

The Book of Revelation

No. 20 *The Woman, the Child, and the Dragon, Revelation 12*

Where have we been? We have listened to the risen Lord Jesus dictating letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (chapters 1-3). We have been in the throne room of heaven and watched as the Lamb receives the scroll of God's redemptive purpose, breaks its seals and executes its contents (chapters 4-7). We have heard seven trumpets blown and witnesses the judgment of God upon an unbelieving and idolatrous world (chapters 8-11).

Where are we going? We are entering the second main division of the *Revelation*, chapters 12-22. If chapters 1-11 showed us the conflict between the church and the world, chapters 12-22 show us what is going on behind the scenes during the same period of time, i.e. the conflict between Christ and the devil.

1. The woman, the child, and the dragon (12:1-6)

John sees two signs. The first, the great sign, is of a woman, gloriously arrayed, and pregnant, and in birth pains. The second, a fiery red dragon which stands poised to devour the woman's child as soon as he is born. But as soon as the woman delivers her child he is caught up to the throne of God, and the woman flees into the wilderness where God provides for her provision.

The woman is the church – resplendent and reigning.

The child she bears is the Christ – he is the iron sceptre wielder of Psalm 2:9.

The dragon is the devil – drawing down a third of the heavenly powers, ruling the kingdoms of the earth, and exercising tyrannical power.

The vision depicts the announcement of God to the serpent in Genesis 3:15 – “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. And he will crush your head, and you will crush his heel.”

The history of redemption depicts the efforts made by the serpent to destroy the “seed of the woman” – from Cain's killing Abel, through the Egyptian holocaust, to Herod's pogrom in Bethlehem. This comes to a head at Calvary – which is where the reciprocal crushing of Genesis 3:15 occurred.

We have met the 1,260 days before (11:3) – and we meet it again in v. 14 as “a time, times and half a time” (i.e. 3½ years of 360 days each) – this is the period during which the church bears witness to Christ.

2. The expulsion of the dragon from heaven (12:7-12)

“Now war arose in heaven” – the Calvary crushing of the serpent and the exaltation and enthronement of the Christ are described in terms of the casting down of the dragon. In other words, this paragraph is not subsequent to verse 5 but an explanation of it.

“Michael” means “who is like God?” It's a rhetorical question, which expects the answer “no one”. Cf. Psalm 113.

Michael appears in Daniel 10:13 as a “chief prince” who stands with a “man” who looks very like the Son of Man against the kings of Persia. In Revelation 12:7 he leads the host of heaven against the dragon and his angels, and the dragon is resoundingly defeated. It is possible that “Michael” is another picture of Christ in his serpent-crushing role.

The adversary is given five designations – the great dragon (cf. Leviathan and Pharaoh, Psalm 74:14 and Isaiah 27:1); the ancient serpent (cf. Genesis 3:1); the devil; the Satan (i.e. the accuser/adversary, cf. Job 1:6-12); and the deceiver (cf. John 8:44).

His expulsion from heaven (as a sphere of operations) results in a song of praise being sung – salvation has come, and the kingdom of God (cf. Matt. 4:12-17; 28:18-20) – God's people overcome the Satan by Christ's blood (his propitiation, by which their sins are forgiven so that no accusation against them can now stand), and by their testimony, and by their willingness to follow Christ, carrying their own crosses.

But the expulsion of the dragon is bad news for the earth – he comes down in great wrath (like the burnt mountain of 8:8-9) and knows that his days are numbered.

3. The assaults of the dragon (12:13-17)

In verse 13 we cut back to the flight of the woman in verse 6. God carries her away on eagle's wings, cf. Exodus 19:4.

The picture here is of Israel's journey through the wilderness, during which time God provided his people with food, water, and deliverance from Amalek.

In another allusion to the exodus, John sees that when the dragon spews out water to sweep away the woman, the earth opens its mouth to swallow the river, just as the Red Sea swallowed Pharaoh and his army.

Isaiah 8:1-10 also uses the picture of an overflowing river – in that case it's a picture of the invasion of Judah by the Assyrians. But Assyrian shall ultimately fail “because ‘Immanu-El’ – God is with us.”

The point of the vision is that the church experiences both persecution inspired by the devil *and* the protection of God throughout the period between the first and second comings of the Christ. If the dragon cannot devour the woman's firstborn (Christ) then he will make every effort to devour her other children (the redeemed) – but remember verse 11 and compare with verse 17 – “They have overcome him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives unto death.” Just as the dragon's assault upon Christ resulted in the dragon's expulsion from heaven, so also his assault upon Christ's people will result in his final downfall.

The Book of Revelation

No. 21 *Beasts from the Sea and from the Earth, Revelation 13*

Revelation 12 closes with the dragon standing on the shore of the sea – the boundary between land and water. In Revelation 13 he proceed to call up, first out of the sea and then out of the land, two beasts who serve his purpose of making war upon “the rest of the offspring of the woman” (12:17).

The dragon establishes a grotesque parody of the throne room in heaven. He himself is the anti-lamb. The first beast, with its diadems, is like the anti-form of the 24 elders. The second beast, who is also the false prophet of 16:13, is like the anti-form of the two witnesses of 11:3-11. Babylon the prostitute, who appears in 14:8, is the anti-form of the woman who gives birth to the child in 12:1-6. Those who receive the mark of the beast are a parody of the 144,000 who are sealed by God.

The timeframe for Revelation 13 is “forty-two months” (13:5), i.e. 3½ years. This is the same as the timeframe of 1,260 days in chapter 12. In other words, chapters 12 and 13 cover the same period of time, between the exaltation of Christ and his return in glory.

1. The beast from the sea (13:1-10)

The beast from the sea is a composite of the four beasts described in Daniel 7. At the end of the first century this was Rome, the latest manifestation of pagan empire. From the point of view of the coastal dwellers of Asia Minor, foreign powers rose up from the sea (think about how Roman ships would have appeared to rise up, mast first, as they approached the coast). Horns represent power. The Roman emperors took “blasphemous” names by their claim to be gods.

The numbers seven and ten are symbolic. They give the impression of the historical and geographical sphere over which pagan, anti-Christian empire holds sway – the persecution faced by the church in first century Asia Minor is no local, flash-in-the-pan persecution!

The wound received by one of the heads of the beast is literally a “plague” – which implies that it was inflicted by God. Revelation 3:14 attributes this wound to a sword – cf. Isaiah 27:1; Psalm 74:13; Habakkuk 3:8-15. Because the beast appears immediately after the Revelation 12 report of Christ’s exaltation in victory, the wound is the result of Calvary, cf. Genesis 3:15.

In a further parody of Christ (his death and resurrection), the beast that had received a mortal head wound was healed – another parody, in 13:7, is the beast’s authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation, cf. 5:9. The historical manifestation of the “death and resurrection” of the beast is seen in the rise and fall of empires, and the rise of new empires in their place.

The beast manages to portray its recovery from the mortal wound as a victory which deeply impresses the people of the earth, who are filled with fear and acclaim the

beast’s seeming invulnerability: “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” (13:4).

But those who worship the beast are limited to the people whose names are not in “the book of life of the Lamb that was slain” (13:8). This register was prepared “from before the foundation of the world” – God’s sovereign grace in election. Alternatively, the expression “from before the foundation of the world” might be a reference to the slaughtering of the Lamb (cf. 1 Peter 1:19-20), in which case the means by which the Lamb won his victory was foreordained. Both ideas are true.

This section concludes with a word of exhortation to believers – “Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.” The “forty-two months” (the period between the Christ’s first and second comings) will be a difficult trial for the saints.

2. The beast from the earth (13:11-18)

The beast from the earth is another parody of the Lamb. This “lamb” has two horns, like the beast of Daniel 8:3. If the role of the first beast was primarily political, then the role of the second beast is primarily religious – he asks like a priest to and prophet for the first beast. If the first beast is evidently pagan and outside the church, the second is not so evidently pagan and operates inside the church.

