of 11:8. The list consisted of seven ‘vices’ prefixed by ‘cowardly,’ a characterization of all those who practiced any of seven vices for the sake of self-preservation and personal benefit in the face of worldly power structures. As has been noted, seven is the number of completion, perfection. The ‘vice’ list looked at those who were ‘completely and perfectly’ evil and corrupt. The basic effect of the list of three in 21:27 is to suggest that same corruption, but in short order. The ‘victory’ has been won, the Messianic Age – the millennium, has passed and the Kingdom of God is here.

‘koinon,’ a profane thing, in the ritual/liturgical context has the sense of ‘unclean.’ As such, defecating or urinating, having sexual intercourse with one’s husband or wife, giving birth were considered ‘profane/unclean,’ not in the sense of being evil but as human actions that required ‘ritual purification’ prior to participation in temple sacrifice. Beyond such ‘profane’ human actions, moral lapses also render a person ‘unclean,’ incapable, without some atonement and purification, of participating in worship. It is the sense of immorality that is intended here.

Harrington cites Mark’s understanding of uncleanness or defilement to explain what is intended here: ‘What comes out of person is what defiles a person. From from within, out of the human heart, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’ (Mk 7:20-23).551

16. Hoi gegrammenoi en to biblio tes zoes tou arniou – ‘those having been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb.’ Again Harrington asserts that those whose names have not been written in the Book of Life are the ‘inhabitants of the earth.’ Still, he follows Swete in asserting that, as in the perspective of the Letters to the Seven Churches, commerce with both the ‘heavenly Jerusalem’ and with the Harlot are still present

550 Ibid.
551 Ibid.
possibilities.\textsuperscript{552}

It is again possible to dispute the contention that it is ‘the inhabitants of the earth’ who are universally excluded from the Book of Life. (See Commentary on ‘The Last Judgment,’ pp. 364-365, which discusses the five uses of the ‘Book of Life’ in Revelation.) It can be argued that everyone is included in the Book of Life and, according to their deeds, recorded in other ‘books,’ their names either remain or are erased. Recall again the striking and surprising image of God ‘tenting with men’ in 21:3. It was argued there that what was envisioned was a restoration of the original plan and design for all creation, including all of humanity. (see note #6, p. 368). In seems impossible, on a close reading of the text, not to conclude that the ‘New Creation’ includes a place for ‘good men,’ ‘good people’ from whatever nation or tribe, or people or tongue, those ‘on the way.’

17. \textit{Potomon hydatos lampron hos krystallon ekporeumenon ek tou thronou tou theou} – ‘a river of water of life, clear as chrysal, flowing out from the throne of God.’

In ancient cosmology, one image of creation and the origin of life involved a high mountain where God met with earth. From the peak of the mountain flowed four rivers of water flowing to the four corners of the earth, bringing life all along their courses. This mythic cosmology is reflected in Gn 2:9-14 – ‘Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And a river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bedellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.\textsuperscript{553} What is significant in the portrayal of the four rivers in Genesis is that they bring life giving support to Havilah, a land associated with the Ishmaelites, Ishmael being remembered as the father of the Arabs, the ‘Cushites,’ a biblical people generally associated with Africa – and perhaps Egypt, the land of the Assyrians and the land of the Babylonians. Whatever the designation, the implication is that God provides life giving water to non-Israelites, to perhaps traditional enemies of Israel. All people have a place in God’s care and plan. This imagery also stands behind Ezekiel’s image of restoration where the water flowing from the envisioned reconstructed temple flows out and freshens and gives life to the earth and restores stagnant seas.\textsuperscript{553} Harrington observes that the waters of Ezekiel 47 flow from the sanctuary of the temple, but here they flow from the throne of God. There is no temple in the New Jerusalem. The water of life flowing from the throne of God has a parallel in Jn 7:38-39 – ‘If any one thirst, let that one come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said: Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’

18. \textit{In meso tes plateias autes kai tou potomou enteuthen kai ekeithen xylon zoes} – ‘in the middle of its street and the river, from here and from there (on this side and that), a tree of life.’ The imagery continues to draw heavily on the vision of Ezekiel 47. It appears that the river flows down the middle of the ‘main’ street of the Holy City. This is in accord with the Genesis image where the river first waters the garden before splitting into four branches to water the whole world. Harrington observes that the singular ‘tree of Life’ may be understood as a ‘generic singular’ that can correctly be rendered as plural – ‘trees of life,’ ‘life giving trees.’\textsuperscript{554}

19. \textit{Poioun karpos dodeka kata mena hekaston} – ‘making twelve fruits according to each month.’ This has the sense of ‘bearing fruit according to its season.’ There are twelve distinct fruits produced, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel, for each of the twelve Apostles. This is the fruit promised to the ‘victor’ in the conclusion of the first letter, 2:7.

20. \textit{Ta phylla tou xylou eis therapeian ton ethnou} – ‘the leaves of the tree (are) for the healing of the nations.’ Note that Ezk 47:12 states, ‘Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing.’ Revelation adds the idea that this healing is ‘for the nations.’ Again it is hard to escape the conclusion that, as was the case

\textsuperscript{552} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{553} NRSV translation.
\textsuperscript{554} Wilfrid Harrington, \textit{op. cit.}
with the destruction and exile of the Israelites to Babylon, the concept grew that there was a ‘faithful remnant’ to be restored who would continue to carry on the mission of Israel to all the nations of the earth, there is here to be understood a kind of ‘faithful remnant’ of the nations of the earth who may still be open to hearing the Word of God, to experiencing his ‘healing,’ and becoming faithful witnesses to God and his Christ.

21. *Pan katathema ouk estai eti* – ‘every curse/anathema/ban will not be any longer.’ Harrington sees Zech 14:11 standing behind this claim: ‘And it shall be inhabited, for there shall be no more cures; Jerusalem shall dwell in security.’ He concludes that the New Jerusalem will be securely inhabited because the divine curse (the divine ‘ban’ or ‘anathema’) which sentenced the city to destruction will be no more. This was the sense of Zechariah’s prophecy. To this, Revelation adds that no accursed person, no object of God’s displeasure will find a place in the New Holy City.\(^{555}\)

It is significant that the word used in Zech 14:11 is *herem*, ‘the ban.’ *Herem* warfare is described in Dt 7:1-26. Basically, the concept is that, within the Promised Land, the people of Israel are to ‘wipe out,’ ‘annihilate,’ ‘completely destroy,’ ‘devote to the ban (herem) any foreign people in their midst. This is an obviously uncomfortable concept suggestive of divinely approved genocide. However, Robert Polzin has argued convincingly that, in the Book of Joshua, the Deuteronomic Historian uses the ‘Law of the Ban’ to argue against ‘authoritarian dogmatism’ in favor of a ‘critical traditionalism.’ That is, our relationship with God is not caught up in rigid adherence to a set of rules, but demands that people look at their traditions critically, that they understand and apply God’s will in a variety of situations. The Book of Joshua, then is a meditation on following God’s will. In the end, the ‘Law of the Ban’ is interpreted to mean that Israel should avoid anything and anyone that could draw them away from fidelity to God. Those people are ‘dead to them.’ When people and circumstances present no threat to Israel’s faithfulness to God, there is a higher value at stake: in you all the families of the earth are to find blessing. In Joshua, the people of Israel make a number of exceptions to the ‘Law of the Ban.’ When their exceptions are based on self-interest, on acquisitiveness, the people are condemned and experience hardship. When the exception is made because other people pose no threat to the life of Israel with her God, even more when they show openness to the God of Israel, their exceptions are judged to be right and just, as was the case in sparing the prostitute in Jericho who hid and saved the Israelite spies.\(^{556}\)

It was syncretistic practices in Israel during monarchic times that lead to problems and unfaithfulness on the part of the people. It has been compromises and accommodations made by some members of the Church and some Church communities that diluted the faithfulness of the Christian community in the late first century. These are ‘anatema!’ No such cursed person or nation will reside in the New Jerusalem. Nothing that could lead people astray, away from being faithful witnesses will have a home in the New Jerusalem. Can such ‘banned’ people still exist? It would appear that the author of Revelation envisions this possibility. But what he also envisions is that they will not be allowed into the city, that the situation of the Church existing in the midst of an alien culture, an alien social, economic and corrupt political system will never emerge again.

22. *Douloi autou latreusousin auton* – ‘his servants/slaves/bondsmen will serve/worship by serving him.’ In this phrase, Harrington finds the fulfillment of 7:15. The implication is that those who have served the Lamb, been faithful witnesses, have ‘washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb,’ have aligned themselves with the Lamb, the Christ, will offer fitting service – and nothing can threaten that service that they embrace.

23. *Opsonta to prosopon autou* – ‘they will see his face.’ Harrington writes that the Israelites had gone in pilgrimage to the temple to worship and to ‘behold the face of God.’ (see Ps 17:15 and Ps 42:2). They had seen him only in wish, in a ‘spiritual’ experience, because no one can see the face of God. (see Ex 33:20-23). But now, in the new age, that desire is satisfied, there is an immediate access to God. In particular, Harrington cites 1 Jn 3:2 – ‘Behold, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.’ He finally

\(^{555}\) Ibid.

notes that the third person, singular personal pronoun throughout vv. 3-4 refers to God the the Lamb in tandem. The assimilation of Christ with the Father is becoming more absolute.\textsuperscript{557}

24. *Nyx ouk estai eti* – ‘night will not be any longer.’ V. 5, in a movment of summation and final emphasis proclaims that ‘night will be no more.’ In the New Jerusalem, the radiant light of God will illumine everyone at all times. The final result of dwelling in this eternal light is that they, the ‘victors’ will rule with him forever. This again assumes that there will be ‘someone’ to rule.

\textsuperscript{557} Wilfrid Harrington, \textit{op. cit.}
Commentary

What would heaven on earth look like? Drawing on a host of traditional images focusing on God’s original design for his creation and prophetic visions of a renewed and restored people of God, Revelation sets out, in the vision of the New Jerusalem, to describe a future ideal, to describe a ‘new’ concept of sacred space – a place where God meets with his people, to envision heaven on earth.

As was the case with the vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth, the New Jerusalem is not a creation of something completely new, but a transformation of what was into what it was always intended to be. The ‘angel guide’ for the this vision is one of the seven angels with the bowls of God’s final signs, plagues. In one sense, their job is finished; the final judgment has occurred. But, in a subtle way, the author of Revelation indicates that the old order hasn’t ceased to exist in the ‘new creation.’ All things have been made new, transformed.

There is a veiled implication in all of this. This present moment matters. It is on this present moment that the ideal future is built. The present world is the ‘stuff’ out of which the new world is made. Readers of Revelation cannot ignore the present moment in longing for an ideal future. That future can only come into being if the present world is ready to be transformed.

In this vision, the ‘bride of the Lamb’ is explicitly identified with the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. That means that this vision is an imagining of an ideal future Church, a Church that is renewed to be everything it was meant to be.

Consider the image of a bride. At the dawn of creation, God made a suitable helper for ha adam – the man. In Hebrew, the words are ezer k’negdow. While ezer can be translated as ‘helper,’ it more properly suggests a ‘partner.’ Within the Old Testament, the only other character who is ever designated as a ezer is God himself. K’negdow means ‘suitable’ in the sense of ‘corresponding to.’ Eve, the first ‘bride,’ is a partner corresponding to her groom, not a subordinate servant of her man. In the New Jerusalem, in the ideal future, the Church will lives its mission as the Bride of the Lamb, as a partner corresponding to Christ himself, sharing his mission to reveal his Father, sharing in his work of establishing justice, equity, mercy, peace and love.

The vision unfolds from the vantage point of a high mountain upon which the ‘New Jerusalem’ is descending from the heaven, from God. The mountain of the Holy City is Mt. Zion, a symbol of sacred space throughout the bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. This is the place where people commune with their God. As such, this renovated city is filled with the glory of God, with the bright light of his presence. This ‘brightness’ is an obvious allusion to the contrast between ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus came into the world as light, but men preferred darkness. In the New Jerusalem, all darkness has been banished.

