

REVELATION AS A PASTORAL LETTER

Cover illustration of the Apostle John on Patmos
by *Pat Marvenko Smith* ©1982/1992 - www.revelationillustrated.com

Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from the
ESV Bible (the Holy Bible, English Standard Version) copyright
2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News
Publishers, used by permission. All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

Introduction: Structure and Symbol

Part 1 - God redeems his people

2	Among the Lampstands (Rev. 1:9 to 3:22)	22
3	The slain Lamb and the scroll (Rev. 4 and 5)	37
4	The four horsemen (Rev. 6:1-11)	56
5	Sealing then silence (Rev. 6:12 to 8:1)	67
6	Four trumpet blasts (Rev. 8:2 to 8:12)	79
	Annex to Chapter 6: Persecution of Jews	
7	The woe trumpets sound (Rev. 8:13 to 9:21)	100
8	Israel – the turning point (Rev. 10:1 to 11:14)	115
9	The seventh trumpet sounds (Rev. 11:15-19)	133
	Excursus: Joel and the three Woe trumpets	146

Part 2 – God redeems the world

Introduction to Part 2	153
10 War and victory (Rev. 12)	156
11 The battle lines are drawn (Rev. 13 and 14)	169
12 The first four bowls of God's wrath (Rev. 15 to 16:9)	194
13 The final three bowls (Rev. 16:10-21)	211
14 Babylon (Rev. 17)	227
15 Babylon falls (Rev. 18 to 19:10)	243
16 The Millennium and beyond (Rev. 19:11 to 20:15)	255
17 The Bride (Rev. 21)	277
18 Eden restored (Rev. 22)	294

Introduction: Structure and Symbol

The book of Revelation, with its signs, symbols, and cryptic language, is a difficult book to understand. John begins by telling us that the book is:

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John ... (Rev. 1:1).

The word ‘Revelation’ is English translation of the Greek word ‘*apokalupsis*’ which means ‘disclosure’ or ‘manifestation’. This disclosure originates with God who alone knows the future (Matt. 24:36); it has been given to Jesus Christ to pass on to John for the benefit of the churches. The visions will be mediated through angels in the form of symbols, and John is to record these visions for the enlightenment of Christ’s ‘servants’. The prophecy has to do with the way in which God’s purpose in Christ will be manifested in a future which began with the resurrection of Christ, and will continue until the kingdom which Christ will set up on his return to earth has been brought to a conclusion.

It is a book of blessings. There are seven beatitudes in the book, the first of which is:

“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.” (Rev. 1:3)

It is a blessing repeated in the last chapter of the book:

“And behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.” (Rev. 22:7)

It is not perhaps surprising that there is a blessing associated with reading the book or hearing the book read aloud, especially in an original church setting where some members may not have been able

to read. The instruction to ‘keep’ the words of the prophecy is however somewhat surprising, until one realises that the word ‘keep’ here (Gk: *tēreō*) does not mean keep as a matter of obedience to law, but keep from loss, or preserve; ‘keeping (preserving) the word’ is important because the prophecy is divinely valuable, and care is needed to ensure it is not corrupted (compare Rev. 22:18-19). The prophecy after all, is a unique glimpse into the future given by Christ to his followers, because they are his ‘friends’ (John 15:15).

A pastoral letter

It is important also to realise that the book of Revelation is a pastoral letter. It is of course an ‘apocalypse’, an uncovering of things previously covered, and it is a ‘prophecy’ following the pattern of the Old Testament prophecies, but we will miss one of its key functions if we fail to see it as a pastoral letter whose immediate purpose was to encourage and strengthen the churches.

That the whole book is a letter is clear from the way it opens:

“John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia: grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness ...” (Rev. 1:4-5).

And the letter closes with the doxology:

“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.” (Rev. 22:21)

The book is thus a letter from John to the churches in Asia. But it is much more than a letter; it is the last message of Jesus to believers, mediated through angels and written down by John. We are not told exactly how this communication process worked, whether John was shown visions which he later committed to paper or whether the process was a more direct one, but the process is unimportant. What matters, is that the book is an ordered account from God concerning

his purpose for mankind, centred on Jesus Christ, and written down for the encouragement of believers throughout history.

The intention of this commentary is to explore how the members of the churches to whom it was first written might have understood the visions contained in the book of Revelation. If we can go some way towards achieving this objective satisfactorily, we should be able to appreciate not only what the message meant to the first Century church, but also its meaning and relevance to us today. Most commentators accept that Revelation was written towards the end of the reign of the emperor Domitian (81-96 CE), though an earlier date in the time of Nero (54-68 CE) is a possibility. We shall discover later that the earlier date fits some aspects of the prophecy rather better than the later one. However, during the reign of both of these emperors Christians were persecuted, and it seems likely that the original purpose of the letter was to strengthen the faith of those facing persecution. We begin by considering John's own introduction (Rev. 1:4-8).

John to the churches

“John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.” (Rev. 1:4-5a)

In this opening salutation, John refers to God as the one ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come’ (Rev. 1:4). This title is an elaboration of the name which God gave to Moses at the burning bush (Exo. 3:14). On that occasion God told Moses that his name was ‘I am who I am’, a name which because of the tense structure of Hebrew could also be translated ‘I will be who I will be’. God thus proclaims himself to be the timeless self-existent one, who is past, present and future, and who in effect, is from everlasting to everlasting (Psa. 90:2). Significantly in Revelation, the future tense verb is changed from ‘who will be’ to ‘who

is to come'. This is clearly deliberate because in Revelation, the divine future for mankind will be determined by the second coming of Christ.

In passing, it is significant to notice that in two later visions of Revelation – at least in those translations of the Bible based on the latest version of the Greek text – the phrase 'who is to come' has been omitted from this three-fold 'title' of God. In the seventh trumpet (Rev. 11:17) and in the outpouring of the third bowl of the wrath of God (Rev. 16:5) the action is said to relate to the one 'who was and who is'. It seems reasonable to assume that 'who is to come' has not been included in these two passages because in the events represented, Christ is already in the earth – he has already 'come'.

John in his opening salutation calls for the blessings of grace and peace to come from the self-existent God, from the 'seven spirits who are before his throne', and from Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:4). We shall consider the seven spirits in connection with the 'letters' to the churches in the next chapter. John introduces Jesus Christ with three 'titles' which establish his authoritative status: he is 'the faithful witness', 'the firstborn of (or from) the dead', and 'the ruler of kings on earth'. His faithfulness as a witness (Gk: *martus*) refers to the fact that in his ministry he witnessed to the saving purpose of God even to death. In doing so, he became a 'martyr' in the English sense of the word, and he revealed the quality which will be shared in various degrees by all those who aspire to be witnesses for Christ. Because of his faithfulness to the point of death, God raised him from the dead to become the firstborn of a new creation. And at his resurrection, God assigned to him 'all power in heaven and on earth' (Matt. 28:18), and he became the 'ruler of kings on earth'. John follows this statement of the status of Christ with an ascription of praise in the form of a brief prayer:

"To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."
(Rev. 1:5b-6)

Further introductory features

In his introduction, John makes two striking statements which foreshadow important features of the visions which follow. He writes, 'Behold he is coming with clouds and every eye will see him' (Rev. 1:7a). This is a statement which reflects a number of references in the gospels to the second coming of Jesus (Matt. 24:30, 26:64, Mk. 13:26, 14:62, Luke 21:27), and also recalls the manner of his ascension (Acts 1:9). It will become an identifier of his second coming at a key point in the later visions (Rev. 14:14). Significantly, the coming of the Lord with clouds is a reflection of that clearest of Daniel's Messianic prophecies (Dan. 7:13-14). It was in fact the Messianic claim made by Jesus when facing the Jewish Council, and which as far as they were concerned, sealed his fate (Matt. 26:64).

The other statement included by John in his introduction is more challenging. John writes, 'Even those who pierced him (Gk: *ekkenteo*) and all tribes (Gk: *phule*) of the earth will wail (or mourn) on account of him'. The Greek word '*phule*' (tribe or clan) is the word used for the tribes of Israel in both the New Testament and the Greek translation of the Old (the Septuagint). The verb '*ekkenteo*' means pierced or thrust through. It is used only twice in the New Testament; in this passage (Rev. 1:7), and in the Gospel of John (John 19:37). In his gospel, John is making reference to the piercing of Jesus on the cross as predicted by one of Israel's prophets (Zech.12:10). According to Zechariah, the time will come when the house of David (Israel) and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will mourn and weep as an act of contrition for their involvement in the death of God's chosen one. Jesus himself quotes this same passage in his Mount Olivet prophecy where the phrase 'all the tribes of the earth will mourn' is virtually identical to that in Revelation (Matt. 24:30). By using Zechariah's words John seems to be indicating that we may expect the repentance of the Jewish people in the days before Christ returns to feature later in Revelation's visions. We will be suggesting that the trumpet sequence in Revelation tells of God's future plans for the Old Testament people of God.

John concludes his introductory words with what appears to be a formal stamp of divine authority:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’” (Rev. 1:8)

Alpha and omega are, of course, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. It is therefore a ‘title’ signifying that the purpose of God in Christ which will be revealed in the visions which are to follow, represent the beginning and the end of God’s redemptive purpose with mankind. The ‘title’ occurs on two other occasions in Revelation about which we shall comment at the appropriate point (Rev. 21:6, 22:13); the title is also indirectly referred to in Christ’s letter to Smyrna (Rev. 2:8). When the title finally occurs it is used by Jesus of himself alongside a promise to come soon (Rev. 22:12-13); by doing so, he reinforces his key role in the divine purpose of redemption as the one ‘who is to come’.

The structure of the prophecy

It seems likely that in the first Century, an appreciation of the structure of the letter would come from hearing it read. After the introduction (Rev. 1:1-8), the listeners would hear of John’s encounter with the risen Christ, and the messages Christ dictated to be sent to the seven churches. They would then hear about John’s invitation to enter the heavenly Temple and his account of the events taking place there. They would listen with amazement to the drama of the seven sealed scroll and about the Lamb who was deemed worthy to break the seals. They would hear an account of the awesome events which occurred as each seal was broken. Then, they would hear seven trumpets sounding, each heralding fearful and perplexing events. When the seventh trumpet sounds they would hear a heavenly announcement proclaiming that ‘the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ’, and they would naturally think that they had arrived at the climax of the vision.

However, they are in for a surprise! Because when the reading continues (at Revelation 12:1), it is as though John is starting all over again with a whole new cast of characters. He tells them of a woman about to give birth, and of a great red dragon standing by ready to devour the child. He tells them of two beasts, one emerging from the sea and the other from the land; then, somewhat 'out of the blue' a magnificently dressed harlot appears riding one of the beasts. And only after these characters have made their appearance does John's visions turn to a description of the destruction of the forces of evil by a rider on a white horse who rides forth to victory. Finally, they hear about the new Jerusalem pictured as a bride adorned for her husband descending from heaven resplendent with the divine glory.

It must have appeared therefore to the original hearers of Revelation, that the book consisted of two parts, each with its own set of distinctive characters and its own themes. A structure following this pattern, omitting John's introduction (Rev. 1:1-8) and his epilogue (Rev. 22:10-21), is presented in the Tables below:

Part 1: God redeems his people		
	Revelation	
Lamp-stands	1:9-1:20 2-3	Christ walks among the lampstands. Christ dictates messages to the seven churches.
Seals	4-5 6:1-8:1	John enters the heavenly Temple. He sees the slain lamb and a scroll sealed with seven seals. The seals are opened with dramatic consequences. Silence in heaven.
Trumpets	8:2-8:5 8:6-11:19	Prayers of the saints. Seven trumpets sound. The seventh trumpet heralds the kingdom. Christ reigns.

Part 2: God redeems the world

	Revelation	
Christ and the beasts	12	The woman, the child and the great red dragon is described.
	13	The beasts exercise their power on earth whilst 144,000 are seen on Mt. Zion. Warnings. Christ returns; reward and judgement follow.
	14	
Bowls of Wrath	15 – 16 17:1 - 19:10	Divine wrath is poured out on the nations. Excursus 1: Judgement on Babylon.
Millennium	19:11 - 20:15	The millennium is described. It is followed by the great white throne judgement.
The Bride	21:1 - 22:9	New heavens and earth. Excursus 2: The bride, the new Jerusalem, the holy city is revealed.

Part 1: God redeems his people

The first part of Revelation includes visions of the seven lampstand churches, the seven seal openings and the seven trumpet soundings. We shall argue that each set of seven represents God dealing with his people in the three following distinctive groupings:

- The lampstands represent the churches; it is a picture of the followers of Christ in which 'wheat and tares' grow together; a community which includes those who are truly 'in the Lord' and those who are not. It is an 'earthly' view (warts and all) which John sees before being invited into heaven (Rev. 4:1).
- The seal visions occur after John has been invited to enter the heavenly temple (Rev. 4:1). They provide a heavenly view of the process by which the true spiritual church, the saints, are 'sealed of God'.
- The trumpets represent God's dealings with the Old Testament

‘church’, the Jews; those who have so far rejected Christ but who will, prior to his return, recognise him as their Messiah.