“Whereas the first beast speaks loudly and defiantly against God, the second beast makes the first beast’s claims sound plausible and persuasive. False teachers in the church are encouraging compromise with the culture’s idolatrous institutions, which are associated in some way with the Roman cult... Therefore, it takes a discerning Christian to detect the evil inherent in the second beast.” (G.K. Beale)

The second beast parodies the wonders performed by the “two witnesses” (11:6).

The image of the first beast is an echo of the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 3). An image of the Roman emperor Domitian at Ephesus was a manifestation of it contemporary to John and his audience.

The “mark of the beast” is figurative of the way in which the state keeps tabs on who does and who does not submit to its worship and obedience. The mark is yet another parody of the work of the Lamb, who seals his people (7:3-8; 14:1).

Forehead may indicate ideological commitment, and hand practical outworking.

Failure to bear the mark of the beast results in economic exclusion. This was the experience of Christians who were unable to enter the trade guilds because of the pagan worship in which the guilds engaged, often in connection with the cult of the emperor. It has continued to be the experience of Christians – and in our own day we see signs of its re-emergence as confessional adherence to the new morality becomes the test for whether a person is fit to serve in local government or the civil service, the law courts, practise medicine or provide counselling, or teach, etc.

This section concludes with another exhortation: “This calls for wisdom,” i.e. spiritual and moral insight given by God to his people. Six falls short of seven (fulfilment). The number of the beast/of man (666) is simply “failure upon failure upon failure”.

The Book of Revelation

No. 22 Victory and Judgment, Revelation 14

This final section of Part IV of *Revelation* covers 14:1-15:4. It opens and closes with the redeemed singing before the throne of God (14:1-5 and 15:1-4). Between this are two messages of judgment on the world-in-rebellion (14:6-11 and 14:14-20). In the middle is a promise proclaimed from heaven: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on” (14:12-13).

1. The Lamb and the 144,000 (vv. 1-5)

In chapter 13 we encountered an anti-lamb, an anti-prophet, and an anti-church with its anti-mark. Now, in contrast, we are shown the Lamb and the church whose members have the name of the Lamb and of the Lamb’s Father written on their foreheads. The number of the redeemed (144,000 = 12×12×10×10×10) is symbolic of consummate completeness, and is in contrast to the number of man (666) which connotes “failure upon failure upon failure.”

The Lamb is standing on “Mount Zion” – cf. “I have installed my King on Zion, my holy mountain” (Psalm 2:6-12).

The “new song” of the redeemed was previously mentioned in 5:8-9 and will appear again in 15:2-4. This is a song of victory – praising God for his victory over the dragon – cf. the Song of Salvation (Exodus 15:1-18).

The redeemed are figuratively called virgins (14:4a). Their virginity is symbolic of their loyalty to Christ – they have refused to defile themselves with the unbelieving and idolatrous “isms” of the world. It is worth remembering that: (a) the OT prophets occasionally call Zion a “virgin daughter” (e.g. Isaiah 37:22); and (b) New Jerusalem is called a bride in Rev. 21:2. Thus the designation “virgin” is applied to all the redeemed.

The redeemed are also called “firstfruits” (14:4b). The background to this idea is in the Feast of Firstfruits (e.g. Leviticus 23:9-14). It is the demonstration that God has kept his promise and brought his redeemed people into the Land of Promise. That in 14:4b the people themselves are the firstfruits shows the degree to which they are identified with the fulfilment of the promise, and that their redemption is the necessary condition for the restoration of the whole cosmos (cf. Romans 8:18-25).

2. Judgment announced by three angels (vv. 6-11)

The focus shifts from the redeemed to the unredeemed. Three angels appear with messages of judgment which are increasingly severe.

The first angel (vv. 6-7) announces the “eternal gospel” – but while this is a message of grace, the accent in the proclamation is on judgment: “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come” (14:7). (Compare this sort of oath language in the setting of judgment with Joshua 7:19.) This proclamation of the gospel is not designed to bring to faith and repentance (cf. Matthew 24:14).

The people to whom this message is announced are “sitting” upon the earth. “Sitting” connotes a sense of security – these people feel that they are secure in their possession of the earth – not so much active rebellion against God as satisfaction that life is good without him.

The second angel (v. 8) announces the fall of Babylon (cf. Isaiah 21:9). The title “Babylon the Great” is from Daniel 4:30 – in the mouth of Nebuchadnezzar it is hubris, for which he is judged and punished. Babylon (the Babel of Genesis 11:1-9) is the symbol of human arrogance and defiance of God. In 14:8 that arrogance is expressed under the picture of drunkenness and sexual immorality – in 18:3 the notion of self-indulgent luxury is added. This is what it means to “sit on the earth.”

The third angel (vv. 9-11) announces final judgment. Three elements stand out in this terrifying announcement. First (vv. 9, 11b) it is on the people who have followed the teaching of the second beast by worshipping the image of the first beast and receiving his mark (13:11-17). Secondly (vv. 10a, 11a) the punishment comes straight from the hand of God (it is his wrath, poured out in full strength), and it entails unending torment. Thirdly (v. 10b), the punishment is endured in the presence of the Lamb and of the holy angels.

3. The harvest of the day of judgment (vv. 14-20)

These verses depict the day of judgment as a harvest over which Christ, the Son of Man sits enthroned (v. 14), and of which he is the executor (v. 16).

With the harvesting of the earth our attention is drawn back to the firstfruits of 14:4. The distinction between the harvest that belongs to God and the rest of the harvest is like the distinction between sheep and goats. Here, in vv. 14-20, with the double reference to a harvesting sickle, the focus is only on the judgment aspect of the harvest. The Old Testament background is in Joel 4:13, “Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great.”

The punishment of the world-in-rebellion takes place outside the holy city – outside being the place of uncleanness and exclusion.

The depth of the bloodletting – as high as a horse’s bridle – may indicate that it is the result of battle (cf. 19:11-16).

The extent of the bloodletting – to a distance of 1,600 stadia – is symbol of worldwide judgment (1,600 = 40×40, where 40 is apparently a traditional number of judgment).

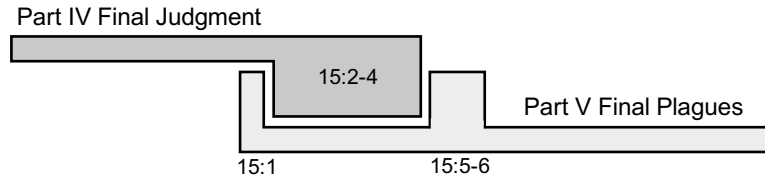
4. An exhortation to the saints (vv. 12-13)

Just as the visions of the two beasts came with exhortations (13:9, 18), so too does the vision of the day of judgment – to trust and obey (14:12). This is accompanied by a promise of eternal rest, 14:13 (the polar opposite of the unrest endured by the worshippers of the beast). Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:58.

The Book of Revelation

No. 23 The Seven Last Plagues, Revelation 15-16

Revelation 15-16 comprise Part V of the prophecy. Notice how it is locked into Part IV. Part IV concludes with the song of victory (15:2-4) which was introduced in 14:1-5. Part V opens with seven angels with the bowls of the seven last plagues (15:1, 5-6). This provides a hook which binds Parts IV and V together, indicating that the Final Judgment with which Part IV closes is also the subject of Part V.



1. A great sign (15:1)

The introduction “Then I saw another great and amazing sign in heaven” is like the introduction to 12:1 and shows that 15:1 opens a new section.

The sign is seven angels with the seven *last* plagues. Because of the hooking mechanism noted above, *last* in this context means “the last of the sets of seven” which John has seen, rather than “the last in time” – in fact, these plagues are a further depiction of the judgment described in 14:6-20. With them the portrayal of the wrath of God is complete.