The city is described in gigantic proportions. It is all encompassing. Its height, width and length are equal, creating a perfect cube, a symbol of balance and perfection.

There are twelve gates in the wall leading into the new city, three on each side – north, south, east and west. Each gate is inscribed with the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel and an angel is stationed at each gate. The twelve tribes of Israel are the people of the covenant, the people who entered into a relationship whereby ‘hwh would be their God and they would be his people. The implication is that entrance into the city happens only by entering into a mutual and exclusive relationship with God. The
inclusiveness and universality of this ‘new city’ is suggested by its correspondence to Lk 13:29 – ‘And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at the table in the Kingdom of God.’

The gates of the city are all adorned in pearls. While pearls are not mentioned in the Old Testament, they appear in the New Testament as signs of those things that are of great value. In Mt 13:45-46, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he finds one of true value, he sells all that he has to acquire it. That is the value of entering into this new city. These gates never close. This great value is always available to those who seek it.

Within the Book of Revelation itself, the four corners of the earth have been presented as sources of danger. Four angels have taken their stand on these four corners, ready to unleash the destructive winds that emanate from them. It might be possible to see the angels at the gates as guards, ready to close the gates against the forces of evil. But evil has been vanquished. The gates never close and the angels, literally ‘messengers’ of God, are stationed at the gates to beckon all to come in to share in the peace, the justice, the mercy and love of God’s Kingdom.

The foundations of the wall are twelve precious stones, recalling the twelve gems on the breastplate of the high priest. Those gems represented the twelve tribes of Israel. The foundation stones are inscribed, however, with the names of the twelve Apostles. If entrance into the city is through a mutual and exclusive covenant relationship with God, the foundation of that relationship is the Church founded on the twelve Apostles, the twelve original witnesses to the truth of Jesus Christ. Recall the sayings in Matthew, ‘You have heard it said to the ancients… but I say to you…’ Jesus did not abrogate the Law, did not do away with the covenant relationship between Israel and God, but clarified it, brought it to completion. He is God’s Word made flesh, the heart and soul of what God reveals to the world. He is the foundation of all that is said in the Torah, the Law.

What might be unexpected in the vision of the New Jerusalem is that the ‘seer’ observes no temple. It was the temple on Mt. Zion that had consistently function as a symbol of sacred space, of that one place in creation where people and God commune. In the New Jerusalem, in the new world order, God is everywhere available to his people. The secular and spiritual aspects of life are merged into one way of being in the world. The image is of a ‘theocracy’ of the highest order, not a political rule based on what humanity thinks God might want, but a way of living in the world completely aligned with God’s will and design – as he intends it.

Some commentators see a difficulty in the text with the notion of the kings of the earth bringing their ‘glory’ to the new city. They point out that, in the dualistic perspective of Revelation, the world is divided into the Church, the faithful witnesses of the Lamb, and the ‘inhabitants of the earth.’ They assume that all kings, all the nations of the earth, had gathered at Armageddon and had been vanquished. So the question for them is, ‘Where do these kings and nations come from?’ The text, however, never says that ‘all’ the kings of the earth were gathered for the battle between good and evil at Armageddon. It envisions a coalition of kings who have aligned themselves as vassals to the evil of the Roman Empire. It is also suggested that other kings from beyond the control of the empire are mustered to the battle. But the whole point of the battle is that the evil of those who worship the beast is defeated.

It is to be noted that one of the ‘rewards’ of the ‘victorious’ is that they should share with Christ the role of shepherd/rule the nations of the earth with an iron rod.’ If they are to shepherd/rule the nations of the
earth, there have to be some nations for them to rule. In a number of its images, Revelation reflects a Wisdom perspective, a perspective that asserts that God has spoken his word into the world and that all people, by observing the reality of the world, can discern the means of living the ‘good life,’ can perceive the consequences of actions and see what leads to justice, peace and the good of all. It is possible to suppose that there are nations and kings, beyond the influence of evil, corrupt and self-seeking nations, who have glimpsed the truth and have tried to live by it. These are not of the Church, but neither are they fully of the world. In the end, Revelation envisions in the age to come ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders.’ The outsiders can still be drawn to the light of the Kingdom of God, or they can choose another path. The mission of the Church continues. Those who choose the other path are forever barred from the new city; those who choose the light are welcomed with open arms. In a reverse of the old order, the kings and nations bring tribute to God rather than demanding tribute and glory for themselves.

The final image of the vision of the New Jerusalem envisions a river of the waters of life flowing from the throne of God in the New Jerusalem. The image is drawn from the vision of the restoration of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 47. Both images draw on ancient, mythic cosmology in which creation unfolds from a mountain where God meets and abides with the world. From this mountain flow four rivers bringing live giving waters to the four corners of the earth. All along the river, on both sides, ‘trees’ of life grow up. These trees give their fruit ‘in due season,’ a different fruit for each month, a different fruit for each of the twelve tribes and each of the Apostles. This is sustenance, food for life that springs from the waters of life flowing from the throne of God. Moreover, the leaves are therapeutic, bringing healing for the hurts and ills of humanity. In Ezekiel, that healing was for the people of Israel as they returned from defeat and exile in Babylon. Revelation broadens the perspective. The healing is for the nations. In the new age, the pristine order of the original creation is restored and in it there is sustenance and life and healing, available for all who choose it.

The vision of the New Jerusalem imagined heaven on earth. What is my vision of heaven on earth? What would it look like? What would be the main characteristics of life in such a world? Revelation’s vision of the New Jerusalem, of heaven on earth, was clear that the ‘new’ grew out of the ‘old,’ that the ‘new’ was the ‘old’ transformed. What, in my life, would God choose to keep in a new world order? How would he transform it? What in our world and our Church would God choose to keep in the new world order? How would he transform these things? Revelation is clear that in bringing a new world order, the old order matters, how people live now matters in moving ahead to the new age. What does that mean to me? If the present moment matters in moving ahead to the new age, what do I need to change to prepare for and allow the transformation to happen? What does the community of believers, the Church need to change to prepare for and allow for the transformation to happen? What does our global village, the whole community of humanity need to change to prepare for and allow the transformation to happen?
Epilogue and Conclusion (22:6-21)

[Epilogue]

6And he said to me: These are words, faithful and true; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets sent his angel to show his servants what things must happen quickly (in quickness).

7And, behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he keeping the words of the prophecy of this book (scroll).

8And I, John, he hearing and seeing these things, and when I heard and saw, I fell to worship before the feet of the angel showing to me these things. 9And he says to me: Don’t do that! (see to it that not) Your fellow servant (slave) am I and of your brothers and of the prophets and of those keeping (observing) the words of this book. Give worship to God!

10And he says to me: You should not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. 11He doing injustice, let him do injustice still and he being unclean, let him be unclean still and the just one, let him do justice still and the holy one, let him be holy still.

12Behold! I am coming quickly; and my reward (recompense) with me I will give forth (pay out) to each as is the work (deed) of him. 13I (am) the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

14Happy are they washing their robes so that their authority (right) will be unto the tree of life and by the gates they should enter into the city. 15Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the fornicators (committers of sexual immorality) and the murderers and the idolaters and everyone loving and doing a lie.

16I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you these things to the churches; I am the root and seed (offspring) of David, the bright morning star. 17And the spirit and the bride say: Come! And the one hearing, let him say: Come! And he thirsting, let him come, he desiring, let him take water of life freely.

18I am testifying to everyone hearing the words of the prophecy of this book; if anyone should add on (to) these things, God will add (place upon) him the plagues having been written in this book. 19And if anyone should take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share from the tree of life and from the holy city (his share) of those having been written in this book.

20The one testifying these things says: Yes. I am coming quickly. Come Lord, Jesus.

[Conclusion]

21The grace of the Lord Jesus (be) with everyone.
Textual Notes

1. *Eipen moi houtoi hoi logoi pistoi kai alethinoi* – ‘he said to me this words are faithful and true.’ With 22:5, the visionary content of Revelation is concluded. 22:6-21 forms an elaborate conclusion and grand summation of the book. Everything in the ‘epilogue’ is a near exact verbal repetition of ideas and phrases that have occurred earlier in the book. As such, it would appear that the voice we hear speaking to the ‘seer’ in these verses is the messenger/angel of Christ, identified by the omniscient narrator of the opening verses of the book as having been sent explicitly to the ‘seer’ to make known the ‘Revelation of Jesus Christ’ (Rev 1:1-2).

Harrington notes that the phrase, ‘these words are faithful and true’ close the book on the same note with which it opened, the claim that what is communicated is the prophetic word of God mediated through Christ and the revelatory angel.558

While the phrase suggests, in a summary fashion, that the whole of the book, all its vision, prophetic words, and warnings to the seven Churches, are faithful and true words, it also forms a bracket with the same words in 21:5, where the ‘seer’ has been commanded again to write the faithful and true words of God, the visions of how God will make all things new. This bracketing emphasizes the truthfulness of the vision of the New Heaven and New Earth, the truthfulness of the vision of the New Jerusalem.

2. *Ho kyrios ho theos ton pneumaton ton propheton apesteilen ton angelon autou...* – ‘the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel...’ Harrington again notes that the God who sends his messenger is the ‘God of the spirit of the prophets.’ The gift of prophetic insight is a gift from God as reflected in Nm 27:16.559

While prophecy arose in Israel with the rise of the monarchy and passed away when the monarchy was no more, the mission of the prophets was that of critiquing the present order, the abuses of power in human rule, to call Israel and her kings back to covenant fidelity. Christian prophecy was a resumption of that old office in Israel in which certain people of insight were recognized as gifted by God to ‘read the signs of the times’ and critique the abuses and infidelities of the present age. In is in this sense that ‘John’ of Revelation is classed as a Christian prophet. The mention of prophecy here is a recollection of the first Beatitude in Revelation (1:3) – ‘Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and those paying attention (observing, keeping) to the things having been written in it, for the time is near.’

3. *Dexai tois doulois autois* – ‘to show his servants.’ While Harrington argues the ‘his servants/slaves/bondsmen’ refers to Christian prophets,560 it is to be argued that the ‘witnesses,’ ‘the holy ones,’ ‘those who have overcome’ are regularly considered the ‘servants’ and ‘followers’ of the Lamb. It would be a mistake to consider the ‘servants’ for whom the message of the book is intended to be restricted to a special group within the Church, even a group whose purpose and mission is to critique the present state of affairs and pass on God’s true word and will. The opening Beatitude makes it clear that the message is intended for all and that all those who hear it and take heed are included in the ‘blessed.’

Again there is a return to the beginning with the idea that that which is recorded in the book is to come to pass quickly, *genesthai en tachei*, (see 1:1).

*Idou erchomai tachy* – ‘Behold! I am coming soon/quickly.’ ‘Behold!’ in this case indicates a heightened sense of anticipation. At this point, the words of Christ are directly quoted. The ‘coming’ of God/Christ is a motif running through the entire book:

a. 1:7 – ‘Behold he is coming with the clouds of heaven.’ An image that indicates pending judgment

b. 1:8 – ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the one who is and he who was, and the one who is coming.’ An image of the eternity of God foreshadowing something more to come, a final establishment of the kingdom.

c. 3:11 ‘I am coming quickly.’ In the Letter to Philadelphia, this is a word of assurance and encouragement for the faithful community to ‘hang on,’ the vindication of God is coming soon.

558 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
559 Ibid.
560 Ibid.
d. 16:15 ‘I am coming as a thief.’ In the vision of the Sixth Bowl, this is a word of caution. God comes to judge and those who are unawares will be caught off guard. Choose justice and right NOW!

e. 22:7 ‘Behold! I am coming quickly.’ As noted, this is a heightened sense of anticipation of the coming of the Lord as the book draws to a close. It is a word of assurance that precedes the sixth beatitude of the book, a shorter form of the first beatitude in 1:3.

f. 22:12 ‘I am coming quickly.’ This leads into the statement of self identification, ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.’ This ‘coming quickly’ will inaugurate the end, the final age. God and his kingdom will definitely ‘be here.’

g. 22:20 – ‘Yes, I am coming quickly.’ The final affirmation of a consummation in the book met immediately with the response, ‘Come, Lord Jesus.’