So, the first part of Revelation (Chapters 1 to 11) deals with these three groups: church members (on earth), saints in prospect, and Jews. All are God’s people, and John’s Revelation is a message from Jesus to them all. We have entitled this first part of Revelation, ‘God redeems his people’.

Part 2: God redeems the world

The second part of Revelation begins with the triumph of Christ over the power of evil (Rev. 12:1-11). Christ is shown as the child born to the woman clothed with the sun, one who will rule the nations with a rod of iron (Rev. 12:5). Of course, the birth of Christ and his victory over evil occurred many years before John committed his prophecy to paper – but it is the event on which everything else in God’s purpose depends. This vision of the victory of Christ would therefore make an appropriate opening to the whole of Revelation, since the salvation of the people of God (Part 1) depends totally on the victory of Christ on the cross. John however, has been guided to place it at the beginning of Part 2, because it is also the essential event which will result in the salvation of the world. We will explore this vision therefore in its proper place at the beginning of Part 2. However, when we discuss the risen Lord’s messages to the seven churches (Rev. 2-3) and the sequence of the seven seals (Rev. 6-7), we will draw attention to the fact that the people of God conquer evil not by the use of their own will-power, but by appropriating to themselves the victory of Christ on the cross.

After describing the victory of Christ, the prophecy continues by representing the evil powers in the world as beasts which the followers of Christ have to face. The spiritual opposition to the beasts is represented as the 144,000 which John sees on Mt. Zion; it is a spiritual battle which terminates with the second coming of Christ (Rev. 14). Following this, a series of seven bowls of wrath (judgements) are poured out on rebellious world powers. Finally, the world is redeemed when a new heavens and a new earth is established and when the

Bride, the new Jerusalem is revealed. We have called this part of Revelation, 'God redeems the world', and we shall explore its structure in greater detail in the introduction to Part 2 of the commentary.

Action Symbols

The book of Revelation is a book of symbols, but there are four sets of seven 'action' symbols which are of particular importance to the present approach to the prophecy; they are, lampstands, seals, trumpets and bowls of wrath. We will shortly take a closer look at these symbols, but first, we need to illustrate what we mean by an action symbol. When God wanted to show Jeremiah that he was in control of Israel's destiny, he directed him to go to the potter's house, and watch the potter make a vessel on the wheel (Jer. 18:1-4). As he watched, something went wrong and the vessel was spoiled under the potter's hand. But while the clay was still malleable, the potter could re-work the vessel into a form which was acceptable. This encounter was an illustration to Jeremiah, of God's ability to remold Israel, provided they remained sufficiently pliable. The potter's vessel was an 'action' symbol, because it spoke of the sometimes complex and sometimes unpleasant processes which were involved in God's molding of Israel. Revelation's four key symbols are similar 'action' symbols: they speak of the divine processes involved in God's dealings with different groups of people for the purposes of salvation or judgement. We will now consider these four key symbols as action symbols.

Lampstands. The symbol of a lampstand to represent a church is uncontroversial and familiar. The seven branched candlestick in Israel's Tabernacle/Temple with its lamps, represented the light of God's presence in the nation. The lampstand carried oil lamps which would need maintenance; the oil would have to be topped up and the wicks trimmed if the lamps were to shine reliably. John of course, does not see a seven branched lampstand, he sees seven separate lampstands representing the seven churches of Asia. But they are lampstands nevertheless, designed to carry lamps which will also need attention if they are to shine effectively. As a matter of fact, John does

not mention seeing any lamps in this opening vision, a feature we shall consider later (Rev. 1:12-20). But these lampstands are 'action' symbols. The messages (letters) John is instructed to send to these lampstands (churches) represent Jesus' interaction with the individual churches; they include his judgement on the effectiveness or otherwise of their lamps as emitters of the light of the gospel, and his requirements for any corrective action needed.

Seals. A document seal is a means of making sure a document or letter is securely closed; it has a two-fold significance it is a mark of ownership and a mark of protection. In the past, a substance like clay or wax would be used to seal the open edges of a document or scroll and the owner would stamp his name into the wax using a signet ring. In modern times, with the possible exception of legal documents, we have little use for sealing in this form. But the seal on a document is an 'active' symbol. It ensures that the information sealed away has a recognised owner and is protected (compare John 17:12). In the case of the seals in Revelation, the 'information' to be sealed is a person's identity. The people sealed are the redeemed, they belong to God and are protected by him. Of course, seals are temporary devices – there's no point in sealing something if the seal can never be opened. In Revelation, John sees a scroll in the right hand of God; the scroll is sealed with seven seals which are then opened one by one. Moreover, if what is sealed in the scroll are the identities of the redeemed, it follows that the scroll is the book of life, or its equivalent. So the 'active' symbol of the seal then represents the processes used by God to draw people to himself so that they may be sealed as part of the redeemed community.

Trumpets. The trumpet is an obvious 'action' symbol. In scripture the trumpet is strongly associated with God's governance of the Old Testament people of God. The sounding of a trumpet was an important part of the Israel's religious life. Of all the functions the trumpet played in Israel's relationship to God, the dominant one was that of calling Israel to God – or calling them back to God. Allied with this is the requirement that Israel should recognise that they are his covenant people. In this commentary we shall assume that the

sequence of seven trumpets relate to the role of Israel in the purpose of God. The focus therefore of the visions will be the nation of Israel, and the 'action' element of the trumpet symbol will be God's treatment of the Jews, the purpose of which is to bring them back to himself and to enable them to recognise Jesus as their Messiah.

Bowls of wrath. The Greek word for this particular utensil is *phiale*, mostly translated 'bowls' in modern versions. In the Hebrew Old Testament *phiale* is a word used almost exclusively for the bowls used in the service of the Tabernacle/Temple to manipulate the blood of the sacrifices. In sacrifice, the life-blood, representing the forfeited life of the sinner, was poured out at the base of the altar – it was 'devoted to destruction'. The bowls of wrath in Revelation therefore are 'action' symbols representing the judgements of God which have as their objective the elimination of all those who oppose his purposes, so that the world might be cleansed of evil. We shall further explore the significance of this symbol at the appropriate point in the commentary.

Other aspects of the symbology

There are some other features of Revelation's symbology which are best considered before getting down to the detail of the visions. We shall therefore briefly consider the way numbers are used in Revelation, and the significance of the fact that the terms 'heaven' and 'earth' are used in a number of ways in the book.

Numbers

The book of Revelation is well known for its symbolic use of numbers – from 666 to 144,000. We will assess these particular numbers when we come to them, but there are other numbers which occur regularly and which clearly are important to John – in particular 7, 4, 10, 12, 1000 (or multiples of), and 3.5 years or its equivalents (42 months or 1260 days). There are many views about Bible numbers – some of which are rather fanciful. However, we outline below some views on John's key numbers which seem to be reasonably well accepted.

- 7 is generally recognized as indicating totality or completeness – derived primarily the fact that God completed his creative work in 7 days. The use of the number 7 in the case of the four series which we have termed ‘action’ symbols above – churches, seals, trumpets and bowls of wrath – is intended to show that once all seven in the set have occurred, the ‘action’ implied by the symbol (e.g. sealing the saints, or pouring out divine wrath) has been completed. Moreover, the fact that the individual items in each set of 7 are numbered does not necessarily mean that they are sequential – it is clear for example, that the 7 churches all existed simultaneously and it seems quite likely that some of the other elements of the sevens overlap in time. There are also other sets of 7 in Revelation – 7 stars, 7 spirits of God, 7 thunders, 7 beatitudes and so on. Most of these are not a part of the structure of the book, but the fact they exist reminds us that John’s account has been very carefully constructed and that his use of numbers is significant.
- 4 is the number of the physical creation. Most obviously, 4 directions: North, South, East and West (Rev. 21:13), 4 corners of the earth and 4 winds (Rev. 7:1). There are also 4 elements of creation (earth, sea, rivers and springs of water, and the sun) specified as key locations for the first four trumpets and bowls of wrath. In the seal sequence, the first 4 seals are the sphere of operation of the 4 horsemen of the apocalypse which have a special meaning which we will consider later. John’s repeated fourfold specification of the peoples of the earth is remarkable: ‘tribes and languages and peoples and nations’ (Rev. 5:9) – in all, there are 7 such lists, using a variety of terms in different orders, but always in sets of 4 (Rev. 5:9, 7:9, 10:11, 11:9, 13:7, 14:6, 17:15). There are 4 living creatures in the heavenly throne-room who play a key role in executing God’s purposes on earth (Rev. 4:6).
- 10 like 7 is a number signifying totality or completeness but usually in a secular context. The two numbers are used

together in the case of the dragon and the beasts of Revelation 12 and 13; both have 7 heads and 10 horns. The heads represent the totality of human rule; we shall argue that these heads have probably been manifested as the sequence of empires who through history have had control over God's people – Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Media/Persia, Greece and Rome (with one still to come). The horn in scripture being a symbol of power (1Sam. 2:10, Psa. 148:14), the ten horns represent the totality of ruling power exercised by the heads.

- 12 is a number associated with God's governance of his people. Hence, 12 tribes of Israel and 12 Apostles. 12 also features in the woman's crown (Rev. 12:1) and in various aspects of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21). 12 squared, 144, is a feature of both the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:17) and of the company sealed by God (Rev. 7:4, 14:3).
- 1000 when used as a multiplier simply implies a large number. Hence 144,000 (Rev. 7:4) or 12,000 (Rev. 21:16). 1000 is also the length of the millennial age in years (Rev. 20:4). In this case, the fact that it is a stand-alone number rather than a multiplier, suggests that it represents a definite period of time, though it is unclear whether this period should be taken literally or whether it simply indicates a long period of time.
- $3\frac{1}{2}$ occurs in a number of forms. 'A time, times and half a time' (Rev. 12:14), which if taken in literal solar years, is the equivalent of 42 months (Rev. 11:2, 13:5), and 1260 days (Rev. 11:3, 12:6). The first of these terms also appears in Daniel 7:25 and 12:7 where the context suggests that this period was associated with a time of trouble for the people of God. It is also the half week period referred to in the 70 weeks prophecy of Daniel 9, a period which has to pass before God intervenes to bring events to an end. So by extension, in Revelation, it may well be that these periods are not to be taken literally, but refer to periods of time in which the people of God suffer at the hands of worldly powers until God brings deliverance.

Heaven and earth

John sees many of his visions in 'heaven' but the events he sees often have consequences on 'earth'. What then is the significance of the terms 'heaven' and 'earth' in Revelation? In scripture the phrase 'heaven and earth' is often treated as though the two components belong together and that they represent the created order of things:

- 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1).
- Isaiah speaks of a new 'heavens and earth', foretelling a time when God will make Jerusalem a joy (Isaiah 65:17).
- Peter writes about the original 'heavens and earth' which were destroyed by the flood and about the present 'heavens and earth' which will be destroyed by fire (2 Peter 3:5-13).
- Revelation also speaks about both the present 'heavens and earth' as part of God's creation (Rev. 10:6), and the new 'heavens and earth' which will be God's new creation (Rev. 21:1).

However, although 'heavens and earth' in the above references can refer to the literal physical order created by God, the terms 'heavens' and 'earth' are sometimes used metaphorically; they are used to refer to a social or governmental structure in which 'heavens' represents the rulers and 'earth' those who are ruled. For example, when speaking about the destruction of Babylon by the Medes, God through the prophet says, 'I will make the heavens tremble and the earth will be shaken out of its place at the wrath of the Lord of hosts' (Isa. 13:13); again, referring to the covenant relationship between himself and Israel, God says, 'I have put words in your mouth ... establishing the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth and saying to Zion, 'You are my people'' (Isa. 51:16). It is a metaphorical use of the terms 'heavens' and 'earth' which we shall find applied from time to time in Revelation.

But in John's visions, quite often the words 'heaven' and 'earth' take on special 'spiritual' meanings. Heaven is 'the realm of God's sovereign

control'. It is not physically located (i.e. it's not 'up there'), rather it is God's sphere of operation whenever and wherever God-initiated events occur. Moreover, it is timeless; what John sees occurring in 'heaven' is not necessarily tied to our earthly timescale. It is also spiritually perceived. The 'heavenly' realm can only be seen by those whose eyes are spiritually open, in the same way that Elisha's servant could only see the armies of God once his eyes had been opened by the power of God (2Kings 6:17). It can and does include those events physically on earth which are part of God's eternal purposes, but it excludes those things which are a consequence of human aspirations.