2. The song of salvation (15:2-4)

Like Israel standing on the shore of the Red Sea and singing the song of Moses, here the redeemed are seen standing beside a sea of glass and fire, singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb. The song of Moses (Exodus 15:1-18) is the first song in the Bible; the song of Moses and of the Lamb (Rev. 15:2-4) is the last song in the Bible.

This is a song of victory over the (first) beast (the one from the sea, for which the second beast made an image). It is called “the song of Moses” because of the link to the exodus – but it is also called “the song of the Lamb” because the victory over the beast is the Lamb’s victory.

The song focuses on the kingship of God, which draws all nations to come and worship him – this is also the climax to the song of Moses (Exodus 15:18), although in that song it is Israel which comes to worship, while the nations watch on in fear and trembling (Exodus 15:14-15). Other content in the song is adapted from Jeremiah 10:7 (cf. vv. 3b-4a), Psalm 86:9-10 (cf. v. 4), and Psalm 98:2 (cf. v. 4c).

3. Six of the seven last plagues (15:5-16:16)

The vision of the seven angels and the seven plague bowls is resumed.

They come forth from the sanctuary, dressed like the Son of Man in 1:13. Perhaps their attire is also reminiscent of priestly attire (pure linen and sashes) – the bowls are also priestly vessels. The angels are servants of God’s judgment. As the awful glory cloud of the presence of God fills the sanctuary, the angels are required to withdraw – not even they can stand in God’s holy presence – but their withdrawing is in order to pour out the plagues in their bowls.

The similarities between the plagues of the trumpets (8:6-11:19) and the plagues of the bowls (16:1-21) are considerable – they both draw on the exodus plagues and they both depict the same judgments, ending with Final Judgment.

The first four plagues are bracketed by bodily judgments (sores and scorching heat) on those who worship the beast (16:2) and who curse the name of God (16:9). Within these brackets, the second and third judgments involve turning water into blood – a fitting judgment on those who had “shed the blood of saints and prophets.”

The fifth judgment (darkness, vv. 10-11) is upon the kingdom of the beast. It exacerbates the first and fourth plagues and does not lead to repentance – it is, rather, the precursor to final judgment.

The sixth bowl prepares the ground for Armageddon. The drying up of the Euphrates is an echo of the drying up of the Red Sea, which lured Pharaoh and his army to their destruction – so also here. For the final battle as the precursor to the establishment of new Jerusalem see Ezekiel 38-39.

The Hebrew name “Armageddon” means “mount of Megiddo”. This may be an allusion to the battle in the plain of Megiddo described in Judges 4-5. The outcome of the battle is not in doubt – God has gathered his enemies to destroy them.

4. The seventh plague (16:17-21)

That destruction comes with the pouring out of the seventh bowl into the air and a loud voice which comes from the temple and the throne of God: “It is done!” Theophanic phenomena of unprecedented magnitude shake the earth – the nations of the earth fall (v. 19) – even islands and mountains disappear (v.20).

God *remembers* Babylon the great. *Remembers* means that God *acts* – he brings his Final Judgment on the world in rebellion. This judgment is depicted as “the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath” – and Babylon is made to drain it to the dregs.

Compare this with Psalm 75 – at God’s appointed time (Ps. 75:2) God shakes the earth so that it totters (Ps. 75:3), forcing all the wicked of the earth to drain the cup of foaming wine, well mixed, which is in his hand (Ps. 75:8).

The judgment that now falls on Babylon is the subject of Part VI of the prophecy, i.e. chapters 17-19.

The Book of Revelation

No. 24 Religious and Political Power, Revelation 17

Revelation 17-20 comprise Part VI of the prophecy – it is an amplification/explication of the sixth and seventh bowls, and is concerned with the fall of “Babylon the great” and her allies, the beast and the false prophet. “Come,” says one of the seven angels who had the seven plague-bowls, “I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters” (17:2, cf. Jeremiah 51:13).

1. The woman and the beast (17:1-6)

The seated attitude of Babylon connotes her sovereignty – she sits as a queen (18:7) and exercises control over the peoples of the earth.

She is figuratively called a prostitute with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication because sexually immoral practices were common in the pagan religions of the ancient world. The OT frequently identifies idolatry as prostitution. It is intoxicating – it suppresses the will to resist and removes all fear of judgment to come. The meaning of this is made clear in 17:4-6 – she is self-indulgent luxury which opposes and oppresses the church – in fact, inasmuch as the church is the Bride of Christ, Babylon the prostitute is the “anti-bride”. She is an economic system of power/oppression (slavery, trading in “human souls,” 18:13), wealth/pleasure (18:3, 16, 19), and worship/praise (18:7). Remember the song of 5:12 which ascribes “power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing” to the Lamb.

The woman is seen riding, i.e. in alliance with, the beast. Previously we have seen that the beast represents the pagan state. Hence, we are shown economic idolatry combined with political idolatry. The beast is scarlet, the persecuting colour of the dragon. Its blasphemous names connote its claims to universal dominion. Its heads and horns likewise represent the fullness of its power.

For the intoxicating cup in the hand of Babylon, see Jeremiah 51:7-8. A significant ingredient in the intoxicating wine in the cup is the blood of the saints who bear witness to Jesus (17:6). Babylon will not and cannot co-exist peacefully with the church.

2. The interpretation of the beast (17:7-14)

John is appalled by the nightmarish vision of the beast and the woman (17:7, cf. Daniel 7:15). So the angel interprets the vision of the beast for him.

The description of the beast as that which “was, and is not, and is about to rise... and go to destruction” is polemic – the beast is portrayed as a vain and silly parody of the true and living God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come” (1:4). Moreover, whereas Christ’s resurrection was unto life imperishable, the beast’s “resurrection” (its rising out of the bottomless pit) is unto destruction.

Nevertheless, the earth dwellers (those whose names are not recorded in the book of life) marvel at the beast – they are under its sway.

The seven heads of the beast are seven kings – i.e. kingship which spans the whole of history. Five of the seven heads/kings have fallen (died, or been killed) – in other words, history is moving forward and is not a cyclic repetition. John’s readers lived during the time of the sixth king. The seventh king will reign for only a little time (cf. “one hour,” v. 12) – this is the reign associated with the short period for which the dragon will be released (20:3b, 7-10); it will come at the end.

The beast itself as an eighth king – not in sequence after the seven, but as identified with them just as it is identified with the dragon. The ten horns of the beast which are ten kings are an echo of Daniel 7:19-27. As the epitome of worldly power the beast/the ten oppose the rule of the Lamb and the church, but are put down simply by the decree of the Ancient of Days. They would be “king”, but the Lamb is victorious because he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and his people are called, chosen and faithful.

3. The divine interpretation (17:15-18)

The angel provides the interpretation of the vision.

(a) Historic Babylon sat on the “many waters” of the Euphrates (Jer. 51:13) which provided the city with security and trade routes. So the woman also sits on “many waters” – her influence goes out into all the world, the wealth of the world comes in to her, and she feels secure.

Babylon sat on the beast (17:3, 18) – she exercised authority over the kings of the earth (the political system).

But remember that the waters of the Euphrates were dried up in 16:12 to prepare for the end – the loyalty of the people of the world to the religious-economic system will drain away before the end.

(b) So the coalition of the ten kings and the beast (the political world system) turns against the woman (the religious-economic world system) and destroys it. We have seen this sort of thing happen. The second World War involved the wanton and wholesale destruction of the world economy in the name of political domination. The tussle continues today in the form of the struggle between the politics of environmentalism and the religion of industrialism and trade. (Of course, we would normally call both of these “political”.)

(c) The union between religious idolatry and political idolatry is inherently unstable. But the sovereign Providence of God is the ultimate cause of the destruction of the former by the latter.