Note that there are seven instances of God/Christ’s ‘coming.’

4. **Makarios ho teron tous logous tes propheteias...** - ‘blessed is he keeping/observing the words of the prophecy...’ Harrington notes that ‘Beatitudes’ were frequent in prophetic literature, designed to encourage practical implementation of the prophetic message or the observance/keeping of the covenant. He notes that 22:6-7 is a conscious echo of 1:1-3, a circling back to the beginning of the book.\(^{561}\)

5. **Kago Ioannes...** - ‘And I, John...’ In 1:1-9, an epistolary form is evident in which the author of the letter identifies himself. It is often common to repeat the self-identification at the end of a letter. Harrington concludes that this ‘self-identification’ precludes any pseudonymity for Revelation.\(^{562}\) That is an assertion that can certainly be contested inasmuch as we have no idea who this ‘John’ might be. It is possible that, like the Catholic Epistles, it is written under the assumed name of a noted person or Apostle (the beloved disciple?), or some other ‘John’ of some note in the early Church, especially in Asia. It was common for apocalyptic writings to be penned pseudonymously. In the end, we have no idea who the author is.

6. **Epesa proskynesai emprosthen ton podon tou angelou...** - ‘I fell to worship before the feet of the angel...’ What is recorded in vv. 8-9 is a repetition/paraphrase of 19:10. In one sense, this falling before the angel was the ‘low point’ for the ‘seer.’ He mistook the messenger for the message and the one sending the message. This, apparently was an easy trap to fall into. In I Cor 1:12 and 3:4, Paul describes the false situation in which members of the Church in Corinth claimed loyalty to the one through whom they received the message, missing the point that the message, the Good News, originates in and is addressed to all by Jesus Christ. ‘John’ sees this as a subtle form of ‘idolatry,’ and shares his own story to offer a word of caution to the members of the Church. Faithfulness is owed to Christ not to any human or ‘angelic’ messenger or prophet. The end of the book reiterates the warning. Harrington notes that there seems to be a closer identification of the ‘brothers’ of the ‘seer’ with ‘prophets’ in this instance than was apparent in 19:10. He states further that, in 19:10, ‘those who hold the testimony of Jesus’ are now identified as ‘those who keep the words of this book.’\(^{563}\) This conclusion can be too restrictive. It would appear rather than the text counts as the ‘brothers of ‘John’ prophets, faithful ones, those who hear and keep to the words of the Revelation of Jesus Christ in the book, the holy ones, those who ‘overcome.’ In short, there is a brotherhood of all Christians envisioned in the book. It is members of this brotherhood who are addressed by Jesus with the words, ‘But I hold against you that...’ Revelation, as prophecy, intends to critique and correct the mistakes of the Church and its members, mistakes and misunderstandings that become apparent even in the one chosen to share the Revelation of Christ to his brothers. The command of the interchange between the ‘seer’ and the angel, ‘Worship God,’ is the final answer of revelation. All the criticisms of wayward Christians, all the prases and ‘beatitudes’ address to the faithful, to those who ‘overcome’ hinge on the single-mindedness of their adherence to God, their worship of him.

7. **Kai legei moi me sphragises tous logous tes propheteias...** - ‘and he says to me: Don’t seal the words of this prophecy.’ Note that another pattern of ‘he says/said...’ is emerging here, in 22:6, 9 and 10. The first

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\(^{561}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{562}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{563}\) *Ibid.*
is met with John’s address to his readers that he who saw and heard the things recorded in the book fell before the feet of the angel to worship. The second instance, in v. 10 is a repetition of the command from 19:10, but with the added note that all those who read and observe the words of the book are counted among the brothers of the ‘seer.’ Having established and reminded the reader of how easy it is to turn away from the right path, the angel guide gives a final exhortation.

Harrington notes that the command not to seal up the words of the prophecy of the book is the exact opposite of the command given to Daniel (see Dn 8:26; 12:4, 9). Daniel is commanded: ‘Seal up the vision, for it pertains to many days hence.’ In Rev 10:4, the ‘seer’ is also commanded to ‘seal up’ what he has heard in the voices of the thunders, to seal away words of doom and destruction in the face of God’s mercy. Here, explicitly, and in the context of the vision of the New Heaven, New Earth, and New Jerusalem which has occurred immediately before this epilogue, the ‘seer’ is commanded not to seal up the words of the prophecy because the time is near. This again refers back to the beginning of the book, 1:3, the first Beatitude, in which those reading and keeping the words of the book are declared to be ‘blessed,’ ‘fortunate,’ ‘happy.’

Harrington notes that the exhortations pair injustice with ritual impurity and doing justice with ritual purity. This pairing appears to be a clear allusion to Prv 21:3 – ‘To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.’ The Hebrew words are s’daqah, ‘righteousness/justice’ and mishpat, ‘judgment/discrimination/impartiality.’ The suggestion is that ‘ritual impurity,’ those things that bar one from participating in worship and sacrifice, are not primarily external accidents, but justice and fairness in dealing with others. This was the fault of the empire that ruled by greed and self-seeking, not with an intent to be fair and just, to protect and promote the common good. In the same way, those who compromise and make accommodations with the ruling order are equally rendered ‘unclean,’ unfit to render God true worship.

In this regard, Harring observes that the image is drawn from Dan 12:10 – ‘Many shall purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined; but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand; but those who are wise shall understand.’ He concludes that, rather than being deterministic, this verse is a warning and exhortation, similar to Rev 16:15 – ‘Behold, I come like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake.’ Anticipating the Beatitude of 22:14, the sense of the verse is that it is not too late for conversion. The exhortation, combined with the Beatitude, present a call to the reader to put his life in order.

9. Idou erchomai tachy – ‘Behold! I am coming quickly.’ These words continue words of Christ himself. They echo the words of Christ in the Letter to Philadelphia, 3:11, which are followed by the exhortation to ‘hold fast,’ to ‘remain faithful.’ Both there and here there is mention of the ‘reward’ for those who ‘hold fast,’ for those who ‘overcome.’ Harrington observes that the imagery of the verse is dependent on Is 40:10 – ‘Behold, the Lord comes with might… behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.’ This same idea is expressed roughly in the middle of the book, Rev 11:18 – ‘The time has come for rewarding your servants the prophets and your people and those who fear your name, both small and great.’

A significant aspect, in 11:18, which is suggested here by way of a retrospective look to what has gone before, is the idea of ‘those who fear your name.’ In both intertestamental and New Testament times, ‘God fearers’ was a designation for those outside ‘synagogue fellowship,’ Gentiles, who ‘feared God,’ who had a right relationship with the God of Israel, but who did not fully join in the Jewish faith and community. For some circumcision may have been the block to full conversion; for others, they were seekers, but reluctant to convert fully because of the circumstances of the surrounding culture and

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564 Ibid.
565 NRSV translation.
566 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
567 Ibid.
society. Yet they were people who acknowledged God and performed his ‘works.’ ‘God fearers’ appear in the Gospel stories, especially in Luke. These ‘God fearers’ were among the first Gentile converts to Christianity, accepted into the Christian community without imposing on them the full observance of the Jewish Law – a sore point between Jews and the developing Christian Church.

10. *Apodounai hekasto hos to ergon eston autou* – ‘I will give back/repay to each as his work is.’ This is a retrospective recollection of 2:23 – ‘I will give to you, to each according to your works.’ It is also reminiscent of the scene of the Last Judgment in which it is implied that the works of people are recorded in the open scrolls and according to their works they will be included or excluded from the Book of Life.

11. *Alpha kai to O* – ‘the Alpha and the Omega.’ The title here is applied specifically to Christ while it referred to God in 1:8 and 21:6. The assimilation of the Christ with the Father is now complete. Note the variation in the use of the phrase. In 1:8, God was referred to as ‘the one who is and he who was and the one who is coming.’ In 21:6, the phrase was modified to read ‘the beginning and the end.’ There is was noted that God had already come, occasioning the modification in the phrase. It was also noted that ‘Alpha and Omega’ along with ‘beginning and end’ refers both to the eternity of God and to the fullness/completeness of his word. Here, applied to the Christ, the fullness of God’s word is made explicit – the Alpha and Omega is the ‘first and last,’ but more, temporally, it is also the beginning and end. Christ is the Word of God made flesh. He encompasses all of God’s truth and is God’s word, his expression of himself throughout all eternity.

12. *Makarioi hoi plynontes tas stolas auton…* - ‘Blessed are those washing their robes…’ Here is the final Beatitude of the book. It is pronounced by Christ himself. The phrase, here, is an ellipsis of the phrase in 7:14, in the context of the Song of Victory. There it is noted that they washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and made them white – ‘white’ being a symbol of righteousness. To ‘wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb’ is suggestive of suffering and is an assimilation of the ‘victorious’ with the Lamb, the Christ. Harrington suggests that the Beatitude has baptismal overtones. Even early baptismal theology considered it a ‘dying and rising with Christ.’

13. *Hina estai he exousia auton epi to xylon tes zoes…* - ‘so that their authority/right will be over the tree of life.’ This appears to another of Revelation’s reversals of elements in the original creation. In the Garden of Eden, the man and woman had access to and dominion over all the trees in the Garden except for the tree in the middle of the Garden – alternately the ‘tree of life’ and the ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil.’ (On the ‘tree of life’ see note #17, p. 37.) It can be suggested that ‘tree of life’ has a correspondence with the Cross, and ‘authority’ implies a ‘right to the tree of life,’ a ‘right to the Cross and the redemptive sacrifice’ accomplished there. Referring to the reference to the ‘tree of life’ in 22:2, where they produce fruit each month for the twelve tribes/twelve apostles, and whose leaves provide healing for the nations, Harrington suggests a liturgical flavor to this image and to the entire epilogue – a suggestion of the Eucharist.

14. *Tois phylosin eiselthosin eis ten polin* – ‘by the gates they will enter into the city.’ Harrington, expanding on his perceived presence of liturgical, baptismal and Eucharistic imagery, suggests that it is through the sacraments that one gains the right, ‘authority’ to enter the city, to become part of God’s faithful people, to dwell in heaven on earth. It can also be noted that the image of entering the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ through gates is a familiar image from Mt 7:13-14 – ‘Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.’ This image fits the warnings and exhortations found in the Epilogue.

15. *Exo hoi kynes…* - ‘Outside are the dogs...’ This phrase is followed by another ‘vice list,’ those throughout the book who have set themselves in opposition to the Lamb, those who live by the corrupt values of the

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568 Ibid.
569 Ibid.
570 Ibid.
571 NRSV translation.
world. The collective designation, ‘dogs,’ applies to a five-fold list of evildoers: sorcerers, the sexually immoral, murderers, idolaters, and those living and doing falsehood. This is again a typical list of those who live by the corrupt values of the world. It is similar to the list in 21:8, where there was a list of seven vices, all seven illustrating what made people ‘cowardly.’ Here there is another instance of a pattern of five. The pattern is once more suggestive, recalling the five-fold command to humanity at the beginning of creation. The ‘dogs’ are those who have flaunted and corrupted the divine decree for humanity and brought darkness into the world.

Harrington observes that ‘dogs’ is a traditional Jewish designation for heathen Gentiles. In Phil 3:2, Paul applied the designation to some of his fellow Christians, turning back on them their own insulting estimation of Gentiles. The problem of ‘Judaizers’ is also reflected in Revelation. The words of Christ re-inforce the universal outlook of Revelation, the offer of salvation to all, but it does so with a solemn warning, those who believe themselves to be ‘insiders,’ may be wrong, and those they consider to be ‘outsiders,’ may actually be worthy of entering the city.

16. *Ego iesous epempsa ton angelon mou martyresai humon tauta en tais ekklesiais* – ‘I, Jesus, have sent my angel/messenger to testify/witness these things in the churches.’ Here is another element of closure harking back to the beginning of the book (see 1:1, 4). The ‘testimony’ is to be considered the entire content of the book.