In contrast 'earth' represents 'the historical realm' and it is 'naturally perceived'. In particular, 'earth' represents those elements which are under the control of mankind and which are therefore often opposed to the purposes of God. The things we see around us on earth are real enough; they are events which occur within historic time, and they pass from the scene as time passes. They include good things and bad. In John's visions 'earth' contains the beasts representing political powers, and the inhabitants of the world – peoples, nations, languages, and kings. It's probably an oversimplification, but what John sees in 'heaven' are the spiritual realities as God sees them – human evil is out of sight. Human activities and aspirations on the other hand are played out on 'earth'.

So much for these initial considerations. In the next chapter we turn to John's opening vision which is concerned with Christ walking among the lampstands with messages for the churches.

Part 1: God redeems his people

Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from the ESV Bible (the Holy Bible, English Standard Version) copyright 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, used by permission. All rights reserved.

Chapter 2. Among the Lampstands

John's vision (Revelation 1:9 to 3:22)

John is in exile on the island of Patmos on account of his witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. He hears a voice like a trumpet telling him to write what he sees and hears and to send the resulting prophecy to the seven churches in Asia. He turns to see who is speaking, and he sees one like a son of man (a human being) standing in the midst of seven golden lampstands. The seven lampstands are churches in Asia, and to open the prophecy John is given a message from the son of man for each of these churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. The message to each church is addressed to the angel of the church, and each message consists of an opening salutation followed by words of commendation or of condemnation. The messages end with an exhortation from the son of man (Jesus) to conquer, with a promise of reward for those who remain faithful.

On Patmos

Patmos is an island about 30 miles from the coast of Asia Minor. John tells us that he was in exile on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus although we know nothing more about the reasons for his being there. He hears a trumpet voice giving him instructions:

"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see 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 Laodicea.' Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands" (Rev. 1:10-12)

John being 'in the spirit' probably means that he was in a state of spiritual awareness, which was heightened because it was 'the Lord's day'. Some have taken 'the Lord's day' to mean the day Jesus Christ returns to the earth, but it is more natural to understand this phrase as referring to the first day of the week, the day when Jesus rose from the dead and when the churches met to remember his resurrection.

John is told by the 'trumpet' voice to write the visions of Revelation and send them to seven churches in Asia. When John turns to see who is speaking to him, he sees seven golden lampstands (or candlesticks). The lampstands are reminiscent of the seven branched candlestick in Israel's Tabernacle/Temple (the Menorah). However, whereas the Menorah was a single candlestick with seven branches each with its associated oil-powered lamp, what John sees are seven individual lampstands. John however, makes no mention of lamps nor of the means by which the lamps are kept alight. We shall see the significance of this shortly. John is told that the lampstands represent the seven churches to whom the prophecy of Revelation is to be sent (Rev. 1:20).

The son of man

Among the lampstands, John sees one 'like a son of man'. The phrase 'son of man' basically means a human being (a son of Adam) and is often used in this way in the Old Testament (see for example, Job 16:21 or Psa. 8:4 and many others). It was however, the preferred title Jesus applied to himself during his ministry because it identified him with those he came to save. The 'son of man' title however, takes on a Messianic significance when it is seen as the one to whom dominion and glory was given in Daniel's vision (Dan. 7:13-14). John then describes 'the son of man' of his vision. He was clothed with a long robe with a golden sash around his chest. His hair was white, his eyes like a flame of fire and his voice like the roar of many waters. His feet were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace. His face was like the sun shining in its strength and from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword. In his right hand he was holding the

seven stars which are the angels of the seven churches. John is left in no doubt that this impressive person was the risen Lord Jesus:

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, ‘Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.’” (Rev. 1:17-18)

The prophecy John has been told to send to the churches, begins with seven specific messages, one for each of the churches in Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Each of these messages begins with a salutation which includes one or more of the characteristics John has seen featured in the vision of the son of man – for example, to Ephesus, the salutation includes the fact that the author of the message holds the seven stars in his hand and walks among the lampstands, or to Pergamum, that he has a sharp two edged sword, and so on. There does not appear to be any obvious link between these ‘salutation characteristics’ and the features of specific churches, but they certainly reveal that the risen Lord knows the churches well and is active among them; he walks among them (Rev. 2:1), he knows their circumstances (Rev. 2:9,13) and he knows their works (Rev. 2:2,19, 3:1,8,15). Moreover, combining these features from the letter salutations with the explicit details given in John’s vision of the son of man, we can form a comprehensive picture of the risen Lord:

- **His robe.** The ‘son of man’ in John’s vision wears a long robe with a golden sash around his chest (Rev. 1:13). The Greek term for the long robe (Gk: *poderes*) is used in the Septuagint to refer to the garments of the Levitical high priest which featured an embroidered sash (Ex 39:29). However, the gold of the sash of the risen Jesus suggests a higher order of priesthood than that of the Levitical (Heb. 7:11).
- **His white hair.** White hair is considered to be a symbol of age and/or wisdom (Rev. 1:14, Dan. 7:9). In the case of the risen Lord, white hair seems to be intended to show that the wisdom of the

ancient of days in Daniel's vision was shared by the 'son of man' to whom everlasting dominion was delegated in that prophecy.

- ***His eyes and voice.*** Eyes like a flame of fire suggest the power to detect falsehood, and a voice like the roar of many waters suggests the power of the spoken word to overcome evil and to maintain truth (Rev. 1:14-15, 2:18).
- ***His feet.*** Feet like burnished bronze (fine brass or copper) refined in a furnace, speaks of one whose 'metal' had been proved through the furnace of affliction (Rev. 1:15, 2:18).
- ***The two-edged sword.*** The sharp two-edged sword coming from the mouth of the 'son of man' also signifies the power of the one who speaks – this time one who speaks a word of judgement (Rev. 1:16, 2:12,16, Acts 5:4-5). It is the 'weapon' carried by the rider on the white horse by which he will strike down the nations (Rev. 19:15, 21).
- ***His face.*** His face is like the sun shining in full strength – a feature which recalls the transfiguration of Jesus during which the glory of God was revealed in his person. Moses experienced something similar as a result of his close communication with God (Rev. 1:16, Mat 17:2, Exo. 34:29). The shining face is also a characteristic shared with the rainbowed angel who we shall see as the angel of the presence who led Israel out of Egypt (Rev. 10:1).

The salutations to the churches also make the following references to qualities of the risen Lord in addition to those listed above:

- ***He is the First and the Last.*** The salutation to the church of Smyrna picks up the meaning of the title Alpha and Omega, and links it to Jesus Christ as the firstborn from the dead (Rev. 2:8). John has already recorded God as saying that he is the Alpha and the Omega – the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet (Rev. 1:8). Moreover, at the end of Revelation Jesus takes this title to himself and explains it (or expands it) by saying that 'he is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end' (Rev. 21:6, 22:13). In effect, he is saying that the whole of God's purpose from start to finish is dependent on his own ministry – on the person and work of the risen Lord.

- **He is Holy and true.** To the church at Philadelphia Jesus refers to himself as ‘the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens’ (Rev: 3:7). This description draws on an incident in Hezekiah’s reign when an unreliable servant of the king, Shebna, was replaced with a more reliable one, Eliakim (Isa. 22:22). The key of David represents power over access to David’s household which may prophetically be regarded as both the nation of Israel restored, and the prototypical Messianic Kingdom.
- **He is the True witness.** Finally he is ‘the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation’ (Rev. 3:14). Amen means ‘so be it’. Used in this title it is an acknowledgement of the trustworthiness of Christ as the author of the message; he is the one who will not only show John (and us) the things which are about to take place, but will surely bring them about. What’s more, he is the one whose trustworthiness and truth has already been demonstrated by his ‘witness’ (Gk: *martus*) to the fulfilment of the purpose of God in his ministry and death. He is the ‘beginning’ of creation. Beginning is the Greek word ‘*arche*’, which means either first in time or first in rank. Jesus Christ is first in time, because he was the one who was ‘foreknown before the foundation of the world’ (1Pet. 1:20) – an essential part of God’s plan from the beginning of time. He was also first in status because he was the firstborn of the new creation (Rom. 8:29, 2Cor. 5:17).

Lampstands and stars

The lampstands represent the seven churches and the stars in the right hand of the risen Lord represent the ‘angels’ of the churches (Rev. 1:20). There has been considerable debate about who the ‘angels’ of the churches are – are they literal angels, or perhaps human church leaders, or even the ‘spirit’ of the whole church? It is probably simplest to think of the ‘angel’ of a church as its ‘spiritual leadership’ – not any particular individual or group of individuals and not necessarily excluding an element of the supernatural (Heb. 1:14). It is also true that the spiritual characteristics of a church (its ‘spirit’) will depend on its leadership – they are thus the appropriate recipients of

the messages of the risen Lord. Whatever view is taken of the 'angels/stars' however, they are held in the right hand of the risen Lord for protection as well as for guidance.

We noted earlier, that although John sees the lampstands, he says nothing about seeing lamps for producing light, nor, to use the oil-lamp analogy, does he mention fuel required to keep the lights burning. It seems possible that the lamps which apparently were not visible in John's vision of the churches (lampstands) are the 'lamps of fire' John sees before the throne when he is taken into the in the heavenly Temple (Rev. 4:5). The reasons for considering such a possibility are somewhat indirect, but significant nonetheless.

In the salutation to the church in Sardis, the risen Lord says that he 'has (control of) the seven spirits of God and the seven stars' (Rev. 3:1). The stars we have taken to be the leadership of the churches so that the phrase Jesus uses in his message to Sardis suggests that the 'stars' and the 'spirits' are linked in some way. John mentions the seven spirits four times in Revelation (Rev. 1:4, 3:1, 4:5, 5:6). They are the seven spirits who are 'before God's throne', that is to say, they are in the heavenly Temple. There, they are described as 'burning torches' (Rev. 4:5 ESV) although what John actually wrote was that they were 'lamps of fire', which corresponds precisely to what the oil-lamps in Israel's Tabernacle/Temple actually were. The seven spirits also feature as a characteristic of the slain lamb who is described as having 'seven horns and seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth' (Rev. 5:6). Putting these various pieces of information together, it would seem that we are being guided to think of the seven spirits of God as the risen Christ's power both to see (eyes) and to act (horns) working through the 'lamps of fire' before the throne which are the lamps associated with the churches. The lampstands (churches) may be 'earthly' organisations, but the light they are producing is 'heavenly'. What's more, the power by which the lamps shine is not oil but the spirit of Christ. The true function of the lamps is to project the 'heavenly' light of the gospel of Christ to the world, and the spiritual leaders (the stars/angels) are responsible for ensuring that the lamps fulfil this function.

Having seen the vision of the risen Lord, John falls at his feet as though dead. He is reassured by the 'son of man' who lays his right hand on him and confirms his identity by telling John that he is the one who died and is alive for evermore (Rev. 1:18). The risen Jesus then repeats the commission spoken by the trumpet voice: John must write the things he sees (and hears) and send them to the churches.

The Asian churches

Important as the messages from Jesus to the churches undoubtedly are, we do not propose to explore them in any detail here since others have covered this topic exhaustively. It seems appropriate however to consider how these messages fit into our overall approach to Revelation. John will not be taken into the heavenly Temple until the beginning of Revelation 4. The messages to the churches therefore are not 'heavenly' visions but represent God/Christ speaking to his people in the real earthly situations represented by the lampstands (churches). The vision of the risen Lord that John sees is of course a 'heavenly' representation, but the churches among whom Jesus walks, as the messages will show, are a mixture of good and bad, wheat and tares, sheep and goats.

The seven churches form a circuit in Asia centered on Ephesus, one that John himself had probably travelled many times. Although we do not intend to evaluate in any detail the political or social conditions for Christians living in the towns in which the seven churches were situated, a brief reminder of their location (on the map on the right) and their characteristics in the world



of first century Rome forms a helpful background to the Lord's messages.

- **Ephesus:** The city was known as the Gateway to Asia. It had a large deep harbour on the Aegean Sea, and good road connections, arising from the convergence of three trade routes. It was a self-governing city featuring a stadium, a marketplace and a theatre together with Temples to various emperors and to Artemis (Diana of the Ephesians (Acts 19:28-35).
- **Smyrna:** Was a bustling sea port which was rebuilt in BC 290 as a model city. It was said to be one of the world's most beautiful cities and boasted a famous stadium, a library and a large public theatre. Smyrna also featured a school of science and medicine, and Temples to Cybele (Artemis) and to Zeus. The city was an ancient supporter of Rome with Temples to Roma and Tiberius.
- **Pergamum:** Was Rome's provincial capital, taken over from the Greeks, and it was the official centre for the imperial cult. It was a cultural hub with a large library rivalling that of Alexandria. It was also a religious centre for the worship of Zeus, Athene, Dionysos and Asklepios (the god of healing). It had a school of medicine, and an impressive altar to Zeus which was a wonder of the ancient world.
- **Thyatira:** Was a wealthy commercial centre, known for its purple dye (Lydia, Acts 16:14). The city was well known for its trade guilds; bakers, dyers, leather workers, and potters, etc. In order to ply their trade, artisans were required to belong to a guild, which were also often linked to the pagan gods.
- **Sardis:** Was a city of wealth and fame situated on an impregnable plateau. Gold and silver coins were first struck at Sardis. Historically, it was the seat of Cyrus (Persia) before falling to Greece (the Seleucids) and then to Rome. The city was destroyed in an earthquake in AD17, and rebuilt with the help of the Roman emperor Tiberius'. It featured a large Temple of Artemis, a theatre and a stadium.