The Book of Revelation

No. 25 The Fall of Babylon, Revelation 18

Revelation 18 expands on the seventh bowl of 16:17-21 in which “God remembered Babylon the great”. Her desolation is further predicted in 17:16-17 and is attributed to God putting it into the “ten kings” of the beast to lay her waste. What has been only hinted at is now described in more detail in chapter 18.

1. The announcement of Babylon’s fall (vv. 1-3)

It is possible that the glorious angels who light lightens us the whole earth is Christ. He announces with a loud voice (i.e. with great authority) that Babylon “is fallen, is fallen” (cf. Isaiah 21:9) – the past tense is used to emphasise the certainty of the event. Babylon’s fall is an irredeemable judgment.

The reason for the judgment is introduced by the word “For” (v. 3). Remember that Babylon is the idolatrous economic system of power/oppression (slavery, trading in “human souls,” 18:13), wealth/pleasure (18:3, 16, 19), and worship/praise (18:7). She intoxicated the peoples of the earth, and her wealth and luxury enabled the magnates of industry to exercise great power.

But now Babylon’s rich attire (purple and scarlet, gold and jewels, 17:4) is stripped off and she is seen for what she really is – a haunt for all sorts of unclean and demonic things (cf. Jeremiah 51:37). No longer attractive, Babylon is desolate.

2. The faithful are exhorted to escape before Babylon’s fall (vv. 4-8)

Another voice from heaven (the voice of God – he calls the faithful “my people”) speaks, and calls the faithful to escape from Babylon before judgment falls upon her. For similar exhortations see Isaiah 48:20; 52:11; Jeremiah 51:45.

If Babylon is the idolatrous economic system, then how are Christians to withdraw from her? In the first century, they refused to engage in the idolatrous practices of the trade guilds. What does it mean for us today? What forms of economic activity should we consider off limits because it would involve us in idolatry?

“Pay her back as she herself has paid pack others” is the law of “an eye for an eye”, i.e. it is equitable. This is not contradicted by the idea of paying Babylon back “double”. The word “double” implies “duplicate”, i.e. an exact copy, the equivalent. This is expressed in the “As... so” of verse 7.

We have previously noted the notion that God’s people are agents of his judgments. For this see also Psalm 137:8 and 149:5-9.

Babylon’s punishment will come suddenly and swiftly (“in a single day”), will be comprehensive (“death” where Babylon said, “I am no widow”; “mourning” where she said, “mourning [bereavement] I shall never see; “famine” replaces her luxurious living) and will leave her horribly disfigured (“burned up with fire”).

None of this will be random – nor will it be evaded. It will be all from the powerful hand of the Lord God who has judged Babylon.

3. The lament of the godless over Babylon’s fall (vv. 9-19)

The main focus of this section is the despair of kings (vv. 9-10), merchants (vv. 11-17a), and mariners (vv. 17b-19) because the fall of Babylon means the loss of their economic prosperity and power.

Each group expresses its lamentation while standing at a distance – the kings “weep and wail over her” and “stand far off, in fear of her torments”; the merchants “weep and mourn for her” and “stand far off in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud”; and the mariners “stood far off” and “threw dust on their heads as they wept and mourned.” The faithful fled from Babylon – the idolaters longed to return to Babylon.

Each lament concludes with a similar expression of shock: “For in a single hour your judgment has come”; “For in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste”; “For in a single hour she has been laid waste.” This confirms the word of judgment spoken in verse 8.

This prophecy against Babylon is similar to the prophecy against Tyre (Ezekiel 27).

4. The faithful rejoice over Babylon’s fall (vv. 20-24)

This section opens with an allusion to Jeremiah 51:48 (“Then the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them, shall sing for joy over Babylon, for the destroyers shall come against them out of the north, declares the Lord.”) and closes with an allusion to Jeremiah 51:49 (“Babylon must fall for the slain of Israel, just as for Babylon have fallen the slain of all the earth.”).

The contrast between verses 19 and 20 is stark – we move directly from lamentation to exultation, from mourning to rejoicing. This is God’s response to the cry of the martyrs recorded in 6:10.

Verses 22-23 say that the culture, craft, labour, and family life of Babylon will be brought to a complete end – there will be silence everywhere, streets deserted, workshops empty, etc. And verse 24 explains that this is a good and necessary judgment, because Babylon was the centre of all opposition to the people of God and therefore also the centre of all inhumanity throughout history. (It’s worth remembering that Babel was founded by Nimrod the hunter – a designation which may connote him as a hunter of men!)

We must acknowledge that this judgment is necessary. Good and evil are not co-eternal. Only good is ultimate (God is good). There can be no part of God’s creation (of which he had said, “This is very good”) in which God allows evil to remain. Evil must be eliminated for the kingdom of God to be consummated. Therefore, we are exhorted to rejoice over the fall of Babylon – to shed no tears and to feel not the least bit sorry, as though her destruction means any loss to us.

The Book of Revelation

No. 26 Hallelujah, Revelation 19:1-10

The Hebrew exclamation *hallelujah!* rings through Revelation 19:1-10. This exclamation is found only here (four times) and in the book of Psalms (23 times). The word is a plural imperative – “hallelu Yah!” – it literally means “praise Yahweh!” Something extraordinary must have happened for it to appear suddenly and with such concentration so close to the end of the New Testament. Something extraordinary has indeed happened – God has executed judgment upon the world in rebellion (19:2) and has begun to reign (19:6), and the marriage of the Lamb has come (19:7)!

These *hallelujahs* are the joyful counterpart to the threefold *alas! alas!* of Rev. 18.

It is possible that 19:1-10 depict a return to the throne room in heaven (Rev. 4-5). The *hallelujahs* focus in from the innumerable company (vv. 1-3), to the twenty-four elders and four living creatures (v. 4), to the throne of God (v. 5), and back out to the innumerable host (vv. 6-8), and finally to John’s angelic companion (vv. 9-10).

1. Divine retribution has been executed (19:1-3)

The first pair of *hallelujahs* brackets the acclamation of the execution of divine retribution on Babylon. This is a necessary concomitant of the consummation of God’s salvation – notice how the word “for” connects the salvation, glory and power of God with his just and faithful execution of judgment on Babylon. Four things in particular are being said about this judgment.

(a) It is executed upon the great prostitute. Babylon is the “anti-bride”, the antithesis of the church, the bride of the Lamb. Her influence must be expunged before the wedding of the Lamb and the bride.

(b) It carries overtones of the original act of judgment, the Flood, which was also executed because men had “corrupted” the earth (Gen. 6:11-12).

(c) It is the retribution for which the saints have been calling out throughout redemptive history (6:9-11). The time is fulfilled, the number of martyrs complete.

(d) It is enduring. The ever-rising smoke of Babylon’s destruction affirms that rebellion will never reappear – all evil has been removed from redeemed creation.

2. Redemptive history is complete (19:4-5)

The complete removal of all evil from redeemed creation is affirmed by the “Amen! Hallelujah!” of the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures.

The first *hallelujah!* in the Bible is in Psalm 104:35 (“Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more! Bless the Lord, O my soul! Hallelujah!”). The acclamation “Amen! Hallelujah!” occurs in Psalm 106:48 (“Blessed be the

LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, ‘Amen!’ Hallelujah!”).

Pss. 104-106 are a poetic retelling of the highlights of redemptive history – Ps. 104 tells of creation; Ps. 105 tells of God’s redemptive promise to Abraham (see Ps. 105:42 and compare with Gen. 18:19 in context of destruction of Sodom); Ps. 106 tells of Israel’s rebellion, but concludes with God’s gracious “nevertheless” (Ps. 106:44-46), and Israel’s prayer for re-gathering to God’s glory (Ps. 106:47). The significance of this sequence to the 24 elders (the church) and 4 living creatures (creation) should be obvious!