17. *Ego eimi he rhiza kai to genos dauid* – ‘I AM the root and offspring of David.’ Jesus, in his own voice, is laying claim to his true identity. Significant are the words *ego eimi*. Those words in Greek are suggestive of ‘hwh in Hebrew, the tetragrammaton, the unutterable name of God. Harrington observes that ‘root and offspring of David,’ is an allusion to Is 11:1, and is one of the prophetic texts applied to Jesus to show him to be the fulfillment of Messianic expectations. In the Scroll Vision, 5:5, one of the elders applies the ‘title’ to the lion of Judah found worthy to open the seals. What the ‘seer’ finds, is the ‘slain Lamb standing.’

18. *Ho aster ho lampros ho proinos* – ‘the bright morning star.’ Here, Jesus designates himself as the ‘bright morning star.’ Harrington recognizes a dependence of this phrase onNm 24:17 – ‘A star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.’ He sees the context again as Messianic. It is also to be noted that in the closing in the Letter to Thyatira, Christ promises that those who persevere and hold to his works will receive authority over the nations, will shepherd them with an iron rod, and will receive the morning star just as he had received it from his father. (see also note #21, p. 65).

19. *To pneuma kai he nymphe legousin erchou* – ‘The Spirit and the bride say: Come!’ Harrington observes that the ‘spirit’ is the spirit of Jesus who inspires the prophets (2:7, 14:13, 19:10) and the ‘bride’ is the Church (21:2, 9). At the end of all the visions, at the end of glimpsing what can be, the prophetic spirit and the Church cry out to the Christ: ‘Come!’ Bring this vision about. Next comes an exhortation to those who hear and read the book, who are called to take it to heart. They are exhorted (let them say) to respond in kind, to echo the prayer, ‘Come!’ Balanced against two calls for Christ to ‘Come!’ is the exhortation for the one who is thirsty to come, to drink the water of life freely. Harrington believes that there is a liturgical pattern to these statements that matches a similar liturgical pattern discerned in 1:4-8.

Robert Alter, in treating Hebrew/biblical poetry, notes that the older idea of parallelism of members is insufficient to account for the artistry of biblical poetry. He finds variation, specification, intensification, opposition, and subtle nuances of meaning in the so-called parallels. If Alter’s techniques are applied to these lines, something more than an observation that they are liturgical can be discerned:

And the Spirit and the bride say: Come!
And the one hearing, let him say: Come!

572 Wilfrid Harrington, *op. cit.*  
And he thirsting, let him come
he desiring, let him take water of life freely.

In the first verset, the ‘spirit’ and the ‘bride’ implore the presence of Christ. What is implied is the essence of the Church, the bride of Christ imbued with a prophetic spirit that can discern and live the truth. This essence of the Church implores Christ to ‘Be present.’

As is often the case in Psalms, an initial proclamation calls for a response on the part of those present at worship. This is the sense of the second verset. Let the individual members of the Church, the ones to whom the words of this book are proclaimed, echo the cry of the essence of the Church, ‘Come, Christ, be present.’ The movement from the first to second verset is marked by a narrowing of focus, from the idea of the Church as a whole, to a focus on her individual members.

The third verset changes the whole ‘motion’ or ‘direction’ of the prayer. The ‘Church,’ both in its entirety and in its individual members now turns from seeking the presence of Christ to carrying out the mission of Christ – ‘Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.’ The Church and her members pray, ‘let those thirsting come.’ There is a recognition that what those thirsting seek is to be found in the Church and that Christ’s promise to ‘Come’ and ‘be present’ with his Church is dependent on the Church accomplishing the works of Christ. This is the ‘middle ground’ of the prayer, the recognition of a ‘partnership’ with Christ, the recognition of needing Christ and ‘being Christ’ to the world.

The fourth and final verset provides clarity and specification. The one who is thirsty, the one who desires, the one who ‘chooses’ can have life, can drink freely of the water of life. The ‘water of life,’ a spirit of Christ is present in the Church and refreshes her. The ‘water of life’ feeds the desire of those seeking God, enlivens them, incorporates them into the life of the Church, which is nothing less than the life of Christ.

20. Martyro ego panti to akouonti tous legous tes prophetias tou bibliou toutou… ‘I testify to everyone hearing the words of the prophecy of this book…’ The emphatic personal pronoun ego adds a note of solemnity to the warning expressed here. The warning is modeled on Dt 4:2 – ‘You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you’ and 12:32 – ‘You must diligently observe everything that I command you; do not add to it or take anything from it.’

Harrington notes that similar warnings are found in the apocalyptic writings I Enoch 104:1-11 and II Enoch 48:74-75.

If the observations about ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ are correct, that they indicate the fullness and completeness, the absolute reliability of God’s word, this warning, from God’s ‘Word made flesh’ is particularly solemn. It claims that the Church and all its members have everything they need to live as God’s faithful and holy ones and that any deviation from such fidelity is but a sign of being ‘cowardly,’ of compromising with the power structures of the world, of deceiving oneself in the manner of ‘Now God said, but what he really meant was…’ The warning asserts that those who deviate from God’s word, adding anything to it, will experience the plagues recorded in the book – but, again, the plagues are ‘signs’ to get people back on the right path, back to fidelity. If anyone takes away from these words, they will be taken away from the tree of life and from citizenship in the Holy City.

21. Legei ho martyrion tauta – ‘the one testifying/witnessing to these things says’ legei introduces a quote, but it also breaks frame. We hear the voice of the ‘seer’ inserted into the speech of the Christ. The frame break accomplishes two things: 1) it lends emphasis to what follows, ‘Yes, I am coming quickly!’ 2) it makes the assertion that, as important as the words of the Christ and the guiding angels were for the ‘seer’ throughout the book, so important is the ‘seer’ and the words of the book to all later readers. God’s word and will, the revelation of Jesus Christ is mediated to us through the words of this book. ‘He testifying these things’ is Jesus Christ, the faithful witness of 1:5 and 3:14. But we have access to his testimony only through the words of this book.

577 NRSV translation.
578 NRSR translation.
579 Wilfrid Harrington, op. cit.
22. *Amen erchou kyrie iesou* – ‘Amen! Come Lord Jesus!’ The speaker of these words is ambiguous. It could be the ‘seer’ in response to Christ’s proclamation that he is coming soon. It could be the voice of the ‘omniscient narrator’ through whom the reader hears the words of the ‘seer.’ He gives his assent to the truth and faithful witness of the book. It could be the ‘heavenly choir’ who, in liturgical settings respond to proclamations of God’s goodness and glory. Finally, it could be the response of the reader, drawn into the drama of the narrative and assenting to its truth, expressing the desire of all ages of Christians for the presence of the Christ with his bride, the Church. Again, noting the author’s penchant for multi-valent images and expressions, it is likely that all ‘voices’ are intended – a blending of the heavenly and the earthly, the past and the present in an urgent prayer, ‘Come!’ Harrington observes that the expression, ‘Come!’ echoes the ancient Aramaic prayer, *marana tha*. These words are found in 1 Cor 16:22 and in the Didache, in a Eucharistic context.

23. *He charis tou kyriou iesou (christou) meta panton (hagion amen)* – ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus (Christ) be with all (the holy ones. Amen). The words in parentheses are in the Nestle-Alland text. Harrington observes that this reading is based on the Sinaiticus text tradition. In the Alexandrian text tradition there is a variant reading in which these words are omitted. He concludes that the variant reading is preferable. Harrington also observes that the book, which begins with an epistolary formula, (1:4), also ends with a type of final greeting customary in letters. The formula is like those of Pauline letters. ‘Grace’ indicates God’s favor, his benefits, his efficacious desire for human salvation, embodied in Jesus and offered to all.

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Commentary

The visionary and prophetic content of the book ends with 22:5. 22:6-21 form an elaborate conclusion and grand summation of the book’s main message and theme: The Christ is coming soon. There is hope, a realistic hope for God’s faithful witnesses.

In a grand return to the beginning, it is to be assumed that the dominant voice speaking to the ‘seer’ in the epilogue is the ‘revealing angel’ sent to ‘John’ at the beginning of the book. The first words of this ‘revealing angel, ‘These words are faithful and true,’ serve a dual purpose: 1) they form a bracket with the the same words in 21:5; 2) they refer back to 1:1-2, the introduction to the book by the omniscient narrator who announces that God’s angel was sent to reveal to God’s servant what was about to happen quickly. In the first case, there is a promise and a hope. Contained within the brackets is a vision of renewal and restoration, of ‘heaven on earth.’ In the second case, there is a vast testimony to God’s will for salvation and the struggles between this saving will of God and the powers of the world that stand opposed to it. The struggles, the signs, the hardships and the rewards – these are all true and part of God’s plan. All these things will come quickly.

In most apocalyptic writings, whose general purpose is to give hope to people in hopeless situations, there was an expectation that would act, and act soon, to overthrow the present order, to vanquish the evil ones and vindicate the just, to bring about a great reversal of fortunes. In Revelation, however, the situation is far different. In the view of Revelation, the definitive act by which God ‘changes’ everything has already happened in the Cross of Jesus Christ. The implication is that, in this new order initiated by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Messianic age which precedes the end, it is God’s plan and will that the Church, the community of God’s faithful people, should exist in a world where there is evil, where evil impinges upon the rights and freedoms of the Church. It is God’s plan and will that the Church carry out its mission within this world, suffer hardships as Jesus did in order to bring the transformation to its completion – to restore things to the original order of creation, to help to bring about heaven on earth. Somehow, it is in that context, that ‘He is coming soon’ has to be understood.

Abruptly, in v. 7, Christ speaks directly, no longer through the mediation of his revealing angel. He states explicitly: ‘Behold! I am coming quickly.’ It is to be noted that the idea of the coming of Christ, coming quickly, is a motif that runs through the book:

a. 1:7 – ‘Behold he is coming with the clouds of heaven.’ An image that indicates pending judgment
b. 1:8 – ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the one who is and he who was, and the one who is coming.’ An image of the eternity of God foreshadowing something more to come, a final establishment of the kingdom.
c. 3:11 ‘I am coming quickly.’ In the Letter to Philadelphia, this is a word of assurance and encouragement for the faithful community to ‘hang on,’ the vindication of God is coming soon.
d. 16:15 ‘I am coming as a thief.’ In the vision of the Sixth Bowl, this is a word of caution. God comes to judge and those who are unawares will be caught off guard. Choose justice and right NOW!
e. 22:7 ‘Behold! I am coming quickly.’ As noted, this is a heightened sense of anticipation of the coming of the Lord as the book draws to a close. It is a word of assurance that precedes the sixth beatitude of the book, a shorter form of the first beatitude in 1:3.
f. 22:12 ‘I am coming quickly.’ This leads into the statement of self identification, ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.’ This ‘coming quickly’ will inaugurate the end, the final age. God and his kingdom will definitely ‘be here.’

g. 22:20 – ‘Yes, I am coming quickly.’ The final affirmation of a consummation in the book met immediately with the response, ‘Come, Lord Jesus.’

Note that there are seven instances of God/Christ’s ‘coming.’

Christ’s announcement of his appearance soon is followed by the sixth of the seven Beatitudes woven throughout the texture of the book. The last two are spoken by Christ himself. This Beatitude is a shortened form of the one with which the book began, ‘Blessed is he keeping the words of the prophecy of this book.’

The idea of prophecy has played a large role in Revelation. While it seems undeniable that apocalyptic writing is an outgrowth of prophetic literature, the two forms of writing have different purposes. Prophecy envisions a change from within. It is ‘satiric,’ in the literary sense. Prophecy adopts the perspective of the ‘opponent’ in order to display its flaws. It works to accomplish renewal and restoration, to critique what is false and evil in the world in order to change things, to restore things to the way they should always have been. Apocalyptic envisions an ‘overthrow’ from without, a wiping away of the present order so as to usher in something completely new. Since that decisive event that changes everything, in the perspective of the Book of Revelation, has already happened this book stands somewhere in between traditional ‘prophecy’ and ‘apocalyptic.’ Since the decisive event has already happened, the reader is not free to hope for a complete overthrowing of the present order of reality, but is challenged to live in the world as it is and to work for its transformation.