- **Philadelphia:** Was known as the gateway to the east. It had a healthy economy based on agriculture and industry. It also had earthquake problems. It was devastated in AD17, needing Roman help to rebuild it, and was called Neocaesarea as an acknowledgement. It was called Flavia in Vespasian's time (presumably after the Emperor's family). It also featured magnificent Temples.
- **Laodicea:** Achieved wealth through trade and banking; it was rich enough to rebuild itself after an earthquake in AD60. The city was sited at the junction of two imperial trade routes and therefore had good communications. It was famous for producing glossy black wool, and featured a medical school with special ointments for ears and eyes. Sister cities were Hierapolis and Colossae, both of which are mentioned in Paul's letter to the Colossians. The city had water problems which required an aqueduct which brought tepid water to the town.

There were of course, other churches in Asia which John does not mention – the church at Colossae for example – so we are reminded that John is using the numerical significance of seven (completeness) to indicate that although the churches to which John is asked to write were seven specific churches situated in Asia at the time of writing, they represent all the churches which then existed wherever they were located. This principle can be extended in our 21st Century allowing us to legitimately regard the seven churches of Revelation as representing churches everywhere throughout history.

The messages

In the previous chapter we made the point that the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ over evil (portrayed in Revelation 12) was the key historical event upon which the salvation of the people of God depended. Every one of the messages to the churches makes an implied reference to this victory:

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers” (Revelation 2:7)

For believers, conquering evil depends on the fact that Christ conquered. It is not a question of conquering by one’s own efforts or on the basis of one’s own ‘righteousness’ but as we shall see when we consider the vision of the woman clothed with the sun (Rev. 12), it is a matter of appropriating the victory of Christ to oneself. The messages to the churches will help us to see more clearly just what it means to conquer by the grace of God in Christ.

The messages follow a standard format:

- **Authority.** The authority of the sender, the risen Lord, is first established by reference to a characteristic of the ‘son of man’ seen in John’s vision.
- **Commendation.** (Wheat-like qualities). Jesus commends the churches on their good qualities if there are any.
- **Condemnation.** (Tare-like influences). Jesus comments on the churches failings and advises them about remedies.
- **Rewards.** At the end of each message Jesus indicates the potential rewards for those who conquer, based on aspects of the paradise of God (Rev. 22).

Wheat-like qualities

Patient endurance and faithfulness in the face of opposition of various kinds is a key element in the Lord’s commendation of the churches. The Ephesians are commended for not having grown weary but having been steadfast; they have resisted false apostles and have rejected false teachings. The Christians at Smyrna although they are poor in this world’s goods, are rich spiritually. Even so, Jesus reveals that they will have to face prison and tribulation arising from Jewish opposition; he exhorts them to be faithful unto death (Rev. 2:10). Philadelphians too are holding fast with patience; they have kept the word of Jesus despite opposition from the Jews, and because of their faithfulness, Jesus promises to support them during the trial that is

coming (Rev. 3:10-11). Christians at Pergamum have held fast to the name of Jesus even though one of their number, Antipas, has been martyred (Rev. 2:13).

Literal martyrdom represents an extreme consequence of a Christian's commitment to Christ; it is a mirror of the witness exhibited by Christ himself on the cross. When we come to consider the seven seal visions (Rev. 6), we shall find that true discipleship is represented as martyrdom – the souls under the altar were 'those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne' (Rev. 6:9). But judging by the messages to the churches, literal martyrdom was the exception rather than the rule. In practical terms 'conquering' evil is for most part a matter of 'holding fast to the name of Jesus'. God does not normally call us to literal martyrdom, but he does expect us to exhibit that which the church at Thyatira were commended for – love and faith with patient endurance. These were spiritual qualities which in Thyatira's case, seemed to have improved over time (Rev. 2:19). Sadly, only a few in Sardis are described as 'worthy' and many had 'gone to sleep' – they were certainly not as watchful as they ought to have been. It's not that they had rebelled or deserted Christ, it's that they were no longer fully committed to their Lord. And such a life-long commitment is the characteristic which the Lord values, and which will allow him to confess their name before God (Luke 14:33). Jesus has nothing positive to say about Laodicea.

There is a school of thought that interprets these messages as a commentary on the declining 'spirituality' of the church over the centuries; thus the modern church is regarded as being Laodicean in its outlook. Such view is not consistent with the present approach to Revelation, which does not regard any of the sevens (churches, seals, trumpets or bowls) as being necessarily sequential – in fact, many of them will be shown to operate concurrently.

Tare-like influences

To a great extent in his messages to the churches, the risen Lord's condemnations are a negative image of his commendations. Whereas

Thyatira was commended for improving spiritual qualities over time, Ephesus had lost their first love. They were certainly commended for patient endurance, but over time they had become forgetful of their service to their Lord, though exactly in what respect is unclear. It was however so serious a failure that Jesus threatens to dissolve the church (Rev. 2:5).

Several of the churches instead of remaining true to Christ were being adversely affected by false teaching promulgated by other so-called 'religious' groups. Ephesus was commended for dealing with false teachers, but Pergamum was less vigilant; some there were holding what is described as the 'teachings of Balaam'. Balaam was the Old Testament false prophet who was not only prepared to sell his services for money but who was also responsible for encouraging immorality in Israel for the explicit purpose of drawing the Israelites away from God (Num. 25:1, 31:16). Sexual immorality was a common feature intrinsic to many pagan religions at the time. The Nicolaitans are mentioned twice – Ephesus hated them though some in Pergamum were attracted by the cult. Little is known about the doctrines of this group but it seems likely that they were a pseudo-Christian group who combined the Christian faith with elements of pagan ritual. They were drawing church members away from the true gospel and in the process acting contrary to the express advice of the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15:29).

Thyatira had a problem which the Lord likens to that of the Old Testament queen 'Jezebel'; it is even possible that Jezebel was an individual in the church. Once again this pagan influence was drawing believers away from Christ towards idol worship and associated sexual practices. The Lord threatens to afflict those involved with 'great tribulation' for the purpose of bringing them to repentance. They were to be rewarded 'according to their works' (Rev. 2:23), which probably means that Jesus would 'give them up' to the consequences of their own evil practices (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). We have already noted that some in Sardis were asleep; but worse than that, in Christ's assessment they were spiritually dead even though they had a reputation of being alive. The advice of Jesus was to go back to the

fundamentals of their faith, 'remember then, what you received ... and repent' (Rev. 3:3). Jesus had nothing positive to say about the lukewarm church at Laodicea. They thought they were rich and prosperous needing nothing, but they were deceiving themselves. The Lord's assessment of them was that they were wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. He invites them to reassess their spiritual standing (Rev. 3:18).

Local features

In reviewing the messages to the seven churches, commentators often draw attention to local factors of which the recipients would have been aware, and which underlie some aspects of the messages. The following are examples:

1. In the message to Pergamum, the town is said to be the place where 'Satan's throne is' (Rev. 2:13). The term 'throne' (Gk: *thronos*) implies an official 'seat of state'. So that just as Rome was the centre of Roman state power in the west, so Pergamum was the centre of Roman state power in the East. This feature will become significant when we come to Revelation 13 in which the powers of Rome are described in terms of two 'beasts' – the beast of the sea in the west, and the beast of the earth (or land) in the east.
2. In the message to Laodicea, Jesus advises the spiritually 'blind' among church members to anoint their eyes with eye-salve. Laodicea was widely known for its medical school and its medicines of which eye-salve was one of its most famous. Clearly the local reference would not be missed by those reading the message.
3. Also in the case of Laodicea, Jesus describes them as lukewarm, neither hot nor cold. Apparently, six miles north of Laodicea was the city of Hierapolis which was famous for its hot springs. The hot water was transported from Hierapolis to Laodicea through a stone aqueduct, but by the time it reached Laodicea the water would have become lukewarm thereby losing much of its usefulness.

The examples of local knowledge such as those illustrated above are of no great significance to the overall interpretation of the prophecy, but it is important to recognise that John (or the risen Lord) was prepared to include such snippets of local information in Revelation, because we need to be on the look-out for similar snippets when they arise later in the prophecy. Such local references no doubt helped the first Century recipients to recognise the authenticity and relevance of the message to themselves, but they can present difficulties to modern interpreters unless such local references are recognised. By way of an example, in Part 2 of the prophecy John refers to the fact that the beast we shall encounter there is said to have received a mortal wound (Rev. 13:3). We shall interpret this fact by taking the beast to be the Julio-Claudian dynasty of Roman emperors and that the mortal wound was the suicide of Nero the last emperor of this dynasty. This would certainly have been a very topical feature of local history at the time.

Rewards of faithfulness

Each message ends with a reference to the future rewards that will be given to those who conquer. Many of these rewards are linked with the final outcome of God's redemptive purpose described in the final chapters of Revelation.

To those who remain true to him, Jesus promises that they will eat of the tree of life which is the paradise of God (Rev. 2:7). They will not be hurt by the second death but will be pillars in God's Temple with God's name written on them; they will be citizens of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 2:11, 3:12). As conquerors, they will sit with Christ on his throne, just as Christ himself conquered and sits with the Father on his throne (Rev. 3:21). They will 'rule the nations with a rod of iron', exercising the authority of the child born to the woman clothed with the sun (Rev. 2:27, 12:5) and of the Messiah referred to by the Psalmist (Psalm 2:9). Like the unnumbered community revealed as the outcome of the sealing process, those that overcome will be clothed in white, a colour which speaks of purity and righteousness (Rev. 3:5, 7:9). They will be given a white stone inscribed with a name that only the one who

receives the stone knows – a unique identifier perhaps of approval and acceptance. They will also receive some of the hidden manna, the God provided food which sustained his ancient people on their wilderness journey (Rev. 2:17). Their names will not be blotted out of the book of life, rather they will be confessed by Christ before his Father and the angels (Rev. 3:5).

Although we may not understand the full implications of the rewards referred to in these messages, the risen Lord promises that when the purposes of God have been consummated in the earth, those who remain true to him will take an active share in the divinely ordered society of that age (Rev.5:9-10).

Postscript

The final verses to the message to Laodicea could be taken as a postscript for all seven messages:

“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Rev 3:19-22)

Chapter 3. The slain Lamb and the scroll

John's vision (Revelation 4:1-11 to 5:1-14)

After seeing a vision of the risen Lord Jesus, John sees a door opened in heaven and he is invited to enter. When he does so, he sees a throne with someone seated on it. Above the throne is an emerald rainbow, and from the throne comes lightnings and thunders. In front of the throne is a sea of glass and seven burning torches which are the seven spirits of God. Twenty-four elders on thrones are seated around the throne, and in close proximity to the throne are four living creatures who have the appearance respectively of a lion, an ox, a man and a flying eagle.

John sees in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll which is closely sealed, and he is distressed that there is no-one worthy to open the scroll. John is told however, that 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David has conquered' and is able to open the scroll. John then sees not a lion, but a lamb standing 'as though it had been slain', and the Lamb takes the scroll from the one on the throne. At this point praise erupts from the 24 elders and from the four living creatures; it is praise which is ultimately shared by 'every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth'.

A change of viewpoint

From early in his Revelation experience John has been in a state of spiritual awareness (Rev. 1:10), and in this state he is addressed by a trumpet-like voice which invites him to record the 7 messages from the Lord Jesus to the churches in Asia.

John now sees a door opened in heaven and he hears a further invitation from the trumpet voice, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this' (Rev. 4:1). The invitation is associated

with a renewal or an enhancement of John's spiritual state so that he is taken 'in the spirit' to view the heavenly throne room. The reason for this change of viewpoint is to enable him to see and record things that the natural human eye cannot see. In reporting to fellow Christians the things he sees in heaven, John will enable them to appreciate that despite appearances, the forces they have on their side are far more powerful than anything their oppressors (Rome) can muster, just as Elisha's servant's was able to see the divine forces around him when God opened his eyes (2 Kings 6:17).