A voice from the Throne (the voice of God) calls all God’s servants, all God-fearers, great and small to “praise our God”. This is an allusion to the Egyptian Hallel, Psalms 113-118, in which Pss. 113, 115, 116, 118 mention God’s servants and/or God-fearers. The climax to these Psalms is the pronouncement of blessing on “the One who comes in the name of the LORD”.

3. The rule of God and the marriage of the Lamb have come (19:6-10)

In response to the command issued from the Throne of God, the great multitude in heaven redoubles its acclamation of God’s praises, and *hallelujah!* is heard for the last time in Scripture.

The reason for this outburst of praise is twofold.

(a) “The Lord our God the Almighty has begun to reign!” Rev. 11:17 shows that “has begun to reign” is a better translation than simply “reigns”. The point is that this is something new – the old order has passed and God has *begun* to reign in a new manner over the new creation.

(b) What that new manner is, is the depicted under the image of the marriage of the Lamb – which is the second reason for the outburst of praise. The whole point of God’s works of creation and redemption is now revealed – the closest possible union of the creature with the Creator. Without sharing in the divine essence (which is impossible), the people of God will nonetheless share in the divine life!

This is spoken of in terms of the Bride being “granted... to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure” which is “the righteous deeds of the saints.” This is not about salvation by works – it is rather the manner in which God vindicates his people – hence the exhortation “Rejoice and be glad!”, for which see Ps. 118:24; Isa. 61:10; Matt. 5:12. We have previously been told, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. ‘Blessed indeed,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them!’” (Rev. 14:13).

In the larger purpose of the book of Revelation, which is the encouragement of the saints in the face of temptation and persecution, this acts as a strong motivation to remain faithful. The angel who accompanies John underlines this by telling John to record a saying of immeasurable importance: “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (19:9).

The Book of Revelation

No. 27 Judgment on the Beast and the False Prophet, Revelation 19:11-21

The “Amen! Hallelujah!” of 19:4 signalises that redemptive history is complete—judgment has been executed on Babylon, and the marriage supper of the Lamb and his Bride has been announced. What more is needed? Judgment must also be executed on the dragon and his minions. This is carried out in reverse order of their appearance—first the beast and the false prophet (19:11-27), and then the dragon (20:1-10), and finally death and hades (20:11-15). Only when every enemy is destroyed is the new creation ushered in (21:1-22:5).

1. Christ and the armies of heaven (19:11-16)

John sees a rider called “Faithful and True” on a white horse. White is the colour of vindication; a horse is the symbol of conquest (cf. 6:2). Christ is portrayed as coming forth to fulfil his promise to vindicate his people by executing righteous judgment upon his enemies.

Verses 12-16 form a chiasmus:

- A Christ’s diadems and name (v. 12)
- B Christ’s garments marked by the blood of his enemies (v. 13a)
- C Christ designated “the Word of God” (v. 13b)
- D The armies of heaven on white horses (v. 14)
- C’ Christ wields a two-edged sword, i.e. the Word of God (v. 15a)
- B’ Christ treads the wine press, i.e. is splattered with blood (v. 15b)
- A’ Christ is named “King of kings and Lord of lords” (v. 16)

The focus of this is on verse 14 and the armies of heaven, dressed in pure, white linen who follow Christ on white horses. Every other occurrence of figures dressed in white and accompanying Christ is a reference to the saints (3:4-5; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14). The heavenly armies are, therefore, more likely to be the saints than the angels. The saints come with Christ to execute his judgment on the world-in-rebellion (cf. 2:26-27 and Psalm 149:6-9 as the fulfilment of Psalm 2:9). This emphasises the point that the judicial actions of Christ are for the vindication of his people.

Christ wears on his head “many diadems”. The dragon wore seven diadems (12:3) and the beast wore ten (13:1). The supremacy of Christ is emphasised by his “many” diadems—this is underlined by his name, “King of kings and Lord of lords.”

Notice the descriptions of Christ which occur first in 1:12-16 and which recur in the letters to the seven churches (chapters 2-3), i.e. eyes like flames of fire, a name known only to the one who has it, white garments, the sharp two-edged sword, the fulfilment of Psalm 2. This suggests that the promises of vindication (“To the one who conquers, I will give...”) and the threats of judgment (“Repent... If not, I will...”) issued in the seven letters are about to be fulfilled.

2. The beast, the false prophet, and the armies of earth (19:17-21)

Just as the fall of Babylon was a matter of such moment that it was announced by a gloriously radiant angel, so also the destruction of the beast, and the false prophet, and their followers is announced by an angel who stands in the sun! He calls the birds to come to a feast (cf. Ezek. 39:4, 17-20) which is a macabre parody of the marriage supper of the Lamb (v. 9). The allusion to Ezekiel 39 is significant—just as 19:12, 16 makes known Christ’s “unknown” name, so also Ezekiel 39:7, 22, 28 speaks of God making known his holy name.

The passage has an ABB'A' structure:

- A The invitation to the bird to eat the flesh of kings, etc. (vv. 17b-18)
- B The beast and his followers are gathered to make war (v. 19)
- B’ The beast is seized, and, together with the false prophet, executed (v. 20)
- A’ The followers are slain, and the birds are gorged on their flesh (v. 21)

The central feature of this—the gathering and seizing of the beast—is the main thing. The beast, i.e. the “beast from the sea,” represents pagan empire/God-denying government (see study on Revelation 13). The beast is a demonic parody of Christ, and is regarded as invulnerable: “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” (13:4). In this section, the “forty-two months” (the period between the Christ’s first and second comings, during which the saints bear witness, i.e. their martyrdom) is brought to an end by the decree of God—the One on the white horse answers the rhetorical question of 13:4, demonstrating his supremacy!

11:7, 16:12-16, 19:19, and 20:7-10 each report on the same “last battle.” The battle is conducted by “the kings of the earth” against Christ—the allusion to Psalm 2:1-2 is obvious—so also is the fact, as Psalm 2 makes clear, that the outcome of the battle has already been decided!

The nature, extent, and duration of the battle (the sort of details we would like to know) are not reported—just the outcome. The beast and the false prophet are seized. Verse 20 provides a summary report of the relationship between these two figures (the beast is the object of false worship, the prophet is the beast’s propagandist)—this serves as a summary of the crimes of which they are guilty and for which they are punished. That they are cast *alive* into the lake of burning sulphur indicates that they are conscious of their punishment—20:10 indicates that their torment is enduring!

The scene closes with the execution of judgment on the followers of the beast and the false prophet. They are slain by means of the sword that comes from the mouth of Christ, i.e. by his direct authority.

The chapter closes with the Judgment of the Last Day. The whole scene is very solemn—but also incomplete. Where is the report of the destruction of the dragon, and death and hades? This is the topic of chapter 20, which takes us back to the beginning (once again!) and reruns the story of the work of God between the Incarnation and the Parousia.

The Book of Revelation

No. 28 The Thousand Years, Revelation 20

Chapter 20 is a bone of interpretive contention. Does it describe a golden millennial age which is followed by the Parousia (the post-millennial view), or a golden millennial age which follows the Parousia (the pre-millennial view), or simply the age in which we live which is not very golden and is brought to an end by the Parousia (the amillennial view)?

The view taken here is the amillennial view. This chapter does not describe a special golden period of time which occurs at the end of history, whether preceded or followed by Christ's second coming. Rather, it describes the whole of history between the Incarnation and the Parousia. It begins with the binding of Satan, which was accomplished by the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus—and it concludes with Satan being brought forth from prison for execution.

1. Satan is bound (vv. 1-3)

Because we live after Easter and Pentecost we forget that before the Incarnation the world was a dark place. The light shone only in Israel—and even at that, the light was pre-dawn, and the people of Israel were largely blind. The whole world lay under the evil one (cf. Eph. 2:1-2; 1 John 5:19).