The voice of Jesus Christ dominates the Epilogue, from v. 7 through v. 19. Though he words are ‘mediated’ by the reporting speech of the author, are ‘mediated’ through the words of the book, his ‘quoted’ speech allows a sense for the reader of hearing him directly. The quoted speech creates a sense of intimacy with the Lord.

It is important to note, then, how ‘John,’ in vv. 8-9, breaks into the words of Christ, interrupts him. First, he asserts that he is the one who has seen and heard the things recorded in this book directly. He has been chosen and gifted. He is the one who mediates God’s word to the reader. Then he offers a repetition/paraphrase of 19:10, ‘I fell to worship before the feet of the angel showing me these things.’ In one sense, this falling before the angel was the ‘low point’ for the ‘seer.’ He mistook the messenger for the message and the one sending the message. This, apparently was an easy trap to fall into. In 1 Cor 1:12 and 3:4, Paul describes the false situation in which members of the Church in Corinth claimed loyalty to the one through whom they received the message, missing the point that the message, the Good News, originates in and is addressed to all by Jesus Christ. ‘John’ sees this as a subtle form of ‘idolatry,’ and shares his own story to offer a word of caution to the members of the Church. Faithfulness is owed to Christ not to any human or ‘angelic’ messenger or prophet. The end of the book interrupts the words of Jesus Christ to reiterate the warning. It’s as if the author is saying, ‘Here, right in the middle of Christ’s own words, remember how easy it is to mistake the messenger for the message, to hear and honor false prophets, false messages, to slip into subtle forms of idolatry.’

‘And he said...’ There is a sense, in the resumption of Christ’s words, of impatience. There’s a sense, in the narrative flow, of Christ saying, ‘Okay, you’ve made your point. Now LISTEN! You don’t get the last word. This isn’t about you.’ In reviewing the Letters to the Churches and the fact that Christ ‘held against them’ that they were more interested in having what they had to say heard, convinced that they
had the right angle on how to live Christianity, the very pattern of the interruption of Christ’s words highlights the basic need of the Church and all its members to adhere to the message, the original message, the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ and not the false interpretations of that message that allowed people to accommodate Christ to the way they wanted to live instead of accepting the challenge of Christ and living as he wants us to live.

The words of Christ make this clear. He tells the seer not to seal up the words of the prophecy of this book. Earlier, the ‘seer’ had heard the voices of the thunders and was ready to write. It is assumed that the voices of the thunders spoke of judgment and doom. That was to be sealed away in favor of a message of repentance, a message of the possibility of God’s mercy. The message of the book has been to foster a radical form of Christianity, a way of living in the world that allowed for no compromise or accommodation with the surrounding culture. This message is not to be sealed away for some later time; the time is short; the moment of salvation is NOW. Now is the time to live this radical Christianity.

The next words of Christ are confusing. He states that the one who is unjust will be unjust and the one being holy, set apart, will be holy. It sounds, on the surface, deterministic. Instead it is an observation that people will live by their choices, but that the time is short. It is a call for people to get their lives in order, now, before it is too late.

The urgency of the present moment is carried in the repetition of ‘Behold! I am coming quickly.’ Note that these words in v. 12 form a bracket with the same words in v. 7. In v. 7, the words are followed by a shortened form of the Beatitude with which the book opened, calling for all to heed and keep the words of the book. In v. 12, they are followed by Christ’s promise of a reward for that faithful adherence. The promise of recompense or reward echoes the promise from the Letter to Philadelphia, the most positive of any of the Letters to the Seven Churches. Reward is to be based on ‘works,’ calling to mind the Gospel saying in Mt 7:15-20:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inside are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.  

What appears to be the intent, here, is similar to the correction of a misunderstanding and misappropriation of the teaching of Paul that faith alone saves found in the Letter of James. The misconception centered on the idea that if one has faith, his actions don’t matter. To this the Letter of James countered:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works is dead. (Jas 2:14-17)  

The whole section asserts that profession faith by itself is not the essence of Christian life. To be followers of the Lamb it is necessary to show faith and faithfulness in how we live, in what we do.

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581 NRSV translation.
582 NRSV translation
In prophetic literature, a frequent technique used to conclude an oracle is to ‘punctuate’ it by ending with a phrase like, ‘Thus says the Lord.’ Sometimes the phrase is modified to be a direct quote from God such as, ‘I am the Lord and I have spoken.’ In either case, the phrase is often expanded to list attributes or actions of God. This section of Christ’s words at the end of Revelation is concluded by employing this technique: ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.’ With these words, the assimilation of Christ to the Father is made full and complete. As one with the Father, ‘the Alpha and the Omega,’ Jesus is eternal, ‘the beginning and the end.’ As the Word of God made flesh, the gift of God of himself to humanity in words, he is ‘the Alpha and the Omega,’ ‘the first and the last.’ He totally encompasses everything God has to say about himself, everything God is.

The words of Jesus end with the final Beatitude of the book and a final self-identification and assertion of the authority of what the book has to say to the Church. The Beatitude incorporates a truncated form of the description of the faithful in the Song of Victory, 7:14. There it was noted that the ‘victorious’ were those who ‘washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb’ and made them white — a symbol of righteousness. In the Beatitude, ‘Blessed are they who have washed their robes’ suggests the assimilation through suffering of the victorious with Christ. Those who have done so are given ‘authority,’ a right to or access to the ‘tree of life.’ At the dawn of creation, Adam and Eve experienced God’s blessings, but were restricted from having a right to the tree of life. They failed the test. Humanity, from the start, had a tendency to be self-seeking. To those who ‘overcome,’ to those who join Christ to take a stand against the false values of this world, access to the ‘tree of life’ is granted. The original design of creation is restored to its fullest extent.

The origin of Beatitudes can be traced to the ‘blessings and curses’ of ancient covenants. The form was adapted for the blessings and woes of prophetic writings and deployed also in the contrasts between the wise and the foolish, the righteous and evil in Wisdom writings. As such, it is not surprising to see the last Beatitude of Revelation followed by a contrastive statement. What follows the Beatitude, with its promise that those who have aligned themselves with Christ will enter through the gates of the city, is a description of those ‘outside.’ This is a ‘vice’ list similar to that found in 21:8. That list contained seven ‘vices’ preceded and summarized by the word ‘cowardly.’ The ‘cowardly’ were completely and perfectly corrupt, those who embraced the evils that aligned them with the corrupt power structures of the world. Here, there are five ‘vices’ preceded and summarized by the word ‘dogs.’ In Jewish tradition, ‘dogs’ was a contemptuous designation for heathen Gentiles. By extension, the contempt is applied also to false Christians as well as the pagan purveyors of corruption. Given the imagery in the Beatitude of access to the ‘tree of life’ in the creation story, it is not hard to imagine that the ‘five vices’ are a complete undoing of the original order of creation carried in the five commands addressed to humanity in Gn 1:28. In the end, then, vv. 14-15 is a final summary regarding the two ways of life explored in the Book of Revelation. Those aligned with Christ enter the Holy City, Heaven on Earth, by the wide open gates; those aligned against Christ are forever excluded, on the outside like savenging, mongrel dogs.

The final words of Jesus occur in v. 16, a statement lending authority to the entire book. He claims personal responsibility for sending his angel to reveal the things contained in all of Revelation. Everything written has his stamp of approval, his authority. That authority is the authority of the ‘Messiah,’ the root and offspring of David. The ‘root and seed of David’ is an allusion to Is 11:1, a text applied to Jesus as the fulfillment of messianic expectations. The imagery also recalls the words of the elder in the Scroll Vision, 5:5, that the lion of Judah, another designation for Davidic kings, was strong enough to take the scroll and open its seals. This lion of Judah, this messianic king in the line of David was perceived by the ‘seer’ to be the Lamb having been slain.
Jesus also designates himself as the ‘bright morning star.’ This phrase is drawn from Nm 24:17 – ‘A star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel,’ another phrase with messianic overtones. It is also to be noted that in the closing in the Letter to Thyatira, Christ promises that those who persevere and hold to his works will receive authority over the nations, will shepherd them with an iron rod, and will receive the morning star just as he had received it from his father.

The statements of Jesus’ authority and the weaving together of themes makes Christ’s final words a promise of shared destiny and shared rule with the Christ for those who observe and carry out his works.

The words of the ‘seer,’ ‘the prophet,’ the author of the book return in v. 17. That verse records a psalm-like antiphonal response to the immediately preceding words of Jesus and to the whole book. At the end of all the visions, at the end of glimpsing what can be, the prophetic spirit and the Church cry out to the Christ: ‘Come!’ Bring this vision about. Next comes an exhortation to those who hear and read the book, who are called to take it to heart. They are exhorted to respond in kind (let them say), to echo the prayer, ‘Come!’ Balanced against two calls for Christ to ‘Come!’ is the exhortation for the one who is thirsty to come, to drink the water of life freely.

V. 17, as a psalmic response, breaks into four versets. As has long been noted, a key characteristic of biblical poetry is parallelism, not simply saying the same thing in slightly different words, but a parallelism that introduces intensification, specification, contrast and the like. These four versets can be analyzed using the techniques of analyzing biblical poetry:

And the Spirit and the bride say: Come!
And the one hearing, let him say: Come!
And he thirsting, let him come
he desiring, let him take water of life freely.

In the first verset, the ‘spirit’ and the ‘bride’ implore the presence of Christ. What is implied is the essence of the Church, the bride of Christ imbued with a prophetic spirit that can discern and live the truth. This essence of the Church implores Christ to ‘Be present.’

As is often the case in Psalms, an initial proclamation calls for a response on the part of those present at worship. This is the sense of the second verset. Let the individual members of the Church, the ones to whom the words of this book are proclaimed, echo the cry of the essence of the Church, ‘Come, Christ, be present.’ The movement from the first to second verset is marked by a narrowing of focus, from the idea of the Church as a whole, to a focus on her individual members.

The third verset changes the whole ‘motion’ or ‘direction’ of the prayer. The ‘Church,’ both in its entirety and in its individual members now turns from seeking the presence of Christ to carrying out the mission of Christ – ‘Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.’ The Church and her members pray, ‘let those thirsting come.’ There is a recognition that what those thirsting seek is to be found in the Church and that Christ’s promise to ‘Come’ and ‘be present’ with his Church is dependent on the Church accomplishing the works of Christ. This is the ‘middle ground’ of the prayer, the recognition of a ‘partnership’ with Christ, the recognition of needing Christ and ‘being Christ’ to the world.

The fourth and final verset provides clarity and specification. The one who is thirsty, the one who desires, the one who ‘chooses’ can have life, can drink freely of the water of life. The ‘water of life,’ the
spirit of Christ is present in the Church and refreshes her. The ‘water of life’ feeds the desire of those seeking God, enlivens them, incorporates them into the life of the Church, which is nothing less than the life of Christ.

It is possible to sum up the whole of the little poem by saying, ‘We look for Christ until he finds us.’

In vv. 18-19, the author of the book brings what he has to say to a conclusion on the model of Moses when he concludes his ‘great discourses’ in Deuteronomy. Just as ‘John,’ Moses received the Torah, the revealed teaching/law of God from its true source. Just as Moses, ‘John’ mediates what has been revealed to him to the Church, the community of believers. On the model of Moses, ‘John’ concludes his writing with the caution to add nothing to nor take anything away from the words of the book. They are the words of God and his Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, and they are complete in themselves. In a symbolic gesture, it is noted that to the one who ‘adds to the words of the book’ God will add, multiply his signs, the plagues. From the one who ‘takes away from the words of the book,’ God will take away access to the ‘tree of life.’