The heavenly Temple

What John sees in the heavenly Temple forms an introduction to the seal visions which are to follow. However, the Temple is also the 'control centre' from which many of the actions revealed in later visions arise; it will be helpful therefore at this point to take careful note of the details of what John sees in the Temple. In doing so however, it is worth bearing in mind that there are earthly 'temples' that we already know about – in particular Israel's Tabernacle which Moses was specifically instructed to make according to the heavenly pattern he was shown (Ex. 25:9, Heb. 8:5) and Solomon's Temple also made after a similar heavenly design. God gave Israel the Tabernacle as a physical representation of his heavenly Temple, and the design of Solomon's Temple followed the same pattern. These temples were the places where God dwelt with his people, and we should expect that an appreciation of the arrangements of the Tabernacle and/or Temple should help us to understand the significance of what John sees in the heavenly Temple.

In his vision of the heavenly Temple, John sees (using the ESV English descriptions):

- A throne with a person seated on it and an emerald rainbow encircling it.
- In front of the throne he sees seven torches of fire and a sea of glass as clear as crystal.

- From the throne come flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder.
- Around the throne John sees twenty-four elders seated on thrones, who offer continual praise to God.
- Surrounding the throne and closely associated with it John sees four living creatures full of eyes. The first living creature was like a lion, the second like an ox, the third had the face of a man (human) and the fourth was like a flying eagle.

The throne and its occupant

This vision is about the eternal sovereignty of God; a God who is in control of events throughout time both in heaven and on earth. He is the God 'who is, and who was, and who is to come'. John does not explicitly describe the one seated on the throne, rather he describes his appearance in terms of precious stones (jasper and carnelian). Ezekiel in his visions of the glory of God (Eze. 1 & 10) sees the throne as a sapphire, but he is as reluctant as John is to describe the divine person on the throne (Eze. 1:26-27). There can be little doubt however, that both Ezekiel and John intend the one on the throne to be recognised as the sovereign God – the Lord God Almighty (Rev. 4:8), whom no one has ever seen or can see (1Tim. 6:16). In Israel's Tabernacle/Temple, the equivalent of the divine throne was the ark of the covenant (1Sam 4:4). It was the place from which the voice of God was heard (Exo. 25:22) and where God's presence was manifested in Israel (2Chron. 5:14).

When God was present in the Tabernacle or the Temple, the divine glory would shine forth from between the two cherubim which overshadowed the ark of the covenant. In both John's vision and Ezekiel's, this glory is represented by a rainbow (Rev. 4:3, Eze. 1:28). The reason for the emerald colour in John's vision is uncertain. The rainbow itself however, recalls God's covenant with Noah in which he promised that he would never again bring upon the earth the kind of destruction that Noah witnessed in the flood (Gen. 8:21). This covenantal message is quite important to our understanding the book of Revelation. The flood showed that God was in reality a God of

judgement, but that he was also a saviour (Isa. 54:9). And quite often the means God uses to inflict punishment (water in the case of the flood) is also the means God uses to save. In the visions of Revelation, there is much which appears to be descriptive of divine judgement. However, we will argue that the main purpose of many of the events revealed in Revelation is not primarily judgement (with the possible exception of the bowls of wrath), but is a 'wake-up' call reminding those affected that there is a God, and that he is inviting them to turn to him in repentance. This is particularly true of events which form a part of the seal and the trumpet sequences.

In front of the throne

John sees an array of seven torches of fire (or 'lamps of fire') in front of the throne which he is told are the seven spirits of God. The Temple setting of the present vision suggests that these are a kind of reflection of the seven branched candlestick in Israel's Tabernacle (the Menorah). The lampstand in the Tabernacle represented Israel as the bearer of divine light (compare Zec. 4:2); it was a single lampstand, and was equipped with seven built-in lamps. The lamps were kept burning continually and were powered by a unique blend of oil specified by God. The sacred oil used in the lamps represented God's spirit and the light produced kept God's presence visible in Israel.

In the previous chapter when reviewing the son of man vision (Rev. 1:12-20), we observed that although John sees seven lampstands (the churches), he does not mention any lamps, nor does he mention fuel required to keep the lamps alight. By contrast, in the heavenly Temple John see lamps of fire, but no lampstands. There are four references to the seven spirits (the lamps/torches) in Revelation (1:4, 3:1, 4:5 and 5:6) and we observed in the previous chapter that the last of these references is particularly revealing. In Revelation 5, John sees a lamb appearing as though it had been slain standing alongside the throne. The lamb has seven horns and seven eyes, and John tells his readers that the eyes are 'the seven spirits sent out into all the earth' (Rev. 5:6). The seven horns of the lamb in John's vision represent divine power, and its seven eyes, divine awareness. We suggested in the

previous chapter that the seven lamps of fire John sees in the heavenly Temple are in fact the lamps associated with the seven lampstand churches. Moreover the source of the power by which the lamps shine is not literal oil but the spirit of God vested in Christ. But just as the function of the seven branched candlestick in the Tabernacle was to maintain the light of God in Israel and from Israel to the world, so the role of the 'lamps of fire' in the heavenly Temple is to disseminate the 'heavenly' light of the gospel of Christ to the world through the churches.

The sea of glass

The presence of a sea of glass in the heavenly Temple is rather puzzling. However, both in the Tabernacle and in Solomon's Temple, there was a facility for the priests to wash themselves before becoming involved in temple duties. This feature in the Tabernacle is generally referred to in English translations as the 'laver' – an English word clearly indicting its washing function. The Hebrew word in this case refers not to the function of the laver but to the vessel itself. Thus in the ESV and in most modern versions the word 'basin' is used instead, but the washing function remains the same. In the case of Solomon's Temple the corresponding washing facility is referred to as a 'sea' (1Kings 7:23) as it is in John's description of the heavenly Temple. Both the Hebrew term 'sea' in the Old Testament and the Greek term in Revelation is the common word for 'sea' and simply means a body of water. In Revelation the sea is a 'sea of glass like crystal' because the water is clear or still – presumably because the water is clean and ready to be used.

The purpose of the 'sea' in John's heavenly Temple is likely therefore to represent the essential cleansing function needed before sinful humanity can enter God's Temple. This would certainly be appropriate to the reference later where those who had conquered the beast were seen standing beside the sea of glass as though they had just emerged from it (Rev. 15:2); they are described as having conquered the beast, and are holding harps of God in their hands and singing the song of Moses and the Lamb (compare Exo. 15:1). The sea of glass

through which they had passed represents the fact that as the redeemed, they had been cleansed from evil by means of the purifying 'sea' of the lamb's deliverance – though in this case, the water is mingled with the fire of adversity (1Peter 1:7).

Heaven as a noisy place of action

John records that he sees or hears flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder emanating from the throne. These natural phenomena also feature in later visions (quotations from the ESV):

Rev. 4:5 'From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder',

Rev. 8:5 'and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake',

Rev. 11:19 'There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail',

Rev. 16:18 'And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake'.

Lightning and thunder are familiar features of storms. The term translated 'rumblings' (in the ESV) is the Greek word '*phone*' which is often translated 'voice'. But basically '*phone*' is a sound or a noise, not necessarily an intelligible spoken word, hence the ESV translation 'rumblings'. In the Old Testament, such natural phenomena are often associated either with the presence of God or with some form of divine action. Prime examples would be the various supernatural events which occurred when God delivered Israel from Egypt, or when God made his covenant with them at Sinai (Exo. 19:16). The words of Elihu to Job reacting to the storm that is brewing also expresses a clear link between the storm and divine action (Job 36:26 to 37:5). Other examples are Joshua's long day when God used hail to defeat Israel's enemies (Jos. 10:11) and the occasion when he thundered against the Philistines following the return of the ark in the days of Samuel (1Sam 7:10). See also, Psalm 18:12-14 and Jeremiah 10:13.

In Revelation, John's references to these natural phenomena are reminders to his readers that God is active in the events described, even though John does not say so explicitly. A good example would be the 7th trumpet (Rev. 11) in which John sees God's heavenly Temple opened to reveal the presence of Israel's ark. He says no more at this point about the consequences of this revelation, but he certainly implies that there are some; they are conveyed by John in the flashes of lightening, rumblings, peals of thunder, the earthquake and the hail which follow (Rev. 11:19). We shall suggest when considering the seventh trumpet that these natural phenomena represent the dramatic events which are to follow the establishment of God's kingdom under Christ.

There can be little doubt that John's portrayal of the work of God in terms of these natural phenomena makes heaven a rather noisy place. When then, we are told that the result of opening the 7th seal is silence in heaven (Rev. 8:1), it would seem natural to interpret this to indicate that God is resting from his labours because his work as represented by the seals is finished.

The elders

Around the throne were arrayed 24 thrones with 'elders' seated on them. The word 'elder' is '*presbuteros*' – a senior member of an assembly. We are told little about the elders except that they wore white garments and were crowned with golden crowns (Gk: *stephanos*). Their function is to worship God. Their worship consists of falling down and casting their crowns before the throne saying, 'Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created' (Rev. 4:11). The involvement of the elders in the action of the visions which are to follow is modest. On two occasions they take part (Rev. 5:5 and 7:13), but in the main their function is to acknowledge the actions of the living creatures and to respond to that action in worship (Rev. 4: 9-10).

The fact that they number 24 is intriguing. The number corresponds to the orders of priests established by David for worship in the Old Testament temple. Moreover, in the context of the New Testament church which includes both Jew and Gentile believers, it is tempting to see the number 24 as a combination of the number of tribes in Israel and the number of Apostles; this at least would be consistent with the use of these numbers in the descriptions of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21). But the true status of these elders must surely be determined by the fact that they wore white and that on their heads they had golden crowns (*stephanos*); white is the colour of purity or sinlessness (Rev. 7:13-14), and the crowns are the crowns of victors. In Revelation 5 the elders, together with the living creatures, sing a new song. The song is the song of the redeemed who praise and thank the slain lamb for being worthy to open the sealed scroll. The obvious identification would therefore seem to be that the elders represent God's redeemed and worshipping people.

The four living creatures

Around the throne in the Temple John sees four 'living creatures'. The Greek word translated 'living creatures' is '*zo-on*' meaning a living thing – a term which could apply to either a human or an animal (as in Heb. 13:11 or 2Pet. 2:12). The word for beast later in Revelation is '*therion*' meaning a wild or dangerous animal (as in Mk. 1:13 and Acts 10:12). The reason John makes this distinction will become clear when we consider 'beasts' as representing the enemies of Christ's people (Rev. 13). The fact that there are 'four' living creatures links them in John's numerological scheme to a function associated with the earth (see chapter 1 on numbers). It comes as no surprise then, that John sees the living creatures as having the form of either an animal or a human being. The first looked like a lion, the second like an ox, and the fourth like an eagle in flight. The third is described in a different manner; rather than saying that the third looked like a man, he tells us that it had the face of a man. Why does John make this distinction? It is true that unlike the animals, the human face uniquely conveys subtlety of expression. It seems unlikely however, that John wants us to understand that the third creature has a different role from the

others, and there is no evidence for such a distinction in the rest of Revelation. It is more likely that the third living creature had the form of a man and that the faces of all four of them were intended to convey the characteristics of the creatures represented – the lion, nobility, the ox, brute strength, the man, intelligent humanity, and the eagle, perceptive excellence.

In passing, it is worth recalling at this point the association that has often been suggested between the characteristics of these living creatures, and the four Gospels. Although there is no consensus about the details of this association or their validity, it is an association which is quite helpful in characterising not only the Gospels but also the function of the living creatures in Revelation. The association which fits the Revelation context best has the gospel of Matthew as the 'Lion' gospel with its genealogy tracing the kingly line of Christ back to David, Mark as the 'Ox' gospel providing a basic gospel account, Luke's as the 'Human' gospel focusing on the humanity of Christ, and John's as the 'Eagle' gospel reaching the spiritual heights appropriate to the soaring eagle. The connection between the Gospels and the function of the living creatures in Revelation is that the role of both is to communicate the character, personality and preaching of God's King to the world. And in doing so, the living creatures complement the elders in the heavenly Temple, in that the elders function as the worshipping people of God whilst the living creatures function as the preaching people of God. Their role is to give an account of the work of the ministry Jesus, and their message: 'Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Mat. 4:17).

With this in mind, it is worth noting the other characteristics that John records about the living creatures. John tells us that they were in close proximity to the throne, that they are full of eyes, that they are equipped with six wings and they never cease saying: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come". English translators have some difficulty with the Greek text describing their closeness to the throne. Some simply tell us that they are 'around' the throne, while others say that they are 'in the midst of', or 'in the centre and on each side of' the throne. It is clear that the living creatures

were in some way associated with the throne very closely indeed. To discover why, we need to establish some other scriptural connections.