But the coming of the Son of God in human flesh accomplished Satan's binding. That is the significance of the temptation in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11), and the achievement of the Cross (John 12:31; Col. 2:15). The mission of the church is an essential aspect of the binding (Luke 10:17-18)—hence, wherever the light of the gospel is proclaimed, real change occurs—this was evident, for example, throughout the Mediterranean world from the first century onwards.

The binding of Satan is not absolute—in Revelation 12 he is cast out of heaven, but pursues the church on earth. So Satan continues to exercise a baleful influence. But he does not have the free rein he once enjoyed.

The “bottomless pit” is to be understood as a prison in which Satan is kept until he is brought out for execution.

The thousand years of Satan's confinement is not literal—it simply signifies the long period of time between the Incarnation and the Parousia.

2. The saints reign in heaven (vv. 4-6)

In the book of Revelation thrones are in heaven (with the exception of Satan's throne, 2:13, 13:2, 16:10). This scene, therefore, is in heaven and not on earth.

The period of 1,000 years is the period between the Incarnation and the Parousia.

John sees the *souls* of those who had refused to engage in pagan worship or to acknowledge pagan empire's claim of absolute authority, and who had suffered for it. He does not see their *bodies*. Therefore, the “first resurrection” (v. 5) is not *the*

resurrection since *the* resurrection will be that of embodied people (1 Corinthians 15). Instead, the “first” resurrection denotes the “intermediate state,” i.e. the condition of the souls of believers which “are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory” (Shorter Catechism Q&A 37). They reign with Christ in heaven (cf. Eph. 2:6). Christ presently reigns through the preaching of the gospel in the power of the Spirit. The whole church is the agent of this reign—the saints on earth bear witness to the Lordship of Christ, while the saints in heaven join with Christ in the exercise of his Lordship. In other words, the saints in heaven are not idle—just as Christ is the great high priest who lives to make intercession for his people, so also the saints serve God as priests (v. 6), presumably also making intercession for the saints on earth.

3. Satan is released to be destroyed (vv. 7-10)

At the end of the thousand years Satan is released from prison—though his coming forth is, from one point of view, to be executed. He exercises his deception—he is, as Jesus said, the father of lies (John 8:44)—and gathers the nations to *the* battle (same as 16:12-16 and 19:19—both references speak of *the* battle).

Who or what is “Gog and Magog”? The names are found in Ezekiel 38-39. Hendriksen connects them with the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes (reigned 175-164 BC)—the last major persecution before the NT era. Gog and Magog are an apt symbol of the final assault upon the church (v. 9).

According to 2 Maccabees, God struck Antiochus with a horrific and fatal disease, bringing his reign to a sudden end. Similarly, heaven intervenes in *the* battle, and Satan is thrown into the lake of burning sulphur.

4. The final judgment is executed (vv. 11-15)

John's visions began, and now end, with the throne of God. White connotes God's holiness—he vindicates his faithful witnesses and condemns their persecutors.

This is the end. The flight of earth and sky takes us back beyond Day 2 of creation week to the condition of Day 1, i.e. light and darkness, a binary condition appropriate to a binary judgment. Moreover, people must stand in God's presence as their ultimate context with nowhere to hide.

There is a general resurrection followed by judgment according to what each person has done. Without a doubt, if the outcome depended *only* on the record of our deeds, no one would escape the second death. But there is another book—the book of life (3:5; 13:8; 17:8)—those whose names are found there do not die. The torments of those who are rejected by God and sent from his beneficent presence must be very great indeed that they are called “the second death, the lake of fire.”

Death and hades are destroyed in the lake of burning sulphur. Since these are not personal beings, their consignment to destruction connotes their end as “powers” (cf. 1 Cor. 15:54-55). Every power that opposed the reign of God and that threatened to harm his people has been reduced to naught. The new creation can now begin.

The Book of Revelation

No. 29 All Things New, Revelation 21:1-8

At the start of Revelation 21 we begin the seventh and final part of the book. This comprises a tremendously important transition in the story told by the Bible, marked in vv. 4 and 5 by the statements “the former things have passed away” and “Behold, I am making all things new.” From Genesis 3 onwards, the story of the Bible has been the story of mankind’s exclusion from the presence of God, and the reign of sin and death. But chapter 20 ended with the Final Judgment—sin has been condemned and death (and hades) cast into the lake of burning sulphur. In chapter 21 we hear the announcements that “the dwelling place of God is with man” and that “death shall be no more.”

1. The sea was no more

John sees the new creation—for the OT background to the promise of “a new heavens and a new earth” see Isaiah 65:17-25.

The sea is no more. Why? Because the sea represents the source of all the afflictions endured by the people of God in the former creation, e.g. the dragon stood on the shore of the sea and called up the beast from the sea (12:17-13:1). This is borne out by the structure of vv. 1-5a:

- A New heavens and new earth (v. 1a)
- B First heaven and first earth had passed away (no more sea) (v. 1b)
- C “The dwelling place of God is with man” (vv. 2-3)
- B’ The former things (death, crying, pain) have passed away (v. 4)
- A’ “Behold, I am making all things new” (v. 5a)

The “sea was no more” is explained by the passing of the former order of things, i.e., tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain. In Isaiah 65, weeping and distress, labouring in vain and bearing children for calamity, are tokens of the Babylonian captivity. Behind them lies the covenant curses (Deut. 28:15-68). And behind the covenant curses lies the baleful effects of the Fall (Gen. 3:16-19). “No more sea” means no more affliction caused by the world-in-rebellion, and sin, and death.

2. A bride adorned for her husband

At the heart of vv. 1-5a lies the affirmation that “the dwelling place [literally, *the tabernacle*] of God is with man.”

God’s presence cannot be limited in any fashion by his creation. And yet, God made himself significantly present with Israel in the Tabernacle in the wilderness (and later in the temple in Jerusalem). This foreshadowed the tabernacling of the Son of God among us when the Word became flesh (John 1:14). Jesus called his death and resurrection the “destroying” and the “raising up” of the temple (John 2:19). At present, because of the gift of the Spirit, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit

(1 Cor. 3:16-17), and in Christ the church is “being built together as a dwelling place [not the word translated *tabernacle* in Rev. 21:3] for God in/by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22).

The mode of this dwelling of God is not merely local—it is covenantal. “They will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (v. 3b) is the “covenant correlative” (typically, *I will be your God and you shall be my people*). So close is this covenantal union, that it is depicted as a marriage—John sees “the holy city, new Jerusalem” decked out as a bride on her wedding day.

This has a background in the OT representation of Israel as the wife of the LORD. Israel’s addiction to idolatry was therefore an addiction to adultery (e.g. Hosea), which led inevitably to divorce (Isa. 50:1). The restoration of Israel was therefore an act of grace (Isa. 54:4-8; 62:1-5). That “Christ loved the church and gave himself for her... that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27) implies that the members of the church were in themselves unholy and defiled. The adornment of new Jerusalem is the gift of God’s righteous salvation (also Rev. 19:8).

3. The one who conquers will have this heritage

The gracious nature of this salvation is reiterated in the invitation to come and drink freely from the spring of the water of life (v. 6, cf. Isa. 55:1-3 and the “wells of salvation” in Isa. 12:3). The spring of the water of life is the gift of the Holy Spirit who communicates to us the resurrection life of Christ (John 7:37-39). What we enjoy now in part, we shall enjoy then in full (Rev. 22:1-2).

In chapters 2-3 Jesus speaks to the churches in all their present weakness, and makes promises to those who through faithful discipleship (not loving their lives unto death, cf. Matt. 16:24-25) are victorious over Satan and the world-in-rebellion, by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony (Rev. 12:11).