The author adds one, final, repetitive quote. He asserts that the one testifying to the truth of what is contained in the book, the one who assures its faithfulness says: ‘I am coming quickly.’ For later readers of the book, this does not mean that they should ‘look for the signs’ of the end of the world. Rather, this promise is to be read in the light of the small poem. All subsequent generations of readers have the same responsibility to look for and come to Christ. They have the responsibility to a sign to the nations, to invite those who thirst for the truth, for the right way to live, for the proper relationship among peoples based on the proper relationship between people and God to come to the waters and drink, to enter through the gates of the Holy City. These are clear references to Baptism, to joining the community of faith and as a community of faith to carry on the works of Christ in order to bring about ‘heaven on earth.’

There is one, final acclamation in the book, ‘Come, Lord Jesus.’ What is not clear is whose voice makes this acclamation. Is it the ‘seer’ himself? Is it the Church to whom he addresses his words? Is it all subsequent generations? Is it all of these? Given the author’s penchant for ambiguity and multi-valent statements, it’s a safe bet what we can opt for ‘all of the above.’

Finally the book closes in the typical fashion of New Testament letters with a blessing on the part of the sender: The grace of the Lord, Jesus be with all.

What do I mean when I say, ‘Come Lord Jesus’? Is it true to say that we look for Christ until he finds us? What do I have to do to really look for Christ? What is the responsibility of my parish, what is my responsibility to invite others to Christ? What works of Christ do I do? How do I know that what I do is really the work of Christ?

405
Conclusions

Revelation as a Model of Christian Life

Even a cursory look at the Book of Revelation indicates that the author is interested in promoting a radical form of Christianity, a form of Christianity that allows for no compromises or accommodation with the larger, secular world. This is not a new idea. In studying the Book, we have had occasion to look at ancient Israel’s ‘Law of the Ban.’ Like much of Revelation, the ‘Law of the Ban’ seems violent, brutal, hardly what we would expect from a people who celebrate a loving and merciful God. And at face value, much of what is found in Revelation seems to be far removed from the love, compassion, forgiveness and tolerance preached and practiced by Jesus of Nazareth.

A close look at the ‘Law of the Ban’ shows that it was a symbol for a way of living in the world. Stripped of its violent connotations, the law simply said that Israel was to avoid anything and anyone who could draw them away from fidelity and devotion to their God. Historically, it is highly unlikely that, beyond the world of story in the Old Testament, Israel was ever in a position to or ever executed the ‘Law of the Ban’ on her enemies. In the story world of the Old Testament, it was an image of absolute fidelity.

The ‘Law of the Ban’ was an image that was challenged within the pages of the Old Testament itself. It has been argued that the whole Book of Joshua is a meditation on following God’s will and law and that the ‘Law of the Ban’ was used in the book as a symbolic ‘test case.’ The book imagined different circumstances in which Israel was in a position to execute the ‘Ban.’ In a number of cases, they made exceptions. When the exception was made because those who should be devoted to the Ban according to the strict dictates of the law, posed no threat to Israel’s faithfulness to her God, as in the case of Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho, the exception was considered to be right and just. When the exception was made to serve self-interest, to gain profit, to satisfy any human desire or convoluted scheming, the exception was judged as infidelity.

From the earliest times, the people of God have posed the question: ‘How are we to live in the world?’ And from time immemorial two answers have consistently emerged: 1) We live in the world by reasonably and responsibly living our traditions, preserving what gives us our sense of identity, but with an openness to the world, an openness to others and their traditions, an openness that allows us to seek a common ground; 2) We live in the world cautiously, holding fast to the practices and laws and rituals that define us, shunning all contact with external forces and ideas, preserving our integrity in the midst of a hostile environment. In sum, there are two ways of living in the world, two paths on which we can travel.

In difficult times, in times of trial and loss, a society or culture is in danger of losing itself, losing its identity. It is at such times that people become rigid, allowing no variance from cultural practices or religious teachings. This type of rigidity was in evidence during the restoration period in Israel after the Babylonian exile, reflected in the laws forbidding marriage between a Jew and a Gentile (see Ezra 10:10-11, Neh 10:31). The legalism and rigidity of the Pharisees portrayed in the Gospels is a reflection of the turmoil and loss brought about by the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. It is much more a reflection of their stance to the conditions of this time and the relationship of traditional Judaism with the emerging Christian Church than of the conditions at the time of Jesus.
The first Christian communities were born out of a belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Initially, these communities had their roots within the Jewish faith. The first Christian communities emerged as another sect within Judaism, a people comprised of a variety of such sub-groups. Very early these Jewish-Christians were joined by the ‘God fearers,’ those Gentiles intrigued by and drawn to the God of Israel and the person of Jesus Christ. Within about fifteen years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, St. Paul began his missionary journeys, taking the Good News out to the larger Gentile world.

There is good evidence that when Paul addressed his fellow Jews, he presented his arguments as a good Rabbi, he presented the meaning and message of Jesus Christ according to the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures and the writings of the Rabbis. When Paul addressed the Gentiles, he could draw on Hellenistic philosophy, mythology, and poetry to present the message of Christ in terms accessible to the thought patterns of the Gentiles. In short, Paul opted for openness to the world while remaining true to the basic, core teachings of Judaism and emerging Christianity. His letters give evidence of this. He regularly corrects misunderstandings and false teaching with reference to the core beliefs, but he did so with openness to his audiences and in terms familiar from their worlds.

Paul is remembered as the Father of Worldwide Christianity, the founder of the ‘Christian Diaspora.’

In the emerging Church a basic ‘doctrine’ developed early on. It consisted of simple statements: 1) Jesus was the Messiah, the son of God; 2) through his passion, death and resurrection he forgives sin, reconciles humanity with God; 3) this Jesus has been glorified by God the Father to whom he has returned. To these statements were added the expectation that Jesus would return as the Judge of all creation and that return was expected to be imminent, and that, in the interim, those who believed in Jesus were to go out to all the world and proclaim the Good News, preaching a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. These statements provided an original ‘deposit of faith’ that rested on the testimony of the first apostles, among whom Paul included himself.

In the period between about 70 and 100 AD, after the destruction of Jerusalem, a period of general peace prevailed for the emerging Church and for Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire. At times, as in the situation in which the Book of Revelation was written, that peace could be tentative, but there is no evidence of large scale persecutions, though individuals and even individual communities were, from time to time, oppressed by the forces of Rome. As the time of the resurrection became more an event of the past and as the original witnesses began to die off, Christians had to grapple with the reality that the second coming of Christ was not to be imminent. Within this period of time, groups of people living within the context of the Roman Empire, but holding different beliefs, struggled with the task of maintaining their distinct identities and remaining true to their beliefs while existing in a dominant society and culture that did not recognize their beliefs. Groups of both Jews and Christians are included those who sought ways of living in a ‘foreign’ world.

It is in this context that both Christians and Jews, among others, again asked the question: ‘How are we to live in the world.’ For the emerging and growing Church, the prevailing answer to the question is found in the teachings of the ‘Pastoral Epistles,’ I and II Timothy and Titus. These three letters, along with the Second Letter to the Thessalonians, the Letter to the Colossians and the Letter to the Ephesians make up the Deutero- or Pseudo-Pauline group of letters. That is, these letters, claiming to be written by Paul and showing an affinity to Paul’s thought, come from times and circumstances after Paul’s ministry and death in Rome. In general, their content represents an expansion and adaptation of Paul’s thought to new circumstances. These letters begin to grapple with the fact that the Church needs to find a way to exist in the world with the delay in the second coming of Christ and the death of the Apostles, the ‘witnesses’ to Jesus Christ.
The Pastoral Epistles give a model, the dominant model, for how Christians and the Christian community are to make their way in the larger world. They contain instructions and admonitions for the fulfillment of the pastoral office in the Christian communities. These instructions are addressed in the form of letters to Paul’s closest workers and companions, but they do not give the impression of being private letters; rather, they are official communications for ordering church discipline. As was often the case in the genuinely Pauline letters, these letters deal with the problem of false teachers, of deviations from the core ‘deposit’ of true teachings. It would seem that these false teachers represent a false from of Judaism that is mixed with Hellenistic teaching, a form of early Gnosticism. In the absence of the original apostles, who led the Church charismatically, by reason of their intimate association with Jesus, the instruction of these letters establish a Church structure to provide leadership for the communities of faith and guard against deviations from the basic message of the Christian faith. The Pastoral Letters envisioned Church officials, presbyters and bishops, ordained for their task by the laying on of hands, who, supported by the community, were charged with community leadership. To these were added deacons and widows, charged with the care of the poor and disadvantaged. The Pastors, then, are a document of an already rather far developed church law in a community which is establishing itself in the world as Paul never knew it.583

Specifically, the Pastoral Letters deal not only with what Church ‘officials’ should do, but with the roles of the laity in worship and in everyday life. In this, a strong influence of Hellenistic religious practices can be discerned, the adoption of pious acts and ritual that open Christianity to the larger world but does not conflict with core teachings. The Hellenistic religious vocabulary found in the Pastors is also closely related to Jewish-Hellenistic philosophy and ethics. The ‘voice’ heard in the Letters, claiming to be Paul, sets out not only a Church order, but ethical teaching and injunctions for combatting false Gnostic or Gnostic-like teachings. It is very likely that the false teaching dealt with in the letters is a combination of speculative mythology and rigid legalism and asceticism. This false teaching has points of contact with Greek Mystery Religions and unorthodox Judaism. These forms of religious thought denigrated the value of creation and sought escape from the ‘evil material world’ in a spiritual flight to gnosis – a superior intellection insight and special knowledge of the essense of reality. The letters are at pains to insist that creation is positively good, and to insist that nothing in the created order is to be rejected so long as it is accepted as gift from the creator. Within the structure of the Church established by the Pastoral Letters, presbyters had the role of preaching the word and refuting false teachings. The Bishop, episcopus, is a concept borrowed from the Greek world, a kind of financial and legal official in the Greek city-states. The early Bishop was tasked with administrative tasks for the community in much the same way that the Qumran Community had ‘administrators.’ In Judaism, and in early Christianity, especially in the original Jerusalem community, ‘elders’ functioned as a committee with oversight of the community. By the time of the Pastoral Letters, the role of the elders was transformed into the structure of specific ordained ministries, each with a specific purpose in the community. In the end, the Pastoral Epistles confront us with the phenomenon of early, or emerging catholicism in the NT. With the delay in the parousia, the death of the original witnesses to the Christ event, and the increasing threat of false teachings, the church responded by developing such institutional features as the deposit, the regularly ordained ministry of presbyter-bishops, to evolve after NT times into a single bishop presiding over a corporate presbytery with deacons, and a structured catechism.584

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The model for living Christianity in the larger world provided by the Pastoral Epistles includes a defined set of teachings which cannot be ignored or contradicted. The adherence to orthodox teaching is safeguarded by a structure of Church order, specific roles and ministries to govern and administer the Church, assure correct teaching and combat falsehood. This way of living in the world has an openness to the surrounding world, adopting not only vocabulary but religious practices and ritual actions that do not conflict with authentic Church teaching and make the Church more appealing — or at least less threatening to the dominant culture of the surrounding world. In the end, this is the model of the Church in the world that has prevailed and, more or less, accounts for the shape of the Church today.

In examining the context out of which the Book of Revelation grew, the same social and cultural conditions that gave rise to the Pastoral Epistles were also evident. Remaining true to the basic, core teachings of the faith is as much a concern in Revelation as it is in the Pastorals. Addressing the need to not only exist, but to survive in the surrounding world is an issue in both. For the author of Revelation, however, the problem of existing in the social, cultural, economic and political world of the Roman Empire was much more of an issue, an issue that directly impacted adherence to the core teachings of the faith. A specific problem addressed in Revelation centers on the compromises and accommodations that the Churches in the Province of Asia had made with the larger world. There was an apparent attitude that, as long as one said he believed, what he did was of no real consequence. He could sacrifice to idols, he could engage in self-seeking business practices or political scheming with no consequences. He could live the values of the world while professing the values of Jesus Christ. For the author of Revelation, this was not an option. And a particular danger perceived by the author of Revelation was a ‘Church structure’ that supported openness to the larger world, an openness that could easily degenerate into lip-service Christianity. For the author of Revelation, what you do must match what you say.