Ezekiel's insight

The first stop must be to Ezekiel's vision of the 'Glory of God' (Eze. 1 and 10). Ezekiel's vision is much more extensive than John's and there are both similarities and differences. Ezekiel describes a bright cloud coming from the north out of which emerges four living creatures. The living creatures form a kind of mobile platform for the throne which was located above them (Eze. 1:26). Ezekiel's creatures were human in form but unlike John's, each creature had four faces – faces of a lion, an ox, an eagle and a man. They also had wings and eyes, though in Ezekiel's vision, the eyes were associated with wheels on which the platform moved. The wheels were clearly intended to suggest movement, and the eyes divine awareness (omniscience). However, the key thing to appreciate about Ezekiel's 'mobile platform' is its function. It was the 'chariot' on which the throne (or the 'glory of God') moved from place to place (Ezekiel 10:4,18). It's difficult in reading Ezekiel's vision to avoid the impression that he was more impressed with the 'chariot' than with the throne or the one on the throne. But the role of the 'chariot' was crucial because it enabled the one on the throne to involve himself personally and directly in the fortunes of his people.

Once again, we can get additional insights about the living creatures from the appointments of the Old Testament Tabernacle. In both the Tabernacle and the Temple the throne of God was represented on earth by the ark of the covenant. This ark/throne was of course, portable. But the rules for its transportation were very rigorous – it had to be carried on the shoulders of four Levites who were especially chosen for this duty (Num. 18). If it were carried by other means, the consequences could be fatal (2Sam. 6:7). During the wilderness journey, when the time came to move camp, Levites were assigned to carry the ark/throne of God, and there would be four of them – four 'living creatures' in fact. When David was instructing Solomon about the appointments of the Temple, he refers to the ark (and its cherubim)

as the golden chariot of the cherubim (1Chronicles 28:18). So just as the 'mobile platform' of Ezekiel's vision transported the glory of God, so during the journeyings of Israel the throne of God moved with the people guaranteeing that wherever they settled, God was with them.

We conclude from this review, that the living creatures in Revelation represent the means by which the glory of God and his throne, 'moved' (or acted) to execute his redemptive purposes. In particular, their role was to carry (proclaim) God's saving offer to people in the four quarters of the earth – or at least to initiate actions which would have that effect. This function of the living creatures is consistent with the fact that they feature largely in the seal sequence which follows John's visit to the heavenly Temple, but rarely elsewhere. They have no involvement at all in the trumpets which we shall interpret as having to do with God's dealings with Israel. Indeed, outside the sealing activity (Rev. 5-7), they are mentioned only three times. In Revelation 14:3 they appear associated with the 144,000 who sing the new song, and in Revelation 19:4 they rejoice that God has avenged those who had been martyrs for Christ; the only active role in which the living creatures take part following the seal sequence is that of providing the wrath angels with the bowls of God's wrath (Rev. 15:7) – a fact we shall consider later.

But the living creatures never stop recognising God's holiness or of offering glory, honour and thanks to him. And in this worship they are joined by the 24 elders:

“And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever”. (Rev 4:9-10)

Seals and sealing

At the beginning of Revelation 5 we are still with John in the heavenly Temple. John has told us earlier about his vision of Almighty God who is seated on the throne in the Temple. He now tells us that he sees in the right hand of God a scroll, which is written on both sides and sealed with seven seals. It turns out that no-one is worthy to break the seals except the slain lamb who John sees standing beside the throne. In order to help us understand this vision we need to take a closer look at a number of its features. In particular we need to determine what the scroll is, and why it is 'closely sealed' (Gk: *katasphragizo*). We also need to explain why the slain lamb is the only one in all creation able to open it?

The physical arrangement of the scroll may seem a matter of little consequence, but it is a practical aspect that influences how its opening ought to be pictured and interpreted. Some interpreters suggest that the scroll was sealed in seven sections so that as each seal is opened a section of the scroll can be unrolled and read. However, such an arrangement seems unnatural, even difficult to implement practically. For the moment, we shall assume that the scroll is a rolled up parchment with all seven seals attached on the outer edge of the rolled scroll – this would seem to fit in with the 'closely sealed' description of the scroll. If this is the case, it means that all seven seals have to be opened before the scroll can be unrolled and its contents revealed. Moreover, if the scroll cannot be read until all seven seals are opened, the action of opening a seal must have a significance which is different from the actual contents of the scroll. But more of this later. We will begin by considering the significance of sealing.

The significance of sealing

First, note what the Lord Jesus said about sealing when speaking to the crowd about bread:

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that

endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal". (John 6:27)

Jesus is telling those that came looking for him after the feeding of the 5000, that God had set his seal on him, implying that he was God's emissary, appointed by him, and given authority to offer the promise of eternal life. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul extends the idea of sealing to the followers of Jesus:

"And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee". (2Cor. 1:21-22)

To the Ephesians he writes:

"In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:13-14)

Sealing documents was a common practice in the ancient world and is not unknown for legal documents in ours. Sealing a document has a two-fold significance: it is a mark of ownership and a mark of protection. Often the seal would be an engraving on a signet ring belonging to someone in authority. The ring would be pressed into hot wax or soft clay to indicate the authority behind the seal, and to ensure the security of that which was sealed.

Thinking of the seal as a mark of ownership, Paul in the passages above says that those who were 'sealed with the promised Holy Spirit' were 'in Christ' – they were Christ's men and women. More specifically, Christ's message to the Philadelphian church (Rev. 3:12) promises that the redeemed will be branded with the name of God: 'I will write on him the name of my God ... and my own new name'. And this is reinforced in the vision of the 144,000 who are the sealed of Revelation 7, and of whom it is said that they had the Lamb's name

and his Father's name written on their foreheads (Rev. 14:1).

Sealing signifying protection can also be appreciated from the Ephesians passage just quoted, in which Paul writes that the sealing by God was the 'guarantee of their future inheritance'. Paul later in the letter reinforces this idea when he writes 'and do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption' (Eph. 4:30). The element of protection is made clear in the imagery in Revelation 7 in which an angel ascends from the rising sun with the seal of the living God in his hand. His order to the four wind angels is protective: 'Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God'.

The incident of marking the faithful recorded by Ezekiel, is worthy of notice at this point. Shortly before the fall of Jerusalem (BC 586) Ezekiel, who was in exile at the time, was taken in the spirit to witness the future judgements of God on Jerusalem (Eze. 8-10). He heard the executioners being called to initiate the judgements. Among the executioners he saw a man clothed in linen who had a writing case at his waist. The man was an agent of God. He was commanded to pass through Jerusalem and to put a mark on the foreheads of those people in the city who sighed sorrowfully for the abominations which were committed in it (Eze. 9:4). The man clothed in linen completed his task and reported back (Eze. 9:11). The judgements of God were however unstoppable. In the next chapter the man clothed in linen was instrumental in initiating these judgements (Eze. 10:2, 6), and presumably in the process, preserving the people who had received the mark of divine favour on their foreheads.

So, for those reading Revelation in the first Century, the concept of the sealing of the people of God would have a clear meaning – it would represent God stamping his ownership on his people, and guaranteeing them protection through worldly evils to future redemption in Christ. Protection also implies confidentiality. This aspect of the figure of a sealed people suggests that although owned by God and protected by him, those who are truly God's people are known only in heaven – that is, until Jesus returns to reveal those who

are his. It almost follows from the above, that the contents of the scroll must represent the identities (names) of those who belong to the sealed people of God. We must now however, attempt a more rigorous evaluation of the scroll itself.

The sealed scroll

A scroll in the time of John would be another way of referring to a 'book'. There are various different types of book mentioned in scripture – books of history, books of law, books of poetry and books of prophecy. There are also more intimate books such as those containing personal letters, and books which contain lists of names or events – records of various types. In the case of the sealed scroll, the majority of commentators see it as a book of history or prophecy. An Old Testament example of a book of this kind would be the prophecies of Daniel. Daniel was in fact told that the words of his prophecy were to be sealed until the time of the end (Daniel 12:4,9). It seems clear however, that Daniel's sealed prophecy was a prophecy of those historical events which would happen at the time of the end – at the time of the restoration of Israel or the resurrection (Dan.12:1, 2-3). Revelation however, is not a sealed book. The angel tells John not to seal the his prophecy because it is about things which 'must soon take place' (Rev. 1:1). Revelation was intended to provide exhortation and encouragement to the people of John's day and it needed to be read and understood by them.

There is another book in John's account which almost certainly is a book of prophecy. In Revelation 10 John is given a 'little scroll' to eat. The 'little scroll' is unsealed, and when John had eaten it he is told that he must prophesy again to (or about) 'peoples, nations, languages and kings'. This incident is patterned on Ezekiel's experience. Ezekiel's book contained 'words of lamentation and woe' bewailing the apostacy of Israel (Eze. 2:9-10). The word John uses in Revelation 10 for this 'little' book (Gk: *bibliaridion*) is different from the word for book (*biblion*) in Revelation 5. Some would argue that these two terms are interchangeable, and that the book in the right hand of God in chapter 5 is the same as that in the hand of the angel in chapter 10. However,

it seems out of character for John who was otherwise very careful in his use of terms, to use a different word for the two books if they were in fact the same. We shall assume that the two books are different.

Of the more intimate books we referred to earlier, the kind of book one might expect to be in the right hand of God is a book of divine record. There are a number of mentions of such books. On the occasion of Israel's sin in the matter of the golden calf, Moses asked God to forgive their sin and to blot his name out of the book that God had written. God rejected Moses' offer (Ex. 32:32-33). David also refers to God's book of remembrance by asking God to deal with his enemies by blotting them out of 'the book of the living' (Ps. 69:28). Daniel too sees a future time when God's people will be delivered 'everyone whose name shall be found written in the book' (Dan. 12:1). Malachi too describes God's book of remembrance:

"Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name". (Mal 3:16)

A book containing the names of those who God had recorded for redemption seems just the kind of book which would need to be a securely sealed document, especially given that the point of sealing was to establish ownership and ensure protection. The scroll was covered with writing, so that whatever that writing was, or whatever it signified, it belonged to God, was protected by God, and was given by God to Jesus Christ. Moreover, only Jesus Christ because of his sacrificial and redemptive work was worthy to break the seals and open the scroll. In this context, it is worth remembering the words of Jesus in his prayer to his Father: 'I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word' (John 17:6).

In view of these facts, it seems rational to conclude that the scroll was God's book of remembrance and that it contained the names of the redeemed. It was of such a scroll that the writer to the Hebrews had in

mind when he referred to the heavenly Jerusalem as 'the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven' (Heb. 12:23) or Jesus to the seventy-two disciples returned from preaching, 'do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven' (Luke 10:20). Whether it is appropriate to think of such a record as 'the Book of Life' is a rather more difficult question to answer mainly because of the way the Book of Life features in Revelation 20. However, Paul is certainly familiar with the term. In Philippians he speaks of his fellow-workers as having their 'names in the Book of Life' (Php. 4:3). More telling is the fact that in Revelation the Book of Life is twice referred to as the 'Lamb's Book of Life'. The Book of Life was the Lamb's only because God gave it to him and because he alone out of all creation was worthy to break the seals and open the scroll.

It is also significant that on two occasions in Revelation (13:8 and 17:8) reference is made to the fact that the names of those who do not worship the beast, have been written in the Book of Life **from the foundation of the world**. Such a description of the Book of Life accords with the fact that in Revelation 5 the sealed scroll is clearly in the keeping of God before being given to the Lamb; it has by implication existed in the hands of the creator since the foundation of the world. It is not unreasonable therefore to identify the sealed scroll as a Book of Life. We shall suggest in the next chapter that this book of Life is one which is being added to throughout history and will be fully opened at the end of the age.

The sealed scroll – a will?

Consider another question? What would the first hearers of the prophecy have made of the seven sealed scroll? A number of commentators observe that the only document in Roman times which was sealed with seven seals was a will – presumably the will of someone important. The seven executors of the will would place their seals on it to ensure confidentiality; the will could then only be opened, read and acted upon only when each executor broke his own seal. Now if this was a widely known practice in the Roman province of Asia,

then it would be likely that the first listeners to Revelation would see the scroll as a kind of will.

I say 'a kind of will' because even if the idea of the scroll as a will was something which would occur to the first hearers, it would be an illustration which could not be pressed too far. In the case of the seven sealed scroll in Revelation, there are clearly not seven executors, but one only – the Lamb – who breaks all the seals. Moreover, it would probably stretch the analogy too far to ask who the testator is, although it is certainly a fact that the intention of a will is to identify the beneficiaries. The writer to the Hebrews uses the figure of a will when he is arguing for the necessity of the death of Jesus (Hebrews 9:16-17). He argues that for a will to come into effect there has to be a death. Under the Old Covenant, the relevant death would be the shed blood of the animal sacrifices. Under the New Covenant, it was the blood of Christ. In fact, he goes on to argue that just as the Tabernacle equipment of the Old Covenant had to be 'purified' with the blood of animals, so the 'real' Temple in heaven had to be 'purified' by a better sacrifice – the blood of Christ. Revelation 4 and 5 takes us into this 'real' Holy of Holies. The heavenly Temple has been purified by the sacrifice of Christ, the slain Lamb, and by this same sacrifice he shows himself worthy to be the means by which the beneficiaries of the New Covenant will ultimately be revealed.