Now in chapter 21 John sees the church in her final, glorified condition—and once again he hears a promise to the one who conquers—“The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son” (v. 7).

“Will have this heritage” is literally “will inherit these things,” i.e., the promises made in chapters 2-3 of access to the tree of life, a new name, authority over the nations, clean clothing, secure citizenship, a home. What is new in v. 7 is that “these things” are called an “inheritance”—and “inheritance” implies sonship. So where we might expect God to speak in v. 7 as a King to a subject, he speaks instead as a Father to a son. Our relationship with God is to have the intimacy of the Father-son relationship as well as the intimacy of the Husband-wife relationship.

Here too there is an allusion to Isaiah 55:3 and the “sure mercies of David.” Back of this is the promise of 2 Samuel 7:14, one of the key promises in Scripture.

This key promise concerns sonship. Sonship is the goal of redemption—that we might be sons of God (1 John 3:1), and that *the* Son might be firstborn among many brothers (Rom. 8:29). Adoption as sons, writes John Murray, “is surely the apex of grace and privilege... It staggers imagination because of its amazing condescension and love... Eternity will not exhaust its marvel.”

The Book of Revelation

No. 30 New Jerusalem—the Appearance of Glory, Revelation 21:9-21

The vision of new Jerusalem, the city of God, in Revelation 21:9-22:5 draws on the vision of new Jerusalem in Ezekiel 40-48. The vision is heavily symbolic and should not be interpreted literalistically. The point of the vision is that “the entire people of God redeemed throughout all ages will experience consummate security in the inviolable new creation because of God’s permanent and consummate presence there” (G.K. Beale).

The fact that the Bride is described as a garden-city (a treelined river runs through the city) is itself significant. This city was God’s goal from the beginning of creation. But the first cities we meet in the Bible are godless—indeed, *the* trend-setting city of Genesis 11 is Babel (=Babylon), built on a plain but having a mountain-shaped ziggurat in its midst as a symbol of mankind’s arrogant desire to rise up to heaven. Babel’s final manifestation has been destroyed (Revelation 18), and now the true, faithful, and righteous city comes down from heaven and rests on a mountain, the gift of God’s grace to his people. The city is the place of consummate communion between God and his people (which 21:1-8 portrays as the union of Husband and wife, and the fellowship of the Father with his sons).

1. The glory of the city (vv. 9-11)

The city comes down from heaven—not the result of either evolutionary development or human urban planning, it is the creation of God.

The city is radiant with the glory of God (Isa. 61:1-3). The glory of God is God’s presence. We will learn later (vv. 22-23) that the city needs neither temple nor sun nor moon because the glory of God and of the Lamb are all the sacred presence and all the light the city needs.

God does not convey his essence to his people—that would not be possible. But God does create within his people a creaturely analogue of his nature—2 Peter 1:3-4 speaks of us becoming partakers of the divine nature. By making us partakers of the *Holy Spirit*, God causes us to “partake of that holiness by which [God] himself is holy” (Jonathan Edwards), cf. Zechariah 14:20-21.

2. The gates of the city wall (vv. 12-14)

Verses 12-21 describe the wall of the city. The passage is chiasmic, with its focus on the dimensions of the city and its wall.

- A Wall with gate (major detail) and foundations (minor detail) (vv. 12-14)
- B Dimension and materials of the city and its wall (vv. 15-18)
- A’ Wall with foundations (major detail) and gates (minor detail) (vv. 19-21)

The city is square and has a high wall about it. On each side of the city wall are 3 gates, and each gate has an angel and is inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The first time we meet angels in the Bible is when God placed cherubim to guard the way back into the garden of Eden and the tree of life. The angels at the gates of new Jerusalem perform the same function. The point that is

being made is that the sanctity of the holy city is inviolable—“nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false” (v. 27a).

A further point is being made. Only those who are named by the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles (for whom the twelve foundations of the wall are named) may enter—see 7:3-8, and remember that the identification of the redeemed with the twelve tribes is figurative. So the community is complete—“nothing unclean will ever enter it... but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (v. 27b).

3. The proportions of the city wall (vv. 15-18)

The city is cubic—12,000 stadia on each side (a stadion was the circumference of a typical Greek sports stadium, approximately 200 yards). The dimensions of the city (a cube of side 1,400 miles) are clearly figurative. For one thing, it is as large as the known Hellenistic world of the first century—this suggests that the city is not for believing Jews only but for believing Gentiles also (cf. 5:9). For another, the numbers are clearly symbolic—12,000=12×10×10×10 and 144=12×12. We have met these numbers previously—the 144,000 (12×12×10×10×10) redeemed of chapter 12 who follow the Lamb. Thus the proportions of the city are symbolic of the full number of the redeemed, and the doubling of the number 12 may reiterate the notion of the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles, i.e., the whole church in both its promise (OT) and fulfilment (NT) form.

It is possible that v. 16b indicates that the city is a square based pyramid (whose height is indeed equal to the length and breadth of its base). In that case the city would be a ziggurat and the contrast with Babylon would be even more pronounced than it is already. However, the most holy place in the Tabernacle and the temple were both cubes, and since new Jerusalem is the *holy* city, the idea of cubic proportions is probably preferable—so means we remember it is *symbolic*.

The appearance of the city (walls of jasper, made of gold) is evocative of the temple built by Solomon, which was overlaid (inside) with gold. The point is being made again that the city is the dwelling place of God, where his glory is seen and known.

4. The foundations of the city wall (vv. 19-21)

The twelve stones of which the foundations of the walls of the city are made allude to the twelve stones on the ephod of the high priest, on which the names of the sons of Israel were engraved (Exod. 28:15-21). This suggests (a) the security of the residence of the people of God in the city, and (b) the holiness of the city, since both right of residence and holiness are established by the ministry of Jesus, the great high priest.

The twelve foundation stones are also an allusion to the “precious” stones which Solomon used in the foundation of the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 7:9-10; cf. Isa. 54:11-12). But the foundation stones of new Jerusalem are named for the apostles because the apostles bore witness to the fulfilment of the gospel in Jesus.

The vision returns to the gates—through which John presumably passes, because verse 21 concludes with a description of the street of the holy city, which like the walls is evocative of the glory of the God who dwells there with his people.

The Book of Revelation

No. 31 The City of God—the Inner Glory, Revelation 21:22-22:5

If 21:9-21 reported the outer glory of new Jerusalem (the wall of the city—its dimensions, materials, gates, and foundations—is the main subject of these verses), then 21:22-22:5 reports the inner glory of the city of God (notice the transition in 21:21 as John describes the gates and then the street of the city—the impression is given of a movement inwards).

The point of this final passage is that “the glorious presence of God and the Lamb will elicit the response of praise from true believers, but false believers will be excluded forever from God’s presence... God’s consummate, glorious presence with his people ensures the eternal absence of any curse and establishes their everlasting role as priests and kings in praising and reflecting his glory” (Beale).

1. The sanctity of the city is of God (21:22-27)

A holy city without a temple is a contradiction in terms. However, the city of God has no temple precisely because “its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (v. 22)—cf. John 2:19-21, when Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” he was speaking about the temple of his body.

The floor plan of the temple in old Jerusalem emphasised increasing degrees of holiness—the closer one came to the centre, the greater the restrictions on access. But with the death of Jesus, the final barrier, the heavy veil that was hunger in front of the most holy place, was torn in two, signifying either (a) right of access for all whose had been atoned for, or (b) the movement of God outward to live among his people. Perhaps the latter picture is more appropriate here—God does not confine his presence to a building at the heart of the city—the whole city is his home, and is holy, without exclusionary degrees of sanctity.