For the author of Revelation, the model of living Christianity in the larger world was to present a distinct and obvious alternative to the values of the social context in which the Church existed. His model of living in the world was centered on witnessing, on being a prophetic voice, on absolute resistance to anything that diverges from pure Christian works in imitation of Jesus Christ, pure worship untainted with any foreign vocabulary or symbols or ritual acts. His model reaches back into the life and experiences of Israel, to the voices of her prophets challenging kings and people to absolute fidelity to her God. He rejects the new Church order that shows an affinity to administrative practices of the Greco-Roman world. And he embraces a view of reality that affirms that suffering for what we believe, suffering for the sake of good, suffering for the sake of God’s kingdom is nothing short of ‘overcoming’ the world, of aligning and assimilating ourselves to the sacrificial suffering and death of the Christ. In that the Kingdom is established; in that the New Jerusalem comes to be.

As a gross oversimplification it can be said that the model of the Pastoral Epistles for living Christianity in the world is one of peaceful co-existence. The model of Revelation is that of uncompromising resistance and rejection. So which is the path of truth? Which is the path of Wisdom? Which is the ‘narrow way’ that leads to eternal life? Both ways are valid and neither is the complete answer.

Robert Polzin examined the Book of Joshua and concluded that the whole book was a meditation on doing God’s will. In the end, the book argued for ‘critical traditionalism’ as opposed to ‘dogmatic authoritarianism’ as the way in which Israel could be true to her roots, live her unique identify, and follow God’s will. What was true for ancient Israel was just as true for the early Church and remains true for the Church today. We live in a complex world as a unique community formed by God with a mission to announce to all the world the Good News. Ecumenism is certainly one option the Church has for
living in this world, seeking out what we have in common with our brothers and sisters and working
together to fulfill God’s design. Yet, for the sake of working together, we cannot abandon who we are,
our distinct identity as a people formed by our God. We interact with the world as Catholics, as a
Church. We can celebrate commonality with others, but never at the cost of denying who we are, what
we ultimately hold as true, not at the cost of blurring or ignoring those elements of our faith, the
‘deposit,’ that makes us who we are, that makes us unique. This, largely is the option of the Pastorals.

Critical traditionalism also calls the Church to take a stand, to hold fast, to be unmoving in the face of
policies and practices that oppose God’s will, that ignore Gospel values, that treat the teaching and
example of Jesus as irrelevant. In these situations, no common ground can be found, no compromises
can be made. This is largely the option of Revelation.

Within Revelation, the individual Christian and the Church are caught between two poles, to adhere
completely to the words of the book, to take a radical stand against the evil values of the surrounding
world and to shepherd the nations with discipline, to be prophetic voices, to announce the Good News.
How are we to do this? Critical traditionalism is the answer. We have God’s will and word, his design
for his creation, but God wants us to relate to ans with him freely. We have choices to make. We affirm
the truth of God’s words, but not all of those words apply equally to every situation we face in life. God
does not want us to be robots, but free partners with him in building the Kingdom, in inaugurating
‘heaven on earth.’ Critical traditionalism means being true to our roots, taking all of God’s words
seriously, but critically. We are to THINK, to decide, in our partnership with God how his will and design
is best served, how we can best contribute to the good of all creation. Sometimes that means being
open and inviting, taking the lead, shepherding others along the way of God’s will. At other times that
means taking a firm and unambiguous stand against actions, practices and policies that impede God’s
will. This stance will never be popular and, in the most radical circumstances can be life-threatening.
Here is the hard decision. Will we choose for God or for ourselves, for what is right or for what is safe
and easy?

Within the Pastoral Epistles, the Christians are caught between the same two poles. And the same
options are available, the same choices. The Pastorals hold fast to the ‘deposit of faith.’ But the
Pastorals also borrow from the larger world to enhance the life of the Church and to make the Church
and the salvation offered through her more available to others.

In the end, for a Christian who embraces critical traditionalism, the choice is not between the model of
the Pastoral Epistles and that of Revelation. The choice is, rather, which model to adopt in the social,
cultural, economic and political conditions in which the Church finds herself.
The Book of Revelation as a Model of Biblical Interpretation

For most books of the Bible, authorship is simply unknown. In most cases, where authorship is claimed, the claim is fictitious as in the attribution of the first five books of the Bible to Moses or the Pastoral Epistles to St. Paul. It is really only with the authentic Letters of Paul that we have any definite knowledge of who the author is.

In most cases, what we can know about the author of a biblical book has to be gleaned from the words of the book itself. This is certainly the case with the Book of Revelation. It presents itself as the words of a Christian prophet named ‘John.’ It is certain that this ‘John’ is not the ‘Beloved Disciple’ of the Fourth Gospel, though there are thought patterns in Revelation that are similar to patterns in the Fourth Gospel. He may have been a man named ‘John’ who was familiar to the Churches in the Province of Asia at the time, but nothing more can be said about his relationship to those Churches. What we know of this ‘John’ we know only from the words of the book he penned.

Perhaps the most solid conclusion that can be made about the author of the Book of Revelation is that he was highly literate and well-read, versed in the writings of the Old Testament, Rabbinic writings, and Jewish apocalyptic writings as well as the Gospels, the writings of Paul, and other, early Christian traditions. The breadth of his knowledge of Jewish and Christian traditions, as well as secular mythology and histories is one of the most striking features of the book that he wrote, and one of the biggest challenges to its readers. Understanding Revelation requires familiarity with and an understanding of the traditions upon which the author relied to shape his message.

It is in the handling of his sources that ‘John’ gives us a model of how we are to approach, understand, and interpret what he wrote and, in fact, how we can understand and interpret all biblical literature. All the allusions to biblical and extra-biblical literature in Revelation, all the borrowed images fit perfectly the tone and message of the book. As an ancient ‘biblical scholar,’ ‘John’ knew his Bible. He knew the contexts out of which the biblical writings emerged; he was familiar with the theological perspectives out of which those writing addressed their immediate contexts; he was familiar with the use later writers made of earlier traditions to address their own, particular contexts and situations, the needs of their immediate communities; and, as earlier writers, he believed in the consistency of God and was able to draw on older traditions to address his own community, his own time and place, with an understanding of a consistent relationship between God and humanity through a long history to portray a way of life consistent with God’s will for his people, to portray hope for the community of faith in the midst of a hostile world.

Two features of the Book of Revelation will serve to demonstrate how ‘John’ handled his sources in shaping his message to the Churches in the province of Asia: 1) the cycles of plagues and 2) images of the New Jerusalem.

The narrative of Exodus presents a great battle between God and his will for his Chosen People and the Pharaoh of Egypt, a ruler with divine pretensions. The whole battle is initiated because God ‘remembers,’ he makes real and present to himself his relationship with his people, the promises he has made to them, the purpose for which he chose them in the first place. The plague stories in exodus, especially the idea of the multiplication of the plagues serve a symbolic purpose. They demonstrate the power of God over all earthly power structures and, at the same time depict the obstinancy of the Pharaoh, the symbol of all earthly rulers who set themselves over and apart from the God who really has sovereignty over creation. In the original context out of which the books of the Pentateuch emerged,
the Exodus event is seen as the birth of the nation of Israel and functions as a motivation in the ‘covenant formularies,’ the stories and traditions about Israel entering into a covenant relationship with her God. In the covenant formularies, the ‘Great King’ invites the vassal people to enter into a relationship with him because ‘I am the God who led you out of the land of Egypt with my strong arm and outstretched hand, by means of my signs and wonders.’

The original context for the formation of the Pentateuch, of which the Exodus story is a part, is monarchic Israel. There is a long history of writing, editing, re-writing and merging the traditions of the two kingdoms. In every case, the Exodus story originally functioned as a statement of Israel’s dependence on her God, God’s sovereignty over all earthly power, and a reminder to Israel’s kings and people that they hold their kingdom as vassals to a Great King, the all-powerful God of Israel. The Exodus story holds a promise and a warning, that God chooses, frees, and protects his people, but that he also holds them accountable. They are not to mimic the other nations; they are not to put their trust in false Gods; and they are not to abuse their rule, their dominion as other nations do, exemplified by Pharaoh and the Egyptian kingdom. ‘John,’ it appears, was well aware of this tradition as it addressed the needs of monarchic Israel.

It was in the context of the Babylonian Exile that the books of the Pentateuch, the Torah, achieved their final form. It was in this context that the earlier prophetic writings were collected. And it was in this context that Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the later chapters of Isaiah were written. In the context of the Babylonian Exile, the Exodus story began to take on a symbolic nature. It was a sign of God’s ‘remembrance’ and it gave hope to those in exile that God would again remember and lead his people home. From the perspective of the exile, Babylon and Egypt began to merge as symbols of earthly powers that opposed the will of God not only for his people, but for all of creation. Again, it appears, that ‘John’ was well familiar with the writings that originated in the context of the exile and their use of the Exodus story and covenant traditions to give hope to an oppressed people. He drew on these traditions and presented a view of the Roman Empire as heir to Egypt and Babylon, as a further representative of the evil that these two world powers wreaked on the world. He saw a continuity in human history that allowed him to symbolize Rome with images of Egypt and Babylon; and he saw a consistency in God’s actions in human history that allowed him to express his warnings to the Church, God’s people, about buying into the values of the world and proclaim hope for redemption, for freedom, for restoration, for living something new.

The same trajectory through human history that ‘John’ followed in his use of Exodus imagery, especially the plague cycle, is evident in his use of images of Jerusalem and its temple. In monarchic Israel, the Holy City, with its temple on Mt. Zion was a symbol of God’s presence with his people. In the Deuteronomic History, all worship was to be centralized in Jerusalem. There, God met with his people. There, the divine and human partnership for the good of all creation was to be found – in the presence of God with his people and in his chosen, Davidic king who was to ‘shepherd’ his people and bring justice and right to all the world. The detailed description of the dimensions and adornments of the ‘New Jerusalem’ in Revelation mirror the detailed description of Solomon’s Temple in the First Book of Kings and the detailed description of the tent of meeting, constructed on the same plan as the temple, in Exodus. Jerusalem and its temple represented sacred space, that unique place in all the world where the covenant relationship with God was celebrated and lived.

The destruction of the temple by the Babylonians and the exile of the people, in its immediate historical context, represented an unimaginable loss for the people of Israel. Their sense of identity, their sense of election as God’s special people rested on the Promises to the Patriarchs: they were to be a great
nation; they were to inhabit the land God had prepared for them; they were to have and celebrate a special relationship with their God. All this was gone. All hope was gone. It was the Priestly Writer, working in the context of the exile, who gave the final shape to the Pentateuch. The Priestly Writer emphasized that particular strain of Israel’s traditions and stories that stressed the eternal covenant, the fact that God’s promises were forever. This is the same outlook that stands behind the Book of Isaiah. Original Isaiah was a prophet from early monarchical times. In the exile and its aftermath, the original book was supplemented with additional oracles that offered hope for a return and restoration (Second Isaiah) and oracles from the actual return that presented a design for that restoration (Third Isaiah). Ezekiel, who is associated with Jerusalem’s priestly class, offered a prophecy that explained Israel’s loss and offered hope for a restoration. Ezekiel, in particular, imagined a great restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple. Similar ideas and images were used by other exilic prophets such as Zephaniah and Zechariah.

‘John’ was acutely aware of the writings from exilic times, the context out of which they grew and their purpose of offering hope to people experiencing oppression at the hands of forces arrayed against God and his will for good. He was acutely aware of the themes of Israel’s responsibility, God’s use of the foreign nations to execute his judgment on Israel common from prophetic literature, and the ultimate reversal of fortunes expressed in prophetic oracles, the judgment on the nations and the restoration of God’s people with a chance to begin again. He was aware of the use of creation imagery in prophetic writings and images of a return of creation to its pristine state, to a state in which Israel is a sign to the nations, drawing them to God’s holy mountain. Because he understood these themes, because he understood the contexts out of which they grew, he was able to draw on such texts to inform his own view of the state of the world in his own time and address the needs of his own community of faith.