Rejoicing in heaven

It would appear that there are other aspects in this vision which are consistent with the idea that the scroll is the book of life containing the names of the redeemed. For example, when John is told that no one is worthy to open the scroll and reveal its contents, John weeps. But is it really likely that John would weep because he cannot read a prophecy about the future? Such an explanation for John's tears seems totally inadequate. It is much more likely that John understood that the redemption of mankind depended on God providing one who was worthy to open the scroll. Clearly, the other occupants of heaven did. When the slain lamb had taken the scroll from God, the living creatures and 24 elders fall down before the Lamb and sing a new

song:

“And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth’” (Rev 5:9-10).

The song clearly indicates that the right of the Lamb to open the seals was justified by the fact that he had ‘ransomed people for God’ (Rev. 5:9). The Lamb did not need to be ‘worthy’ to open a book of history, or prophecy, but he certainly did need to be worthy to ransom people for God and to make them a kingdom of priests (which is probably a more accurate rendition of the phrase ‘kingdom and priests’ in the above verse). And as they sing, they carry bowls of incense representing the prayers of the saints (Rev. 5:8). This again is appropriate since it is the saints’ salvation which is dependent on the opening of the scroll. We shall find them shortly under the altar in the fifth seal, crying to God ‘How long before you will avenge our blood’ (Rev. 6:10).

The praise of the elders and living creatures that John witnesses is then reinforced by the angelic hosts who sing with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise’ (Rev. 5:12). Ultimately the theme is caught up by ‘every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea’ (Rev. 5:13) – the very people who were unable to supply anyone sufficiently ‘worthy’ to open the scroll. And the worship of God expressed in the earlier part of the vision (Rev. 4:11) is now extended to the Lamb: ‘To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!’ And the living creatures say ‘Amen’, and the elders worship. The Lamb’s victory (Rev. 12) is now converted to a victory for those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

Chapter 4. The four horsemen

John's vision (Revelation 6:1-11)

Previously, John had seen the 'slain Lamb' take the sealed scroll from the right hand of God seated on the throne. Now he sees the Lamb open the seals one by one. As each of the first four are opened, one of the living creatures says 'Come' with a thunderous voice. In response, a rider on a horse rides forth from the throne room. The first rides a white horse and emerges 'conquering and to conquer'. The second rides a red horse and was permitted to take peace from the earth. The third rides a black horse and carries a pair of scales. The fourth horseman rides a pale horse whose name is Death and Hades.

After the four horsemen have emerged, John sees the fifth seal opened. The result is very different from the opening of the first four. Instead, of an emerging horseman, he sees an altar with people under it who appear to have been martyred. They cry out asking God to avenge their blood on those who dwell on the earth. God acknowledges their call, and asks them to be patient until all their fellow sufferers have completed their witness.

The structure of the seven seal visions

The structure of John's account of the opening of the seven seals is as follows. The first four seals are presented as a group of four (Rev. 6: 1-7); when opened four horsemen, often referred to as the four horsemen of the apocalypse emerge, and their character and their influence is described. Seals 5 and 6 follow (Rev. 6: 9-17); they are different from the first four, having their own distinctive characteristics. The opening of the seventh seal results in 30 minutes of silence in heaven and nothing else (Rev. 8:1); this final seal is set apart in the text from the other six, by the fact that between seal 6 and 7 there is a section (Revelation 7) sometimes referred to as an 'intercalation' (from

Latin – ‘to proclaim between’) or a parenthetical ‘interlude’. In it, John hears 144,000 sealed from the tribes of Israel and he sees an unnumbered assembly dressed in white robes. We shall not treat this section as an interlude, but as the divine view of the outcome of the sealing process; it follows the sixth seal perfectly logically, and provides links between the sealed body of believers and the later visions of Revelation. We shall consider the first five seals in this chapter, and the remainder in the next.

The four horsemen of the Apocalypse

In the previous chapter we saw that the slain lamb (Christ) was the only one in all creation worthy to open the seals. As expected therefore, all seven seals are opened by the Lamb. The significance of this should not be missed. We argued earlier, that the reason why the slain lamb was the only one worthy to open the seals was because the sealed scroll was the book of life – it contained the names of those who were being (or who had been) redeemed by the Lamb’s sacrifice. We now go further and suggest that the seal openings (as an ‘active’ symbol) represent the means by which these ‘redeemed’ are separated to God from among mankind.

The opening of the first four seals was initiated by one of the four living creatures saying ‘Come’ in a ‘voice like thunder’ (Rev. 6:1). The voice of thunder suggests that the voice was either God’s voice, or at least one which possessed divine authority (Psalm 29:3, Job 37:2-5). If this is so, the living creatures are issuing a divine invitation. Why is it then that the invitation came from the living creatures and not from God himself? When evaluating the role of the living creatures (Revelation 4) we showed that they were an essential part of the chariot throne, and they represent the means by which the sovereignty of God is proclaimed; they serve as the divine interface with people on earth. If this is the case, who are the living creatures addressing with their divine invitation to ‘Come’?

Before answering that, we need to decide what the role of the horsemen is. The four horsemen would appear to be based on

imagery borrowed from Zechariah's prophecies. In Zechariah's visions, horses appear in the first and the last of his night visions. In the first (Zechariah 1:8-11) riders on horses appear to be scouts riding out in the four cardinal directions (North, South, East and West) patrolling the earth on God's behalf. They operate concurrently. In the eighth vision (Zechariah 6:1-8), chariots and horses emerge from before the Lord of all the earth; they are described as the four spirits (or winds) of heaven, riding forth in four directions doing God's work in the 'four corners' of the earth. We noted in the introduction that the number 4 in Revelation is related to the earth and its inhabitants.

In the light of Zechariah's imagery, it would appear that the four horsemen are likely to be divine agents whose sphere of influence is the earth. They inevitably appear in John's vision sequentially, but in reality they operate concurrently (as do the horsemen in Zechariah's vision). Their role is to monitor and possibly to control activities (human and divine) in the four corners of the earth, and they are 'given power' to do so (Rev. 6:4, 6:8). They continue to do so throughout human history until the work of sealing people for God is completed. Although 'four corners' or 'four cardinal directions' suggest that the area of operation of each horseman might be distinctive and non-overlapping, it is more likely that just as the horsemen's activities overlap in time, so their areas of operation overlap geographically.

So, we return to the question: to whom are the four living creatures addressing their invitation 'Come'? When the four living creatures issue the command, John tells us that the horsemen 'came out' – presumably, 'came out' of the heavenly throne room. However, the living creatures were also in the heavenly throne room, so that 'Come' seems an odd command to address to the horsemen. It seems much more likely that the command 'Come' was addressed to the people on earth with whom the horsemen were to engage – it was the equivalent of the invitation of the redeemed (the Bride) at the end of Revelation:

"The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price." (Rev 22:17)

A Gospel parallel

Before we take a closer look at the effect of opening the seals, it might be helpful to suggest that the first four seal openings parallel the sower's activity in Christ's parable of the sower. The point of the parable is to illustrate the varied response of individuals to the call of the Gospel in the face of opposition from worldly influences. Recall the parable:

“A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty”. (Mat. 13:3-8)

The parable offers four responses to the sowing of the seed, and only the final one of the four is positive – the seed falls into the good soil. The remaining three represent hazards to the germination or growth of the seed – the seed falls onto the path and is eaten by birds, or it falls on rocky ground where there is no depth of soil, or it falls among thorns and is choked by weeds. The first four seals similarly offers four responses, though the opposition to the establishment or growth of the Gospel are of a very different character from those in the parable. In the parable apart from the seed falling on good soil, the opposing influences arise from largely non-aggressive and subtle characteristics of the individual's social environment; in the case of the final three horsemen however, the opposing influences are both aggressive and far from subtle. However, in both cases (seed or horsemen) the establishment and growth of the Gospel depends on

the individual's response to these external forces. Bearing this parallel in mind, consider now the seal events.

Opening the first seal

The opening of the first seal is the only one of the four which has a positive outcome – it corresponds to the sowing of the seed in the parable. When the seal is opened, John sees a white horse going forth ‘conquering and to conquer’ (Rev. 6:2). The clarion call of all the letters (messages) to the churches is ‘to him who conquers ...’ We have already observed (Chapter 2) that in Christian terms ‘conquering’ is not a matter of overcoming the forces of this world by human effort or personal endeavour, but by becoming a member the ‘body of Christ’ and accepting the victory over evil which the work of Christ on the cross has achieved. On the face of it, the first horseman of Revelation 6 riding a white horse would appear to be a pre-echo of the rider on the white horse in Revelation 19:11. But there are important differences. The first of the four horseman is given a victor’s wreath (Gk: *stephanos*) whereas the rider in Revelation 19 wears many crowns (Gk: *diademata*), and these are crowns of rulership. In fact, the rider in Revelation 19 is a picture of Christ who will cleanse the earth from evil when he returns with the army of the ‘redeemed’. The horseman on the white horse in Revelation 6 however, represents those agencies who take the Gospel of salvation to men and women in the ages before Christ returns.

Nevertheless, the rider on the white horse (Rev. 19) and the first horseman of the Apocalypse do, in a sense, have parallel functions in that both are warriors of a kind. The rider in Revelation 19 has a sword – the sword of his mouth with which to deal with his enemies. The first seal horseman has a bow, though, according to John, he has no arrows (or at least, they are not mentioned – Rev. 6:2); perhaps one ought not to read too much into the missing arrows, but in general, John seems to be very careful in his reporting of detail. The absence of arrows suggests that the first seal horseman’s task was not to destroy but to convey a message. He was given a crown – not the ‘*diadema*’ of rulership, but the ‘*stephanos*’ of victory. Again it is intriguing that John does not say that the horseman was wearing the crown, as he does in the case of the elders (Rev. 4:4); he says that he was given it (Rev. 6:2). It seems unlikely that the horseman was given

the 'crown' because he was a victor, but because his military task (with the bow) was to deliver a message about conquering; it would, after all, be a message which could bring the crown of victory (*stephanos*) to those to who were being called.

Opening the second seal

The red horse rides forth taking peace from the earth (Rev. 6:4). The proclamation of the Gospel would not always be a peaceful process – far from it. Jesus on one occasion said: 'I have not come to bring peace but a sword' (Gk: *machaira*). The consequence of the preaching of the Gospel would in some places, and on some occasions, mean conflict. The sword referred to is usually said to be a short sword (*machaira*) – though John refers to it as a 'great' sword. *Machaira* is a fairly common word in the new Testament, used some 29 times, so it would be unwise to place too much interpretive emphasis on the type of sword involved. It was the kind of sword carried by those who came to arrest Jesus (Mat. 26:47) or for executions (Heb. 11:37). Notice 'people shall slay one another' (Rev. 6:4 ESV); this is not out and out warfare, it is more like internecine strife, or the vengeance of the state on those it sees as troublemakers. The word 'slay' used of the red horse's activity is not the usual word for 'kill', but is a word meaning 'butchered' or 'slaughtered' for food or sacrifice (Gk: *sphazo*). It is the same word as that used of the 'slain' or sacrificed Lamb and of those under the fifth seal who had been 'slain' for the word of God (Rev. 5:6, 6:9). It is a word unique to John in the New Testament and there seems little doubt that John was preparing his readers to understand that to be a witness (Gk: *martus*) for Christ would not necessarily be a comfortable role for them, but could mean death at the hands of their fellow men.

There is little value in attempting to match the specific hazards mentioned in the parable of the sower (path, rocky ground or thorns) to those resulting from the opening of the last three seals. The point rather, is to see all the apparently dreadful seal events not as direct divine judgements, but as conditions in which the Christian character is forged. Interpreters often seem to suggest that all traumatic

happenings in the world are judgements from God. But this hardly seems right. God himself tells us that he creates both 'well-being and calamity' (Is 45:7). Jesus himself was once tackled about Pilate's murder of Galileans and about the accidental deaths of the eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell (Luke 13:1-5). His questioners wanted to know whether this was God's way of punishing them as sinners? Jesus answer was no, everyone without God in their lives is in the same situation in God's sight as those who died – they all need to repent. And all have only a certain amount of time in life to respond to God's call. Bad things happen to people for a whole range of reasons, including man's inhumanity to man – and bad things can be a challenge to belief.

Opening the third seal

On opening the third seal, a rider on a black horse emerges from the throne room (Rev. 6:5). He carries a pair of scales, and a voice comes from 'the midst of the living creatures' saying 'a quart of wheat for a denarius and three quarts of barley for a denarius and do not harm the oil and the wine'. It seems generally agreed that the wheat and barley prices given here are excessively high – they are famine prices. At the same time, the prices of oil and the wine are normal. This situation could arise because of poor harvests in which the cereal crops suffer, while the olives and vines being deeper rooted, escape. Alternatively the price discrepancy could be meant to suggest an increasing disparity between rich and poor – the poorer people being affected with famine (of bread), whilst the more prosperous (oil and wine) escape. Such social inequity is perhaps suggested by the pair of scales carried by the rider. Either way, the social conditions represent a challenge to belief in the sovereignty and goodness of God. They call for a God-ward response from the people affected.