On the other hand, the fact that the gates of the city are always open suggests unlimited right of access to God. The picture of the nations bringing glory and honour into the city does not mean that there are people who live outside the city of God. It is taken from Isaiah 60 and is an affirmation that (a) God’s righteous salvation is experienced by people from every tribe, language, and nation, and (b) God’s righteous salvation includes the vindication of the redeemed who had been the object of the persecution of the world-in-rebellion. There is also an echo of the Zechariah 14 picture of the nations coming annually “to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths” (Zech. 14:16). Booths was *the* eschatological feast, pointing towards the fulfilment of God’s promised redemption.

We have seen already that the description of the city walls emphasises that the sanctity of the city will be inviolable. Verse 27 reaffirms this in a manner which emphasises that the redeemed can no longer sin—*their* sanctity is also inviolable.

2. The life of the city is of God (22:1-2)

The garden of Eden was well-watered—a river flowed out of it, implying that the garden was set upon a height. In a similar fashion, a river flows from the heart of the city of God—cf. Ezekiel 47:1-12 and Zechariah 14:8—see also Psalm 46:4,

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.” In the Ezekiel 47 vision, the river issues from under the threshold of the temple—in Revelation 22 the river flows from the throne of God and the Lamb. The river runs “through the middle of the street of the city”—possibly parallel to the street. For this combination of river and road see Isaiah 35:6-9.

The river of the water of life is the fulfilment of the promise made by Jesus in John 7:37-39, i.e., the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit communicates the life of glorified incarnate Son of God to the redeemed. Just as the Holy Spirit is *holy*, so the water of the river is pure, “bright as crystal,” and therefore communicates holiness to those who drink of it.

The life of the river is also manifest as the tree of life which grows beside the river, cf. Ezekiel 47:12. It is possible that John is describing parkland between the river and the street of the city—this would be in keeping with the Edenic motif. To eat from the tree of life is to be whole and to live. The healing of the nations suggests worldwide peace—restored fellowship between ethnic groups which no longer make war with one another because they have access to unlimited resources.

3. The beatific vision in the city is of God (22:3-5)

The “accursed thing” of v. 3 is something “under the ban,” i.e., the decree of destruction which God issued when Israel waged its war of conquest on the Promised Land. Warfare is now passed—the redeemed have entered into the promised rest, and the ban is no longer has any function.

The primary manifestation of this condition of rest is the presence of the throne of God and the Lamb in the city. Perhaps the emphasis here is on the rule of God. The prayer “Your kingdom come” is fulfilled—God reigns as King. This was the hope expressed in the Psalms, especially Pss. 93-100 and Pss. 145-150.

God’s servants minister before him as priests—for which role they had been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb (5:9-10). It is important to note that the relationship between God and his people which is depicted as that of Husband and wife, and Father and children, is also depicted as that of King and servants—the intimate fellowship into which God calls us by his grace does not collapse the distance that exists between Creator and creatures.

But to stand and serve God is a privilege beyond all expression! First of all, God’s servants will see his face. That which Moses was denied (Exod. 33:18-20), and which David earnestly desired (Ps. 27:4, 8), will be granted to the redeemed in the city of God. To see God’s face is to know God and to live.

Secondly, God’s servants will bear God’s name—they will bear the divine image—the Holy Spirit will so suffuse their lives that they will perfectly reflect God’s nature, each according to his or her capacity as a creature.

Thirdly, and in confirmation of the above, God’s servants will be gloriously illumined by the glory of God.

Fourthly, in fulfilment of the promise the Son of God to those who overcome (2:26-27), God’s servants will reign for ever and ever.

The Book of Revelation

No. 32 Come Lord Jesus, Revelation 22:6-21

The wording of 22:6-7 is very similar to that of 1:1-3—this is now the conclusion of the book of Revelation, and the purpose of the book comes to the fore, i.e., the exhortation to maintain faithful discipleship and witness bearing through all the trials that the church must face.

The refrain which runs through this passage is the coming soon of Jesus (vv. 7, 12, 17, 20). His coming is the motivation for faithfulness in the face of adversity.

1. Keep the words of this prophecy (vv. 6-9)

The words of the prophecy are “trustworthy and true”—they are from “the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets”—God has sent them the words by the hand of an angel. These words are, therefore, of tremendous weight. To ignore them, to add to them, or to subtract from them, would be to disdain their Author.

On the other hand, to keep the words of the prophecy—to read them, ponder them, understand them, and to believe their message and obey their injunctions—is to be blessed. The word “blessed” (*makarios*) is used seven times in *Revelation*. 22:7 and 22:14 are the penultimate and final occurrences.

The angel assigned to accompany John throughout the revelation of the contents of the book identifies himself and all who keep the words of the book as one company with one great purpose—the worship of God.

So it seems that faithful discipleship is not the ultimate purpose of the book—the book’s *ultimate* purpose is that God be glorified. No greater motivation for discipleship and witness bearing can be impressed on us.

2. Do right and be holy (vv. 10-12)

The words of the prophecy are of the greatest import possible—they discriminate between the redeemed and the rebellious. When God sent Moses to bear witness before Pharaoh, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that Pharaoh did not believe the message Moses brought—and in that way God displayed his glory in his judgments upon Pharaoh as well as in his redemption of Israel. In the same way, in *Revelation* we have seen that the signs of God’s judgment do not bring people to repentance (e.g. 16:9, 11).

It is, therefore, imperative that those who read the prophecy take it to heart—inasmuch as Jesus calls us to repentance (2:5, 16, 21-23; 3:3, 19-20) we must repent. He is coming and he will repay each person according to their deeds. Holiness is not an option.

3. Wash your robes (vv. 13-17)

The seventh and final beatitude is pronounced on those who “wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by

the gate”—in other words, that they may have the life-giving fellowship with God which will be enjoyed in the new creation.

The washing of robes has a double reference. First, it refers to justification for the sake of Christ’s righteousness—“they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14)—this is the only basis for the forgiveness of our sins and our vindication by God. But “fine linen, bright and pure” is also “the righteous deeds of the saints” (19:8). This is not salvation by works—it is rather the works which accompany salvation.

The alternative is to be numbered with those who love and practise falsehood. They have no right of access to life—rather, their place is in the lake of burning sulphur.

As “the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (cf. Isa. 11:1-10 and Num. 24:17) Jesus is triumphant over his enemies, the executor of full and final justice. This is a stimulus to the believing and obedient reception of his word. The church desires Christ’s coming, and in the Spirit prays for it. But the church also desires to bear trust witness, and in the Spirit calls the unsaved to come and drink freely from the wells of salvation (cf. Isa. 55:1).

4. Do not tamper with the words of this prophecy (vv. 18-20)

The severity of the final warning of the book of Revelation draws on Deut. 4:2; 12:32; 29:19-20. Deuteronomy was preached in preparation for Israel’s entrance into the Promised Land. In the Promised Land Israel would encounter seductive idolatry—so Moses warns the people that they are to listen attentively and obediently to the words of Yahweh alone—and that anyone who taught that it was possible to learn the ways of the Canaanites was false, and was to be cut out of the community.

In the same way, the temptation to compromise with pagan religion and pagan empire was strong in the churches of Asia Minor. They are warned in these closing verses that such compromise was equivalent to adding to or subtracting from the “trustworthy and true” words from “the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets,” and that such teaching would result in exclusion from the blessings of eternal life.

The angel was sent to “bear witness” (v. 16). John “bore witness” (v. 18). Finally, Jesus bears witness to the veracity of the contents of the book (v. 20)—and affirms that he is coming soon, i.e., that he will come without delay and will fulfil everything written in the book.

John’s response speaks for all the faithful—“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”

5. Benediction (v. 21)

The benediction with which the book closes reminds us that this is a letter, written to real people living through real adversity. Only by the grace of the Lord Jesus can they persevere to the end. May his grace be our portion also, working that in us which pleases him, so that by faithful endurance and loving service we may see his church established and built up, and his name honoured and glorified in all things.