From the way ‘John’ understood and handled his sources, a model for approaching the biblical text can be outlined:

1. Determine as closely as possible the social, economic, cultural and political/historical circumstances out of which a biblical text emerges.
2. Within this context, determine as accurately as possible the circumstances and needs of the community of faith addressed by a particular biblical text.
3. Examine the vocabulary, grammar, utilization of images, metaphors and symbols to determine what the text says to the community of faith within the situation in which it finds itself. Determine what themes or ideas are addressed to the community in its present situation.
4. Identify the situations and circumstances in which the readers of the text now experience the same or similar conditions.
5. Based on the assumptions of continuity within human history and the consistency of God in dealing with humanity, determine what the text says to the community of faith now, how it addresses the circumstances and needs of the present community of faith.

Using the Book of Revelation as a test case, the need for and validity of this method becomes apparent. No one can understand Revelation who does not appreciate the biblical allusions and borrowed images it employs. Nor can anyone fully understand Revelation without knowing something about the circumstances in which the Church found herself at the end of the first century of the Christian era. To fully understand Revelation it is necessary not only to recognize allusions and borrowed images, but to understand the original contexts of those allusions and images. From this it is possible to understand the correspondence between the original circumstances that gave rise to more ancient texts and how that text speaks to the situation of the Church in the late first century. Understanding the history of
corresponding images and the relationship between the circumstances and needs of peoples in various times and placed, it becomes possible to ask, ‘How does this present text, situated in a particular time and place and addressing the needs of people living the circumstances of that time and place, speak to us in our world in this present moment?’

That final question is called the ‘hermeneutical task.’ It takes the biblical text seriously as God’s word, addressed to his faithful people in all times and circumstances. But the understanding of what God has to say to us now is rooted in the integrity of the text, tied to its original purpose and intent. It recognizes the gaps in language and cultural circumstances between the origin of the text and its appropriation now, gaps that can only be overcome by analyzing and appreciating the original intent of what was written so as to assure that the present appropriation of the text to our present faith community is in accord with God’s word as it was originally spoken and written.

‘John,’ it would appear, adhered to this method. In itself, the method assures that what we understand from a text is in accord with God’s consistent actions with and for his people. While there are certainly new insights and applications to be gained for current readers of the text as they allow it to address them in circumstances that could hardly have been imagined in the original context of the author, such a method serves as a corrective for those who, without any understand of the original context of a particular text, willy-nilly conclude outlandish things about what God wants of us from an uncontrolled and ungrounded reading.

It has been argued that statistics and the bible can both be used to prove anything. This comes from taking things out of context and with no methodological control. I read the text and conclude whatever fits my feelings and attitudes at that moment. But is that consistent with the word and will of God who reveals himself through his words of Scripture? ‘John’ would certainly not agree to that. He models for us a way to read and understand what he has written, and to read and understand all of Scripture.
Revelation as Narrative

Throught these notes on the Book of Revelation, attention has been given to elements of narrative technique, features common in the ancient art of storytelling. The breaks between episodes in a story signaled by the words, ‘After these things...’, the use of ‘Behold’ or ‘loud voice’ to call attention to specific features in the text, key ideas, changes in points of view, pointing out something that is surprising or unexpected. Attention was given to whose ‘voice’ is heard in the text at any given point, the interplay of narrative and dialogue, the way that words and actions provide characterization of the players who people the pages of the text.

These features, and others, along with the fact that the whole book is presented through the ‘voice’ of an ‘omniscient narrator’ from the very start of the book suggest that methods of narrative analysis might prove fruitful in analyzing and understanding the text of Revelation.

A full narrative analysis of Revelation is beyond the scope of these brief notes of conclusion. What is intended here is merely to sketch out an outline for such a study that might be fruitful to pursue.

To begin with, it is to be noted that in the world of ancient narrative, stories – long and short, follow a basic plot outline:

1. The EXPOSITION or SETTING
   Typical ancient stories begin with a SETTING, a description of the time and place of the story and an introduction of its main characters. In general, the SETTING starts in a stable situation in which there is a sense of balance, order, peace.

2. The PROBLEM or CONFLICT
   After the stable setting has been described, the author introduces an element of CONFLICT, some PROBLEM with which the story will deal. The whole movement of the story is from this initial CONFLICT or PROBLEM to its successful resolution.

3. COMPLICATION
   The COMPLICATING FACTORS are the ‘stuff’ of the story. The COMPLICATING FACTORS include the actions, views of emerging characters, and the ways in which the story examines the PROBLEM from different perspectives. The COMPLICATING FACTORS may involve journeys, commands and executions of commands, incidents of trial and error in meeting the PROBLEM, and contrasts to different approaches to solving the problem. It is in the COMPLICATING factors that opposing individuals and/or groups develop and are evaluated. The development and evaluation of characters is usually subtle, seen in their words and actions through which the reader comes to see their true natures and forms a reaction to them. Explicit evaluation on the part of the narrator may occur, but it is generally rare. More common is the use of storytelling techniques in which the reader is led to form his own conclusion.

4. CLIMAX or RESOLUTION
   The CLIMAX of the story is that specific point at which the RESOLUTION of the PROBLEM is reached. This may occur in the words of a character within the story, such as Jesus’ statement of the Cross, ‘It is finished.’ It can occur in a narrated action, ‘And the sons of Israel cried out to God.’ In a CRIME AND PUNISHMENT story, such a turning back to God RESOLVES the issue of the people’s infidelity to God motivating God’s judgment. Whatever the case, the CLIMAX is that point in the story after which the PROBLEM or CONFLICT is no more.

5. DENOUEMENT or WRAP-UP
   The DENOUEMENT is the element of the story that returns the story world to a stable situation.
It can be very brief, as in the typical ending for the stories of Israel's Judges, ‘and the enemy was defeated and the land had rest.’ In more developed stories, stories having an impact on the whole nation or community of faith, the DENOUEMENT may be longer and more developed, spelling out the consequences of solving the problem.

A narrative analysis of Revelation would, of necessity, follow the pattern of determining context and analyzing the images and language of the text suggested above. In addition to the steps in that model, the ‘story’ of Revelation would be examined in light of the plot outline just described. The goal of such an analysis would be to, ultimately, define the SUBJECT and THEME of the narrative as a unified work. The SUBJECT is a statement, in just a few words, of what the story is about, what it deals with. The THEME is what the story has to say about the SUBJECT. A theme is usually to be stated in a complete sentence.

Suppose the story was about ‘lying.’ ‘Lying’ or ‘dishonesty/deception’ would be defined as the SUBJECT of the story. If the narrative tells a story of someone who lies to take advantage of others, to manipulate things to his own profit or advantage, a THEME statement might be: ‘Lying is a means of manipulating others for one’s own advantage, but it always involves unjustly hurting someone else.’ On the other hand, if the story focuses on the inability to maintain a lie, the THEME statement might be: ‘There’s a price to pay for lying since deception tends to catch the deceiver in his own deceit.’

A narrative analysis of Revelation might look something like what follows:

1. **EXPOSITION or SETTING (1:1-20)**
   The exposition begins with the words of the narrator through whom the story will be told. What he sets out to tell is the story of the Revelation of Jesus Christ about things that are about to happen quickly. This revelation is given, by means of Jesus’ messenger to ‘John,’ and he is to bear witness to everything he saw and heard.
   Though it is rare, stories sometimes begin with an EVALUATION. That is the case with Revelation. The EVALUATION is carried in the Beatutide pronounced by the narrator: ‘Blessed is the one who hears the words of this book and heeds them.’
   The exposition continues with the introduction of a letter form. ‘John’ writes to the the Seven Churches. After the typical introductory elements of the letter form, ‘John’ relates what he first saw and heard. Even in the EXPOSITION, there is a hint of suffering and tribulation, but in the face of this ‘John’ describes an image of Christ walking in the midst of symbols of the Seven Churches.

2. **PROBLEM or CONFLICT (2:4 – but also expanded to include all the letters, 2:1-3:22)**
   The first letter begins in a positive fashion with the words of Christ, praising the good works of Ephesus, but, in v. 4, Christ says: ‘But I hold against you that you have forsaken your first love.’
   It can be noted that Revelation is a longer and more involved narrative and, as such, we can expect some expansions and variations in the simple form. Here, it can be noted that in five of the letters there is an statement of what Christ ‘holds against’ that particular Church. It can be argued that, following 2:4, each of the other statements forms a specification of what it means to forsake ‘first love.’ In the end, the basic PROBLEM concerns wrong ways for the Church to live in the world of conflicting and evil values.
   a. I hold against you that you have forsaken your first love (2:4)
   b. I hold against you that you tolerate the presence of false teachers (2:14)
   c. I hold against you that you tolerate the prophetess who promotes idolatry (2:20)
   d. I have not found your works to be up to God’s standards (3:2)
3. The COMPLICATING FACTORS begin with a glimpse of heaven and an ideal vision of a proper relationship with God. Next comes the vision of the scroll, God’s words for bringing earth in line with the ideal situation of heaven. No one is worthy to open the seals on the scroll except the Lamb, the image of Christ crucified. This is an initial indication of what will solve the problem, what will set things right. There follows in short order three sets of ‘signs,’ acts of God’s power intended to motivate repentance – both for the unfaithful in the Church and for the ‘inhabitants of the world’ who oppose the faithful. Interspersed with these signs are images of sealing the faithful, marking them off as belonging to God, a Song of Victory celebrating those who ‘overcome’ the world, and an open scroll which apparently carries more words of judgment, but whose content the ‘seer’ is commanded to seal away. We get images of the temple, of who may enter and those who are to be excluded and an image of what it means to be a ‘witness’ of Christ. The witnesses are contrasted with the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ who gloat over them,’ but eventually fall in fear as they are summoned to heaven. Before the final set of signs, the meaning of what is unfolding is represented as a great battle between good and evil in which the Dragon is cast out of heaven. In heaven, the battle is won, but it now moves to the earth where the Dragon confronts the woman, a symbol of the Church. This makes clear that the context in which the Church exists is nothing less than a battle between Good and Evil in which the Church must triumph in order for earth to be aligned with heaven. Two beasts arise to serve the evil purposes of the Dragon, but they are contrasted with the followers of the Lamb, those who share in the victory the Lamb has already achieved. In the face of this conflict between the forces of evil and the followers of the Lamb, there is a vision of a Proclamation of Judgment, an anticipation of what can be if the Church is filled with the followers of the Lamb, if it removes from its midst what aligns it with the values of the world, with what Christ ‘holds against’ it. The ‘seer’ is re-commissioned to be a prophet for all nations and the last ‘signs’ unfold – a last chance to repent.

4. The RESOLUTION of the PROBLEM, the CLIMAX of the story comes in the vision of the Seventh Bowl. A voice from heaven, from the throne of God announces: ‘It is done.’ God’s signs are complete, the battle is over. All that remains is to clear away the debris and move into the new order. (16:17)

5. The DENOUEMENT
In rapid succession come visions of the end of evil in the world, the end of Babylon and the beasts and the Dragon. In the middle of all the ‘destruction,’ comes a vision of the Vindication of the Just and everything culminates in the scene of the Last Judgment. In the end, as there was at the beginning, there remain two camps, the good and the bad. Included in the evil ones are the unfaithful from the Church and included in the good are those who did not succumb to the allures of the world. The final return to a stable situation comes in the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth, and the coming of a New Jerusalem from the heaven, initiating a heaven on earth. Here God dwells with his faithful ones; from here all the unfaithful are forever excluded.

The SUBJECT of the narrative of Revelation is the manner of the Church’s existence in the world. The THEME of the narrative is: ‘If the Church endures on the model of the Lamb, adheres to her first love, his victory will be effective – there will be life; if not there will be evil and death.’

The approach outlined here is rudimentary and sketchy. Much more detailed work needs to be on the narrative level to substantiate the movement and intention of the narrative and to better define the story’s SUBJECT and THEME.