Amos draws Israel's attention to a similar situation in his day. He was telling the people that the trying conditions they were experiencing at the time, meant that God was acting to wake them up. And the response he is looking for is that they should 'return to God':

“I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me’, declares the LORD. ‘I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest; I would send rain on one city, and send no rain on another city; one field would have rain, and the field on which it did not rain would wither so two or three cities would wander to another city to drink water, and would not be satisfied; yet you did not return to me’, declares the LORD”.
(Amos 4:6-8)

Without doubt, the famine conditions God inflicted on Israel could be regarded as a form of punishment. But from God’s point of view, it is clear that punishment was not the primary objective. God wanted Israel to recognise their need for him and to turn to him in repentance, just as Solomon had asked God to do in his prayer of Temple dedication (1Kings 8:35-36). And that’s precisely the primary function of the traumatic seal events. On the one hand, the white horseman was offering the way of victory in Christ (conquering and to conquer), whilst on the other, worldly circumstances were making an acceptance of this Gospel challenging, even painful.

Opening the fourth seal

Following the black horse is the ‘pale’ horse (Rev.6:8). There is much debate about what the colour of this horse actually was, though it’s not a matter which need concern us here. The rider’s name was ‘Death’ and ‘Hades’ followed him. Hades was the Graeco-Roman version of the underworld. It is a term used several times in Revelation (Rev. 1:18, 6:8, 20:13,14), not because John as a Jew would have approved of the fanciful views of the Greeks, but simply as a familiar shorthand for the destiny of those who had no knowledge of God. The ‘pale’ horseman was given authority (Gk: *exousia* – God’s authority) over a fourth part of the earth to ‘kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence, and by wild beasts of the earth’. The word ‘kill’ in this passage is not *sphazo* (slaughter) as in the second seal (Rev. 6:4), but is the common word for kill (Gk: *apokteinō*). The Greek word for sword is *rhomphaia* which is a large two edged weapon; it is the same term

used for the sword in the mouth of the rider on the white horse in Revelation 19. It was a sword for serious conflict, but in the fourth seal its scope was limited to a quarter of the earth. The dire effects of the fourth horseman is described in destructive terms drawn from Ezekiel:

“For thus says the Lord GOD: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast!” (Ezekiel 14:21)

There is little doubt that Ezekiel is pronouncing God’s judgements on Jerusalem – judgements moreover, which are soon to be delivered by the Babylonians. However, the final verses of the chapter reveals God’s true purpose in bringing such judgements upon them; he tells Ezekiel that despite these judgements (maybe even because of them) there will be individuals who will remain true to their Godly calling. And these individuals are the people God is looking for:

“They will console you, when you see their ways and their deeds, and you shall know that I have not done without cause all that I have done in it, declares the Lord GOD.” (Ezekiel 14:23)

The cause of God in bringing disaster on Jerusalem was so that the faithful might be identified. This precisely the purpose of the dire events foretold by seal openings 2, 3 and 4.

The horsemen’s catalytic function

Thus a consistent way of looking at the activities of the Apocalyptic horsemen is to regard them as observing (or perhaps controlling) the conditions on earth which would then serve as the catalyst for the formation of the spiritual characters of the true saints of God. These are the people whose identities will be written in the sealed scroll and which will be revealed when the final seal is opened. The seal events represent the ‘furnace of affliction’ in which the ‘metal’ of the saints would be forged. The members of the churches to whom Revelation

was first addressed would have only a limited appreciation from their own local history of the extent of the 'afflictions' to which potential converts to Christianity will be exposed. To readers in later centuries however, the range of political, military and social conditions existing within earthly societies are truly staggering in their complexity as reflected in these seal visions.

At the time of the writing of Revelation, external opposition to Christianity would come largely from pagan Rome – though even then, as the messages to the churches show, false religion within the churches was already playing a part. It is nevertheless, perhaps one of the ironies of subsequent Christian history, that once 'Christianity' under emperor Constantine (AD 306 to 337) became the official religion of the Roman empire, the policies and aspirations of the various factions within in the Empire, would become major hazards facing converts to true faith in Christ. It is inappropriate to go into detail of such influences here, but one only has to think of the crusades, or the Spanish inquisition, or the internecine strife between Catholics and Protestants following the reformation, to appreciate that institutional 'Christianity' of one form or another has been a major source of the conditions on earth in which the horsemen of the Apocalypse have shown their colours since the time John.

Souls under the altar – the fifth seal

The above interpretation of the four horsemen of the apocalypse provides a natural explanation for the fifth seal which turns out to be a direct consequence of the first four. When the fifth seal is broken, 'the souls of those who had been slain' (Gk: *sphazo* - sacrificed) are seen by John as 'souls under the altar'. Reverting to our description of the heavenly Temple in the previous chapter, the altar in this case must be the altar of burnt offering which stood in the courtyard of the Tabernacle/Temple. It is against this altar that the blood of the sacrifices was thrown during Israel's sacrificial rituals (Lev. 1:5). In describing the slain saints as 'souls' (Gk: *psuche*), John simply means that the sacrificial victims were once sentient human beings. More significantly John refers to them as 'witnesses' (Gk: *marturia*) – people

who give testimony. In death they were witnessing for Christ in the same way that Christ witnessed to the purpose of God in his sacrifice. They had 'conquered evil by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony' (Rev. 12:11). The Greek word for a witness is *martus* which has come over into English as martyr meaning one who dies for his beliefs. And certainly the people who perished in the second, third or fourth seals could be considered as the martyrs (witnesses) whose blood was poured out beside the altar in the fifth seal.

In connection with our discussion of the messages to the churches we observed that in the first century literal martyrdom for Christ was the exception rather than the rule. The martyrdom of the saints in the fifth seal should not be regarded therefore as literal martyrdom, but as a figure for a life-long commitment to Christ in the face of opposing forces. The 'souls under the altar' call out to God to 'avenge their blood on those that dwell on the earth' (Rev. 6:10). It is a yearning which is to be interpreted not as a call for vengeance, but as a call for the final defeat of evil in the world by the righteous judgements of God. They are given white robes and told to wait until the number of their fellow-martyrs has been made up – until, that is, the seventh seal has been broken and the names of those written in the Book of Life can be revealed. We shall consider this outcome in the next chapter.

Chapter 5. Sealing then silence

John's vision (Revelation 6:12 to 8:1)

John has seen four seals opened and four horsemen riding forth to carry out the sealing process. When the fifth seal is opened John sees the souls of those who have witnessed for Christ, 'under the altar', crying out to God. He now sees the sixth seal opened, and he witnesses the dramatic consequences. There is an earthquake, the sun, moon and stars stop giving their light and the earth's leaders hide because the day of the wrath of the Lamb has come. Who can stand?

Revelation 7 answers this question. John hears 144,000 sealed from twelve specified tribes of Israel. What he sees however is a great unnumbered multitude of the redeemed standing before the throne and before the Lamb. Finally, the Lamb opens the seventh seal, and there is silence in heaven.

The sixth seal is opened

The first five seal openings can be regarded as a reflection of the words of Jesus in the Mt. Olivet Prophecy:

"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another." (Matt. 24:9-10)

The tribulations which occur as the first four seals are opened, persecution, conflict, wars, famines and the like, represent the trials the elect should expect as they bear testimony to Christ. The souls under the altar of the fifth seal, represents the status of those who have given their lives for Christ, and who now wait for their redemption.

When however the sixth seal is opened, events unlike anything that has gone before occur:

“When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place”. (Rev 6:12-14)

We suggested in connection with the heavenly Temple vision (chapter 3) that dramatic natural events such as storms, thunder, lightning and hail are indicators of divine activity. The earthquake and the disruption of the heavenly bodies of the sixth seal also represent God in action. Four later visions feature earthquakes (Rev. 8:5, 11:13, 11:19, 16:18), and we will be taking a closer look at them when we consider the visions in which they occur. In the present case, the dramas of the sixth seal make it clear that this earthquake is an event associated with the Lord's return. Whereas the first five seals have been operating continuously from the resurrection of Christ to the time of his return, the sixth seal is an end-time prophecy which tells us that the sealing process will soon be completed.

End-time events

John sees the sun turning black, the moon becoming blood, and the stars falling from heaven. It is clearly a reflection of the events that Jesus told his disciples would occur immediately preceding his coming:

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” (Matthew 24:29-30)

What is the significance of the darkening of the heavenly bodies? The sun, the moon and the stars are elements of creation designed by God to give light to mankind, and to act as guides (Gen. 1:14-18). Their failure would bring disaster to humanity leaving it without vision or direction. In prophetic terms, such natural disasters often represent the results of divine action. It is in these terms for example, that Isaiah speaks of God's judgements on Babylon (Is. 13:10); Ezekiel says much the same referring to God's judgements on Egypt (Eze. 32:7-8). However, it is perhaps worth considering the possibility that the darkening of sun, moon and stars is intended to implicate Israel in these events by making a specific reference the imagery of Joseph's dream in which the sun, moon and stars represent the family of Jacob (Gen. 37:9). Such a possibility is reinforced by the way the darkening of the sun, moon and stars are used in Joel's prophecy to refer to invasions of Israel in connection with the Day of the Lord (Joel 2:10, 2:31, 3:15). The Lord's words in the Olivet prophecy (quoted above) also suggest an involvement of Israel in the events of the last days. Christ immediately follows his observation that the 'powers of heaven will be shaken' with the words, 'then all the tribes of the earth shall mourn' (Mat. 24: 30); it is the quotation from Zechariah which John refers to in the introduction to Revelation (Zec. 12:10, Rev. 1:7). In commenting on John's use of this quotation, we suggested that it was his way of telling us that Israel's recognition of Christ as their Messiah will form a part of expected end-time events.

It is difficult also to ignore the fact that as part of the description of the sixth seal, John likens the fall of the stars to a fig tree shaken by a gale (Rev. 6:13). The fig tree is an acknowledged figure for Israel which Jesus himself used from time to time (Matt. 24:32, Luke 13:6-7, Luke 21:29). John's use of it at this point recalls the occasion when Jesus cursed a fig tree because of its inability to produce fruit (Matt. 21:19). In cursing the fig tree, Jesus was in effect, commenting on the failure of the Jewish nation to produce fruit in response to his teaching. In the sixth seal, if the fig tree does represent Israel, the fact that it will be shaken by a gale suggests that the nation will have to face some traumatic end-time experiences. The prophecy then hints that Israel's time of trouble may be the means by which Israel sheds its winter fruit

– their failure to respond to Jesus while he was with them – and replaces it with the summer fruit of their recognition of him as Messiah. We shall certainly hear more of this when the trumpets sound. Signs in the heavenly bodies however, are only the beginning of far reaching changes to be brought about by the sixth seal opening:

“The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’” (Rev 6:14-17)

A vanishing sky, with mountains and islands being removed from their places suggests profound disturbances for all nations (Rev. 6:14). Jeremiah reflects on the desolation of the land of Israel by figuratively speaking of the mountains quaking and the hills moving to and fro (Jer. 4:24). Isaiah also likens God's judgement of the nations to rolling the skies up 'like a scroll' (Isa. 34:4). It will be an alarming time for all types of people: certainly for the rich and powerful, those who might think themselves secure in worldly terms, but also for ordinary people – everybody in fact, whatever their status, slave or free. They will all try to hide, desperately seeking shelter among caves and rocks, though whether this is to be taken literally or not is unclear. What is clear however, is that they are attempting to hide from manifestations of the wrath of God and the Lamb (Rev. 6:15-17). The predictions of this final seal are drawn from Isaiah's prophecy about the time of the end (Isa. 2:6-22):

“And people shall enter the caves of the rocks and the holes of the ground, from before the terror of the LORD, and from the splendour of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth.” (Isa 2:19)

It will be a time Isaiah tells us, when the haughtiness of man will be humbled and God will bring low their lofty pride. It is sometimes suggested that the saints will be sheltered from such troubles by some form of divine action. John tells us however, that the sixth seal events include at least some aspects of the outpouring of the wrath of God. The wrath of God is of course, a key element in the visions recorded in Revelation 15 and 16, and we shall review these visions in the appropriate place. However, from John's description of the sixth seal, it would appear that the sealing of the people of God continues throughout these traumatic end-time events. So traumatic indeed are the events of the sixth seal that John feels obliged to ask 'who can stand'? The answer is given in the following visions.

What does the sealing process achieve?

The visions John describes in Revelation 7, summarise what the seal sequence achieves in God's plan of salvation. Although this section of the prophecy is not strictly speaking a part of the sealing process, it is appropriate that it follows the end-time events of the 6th seal and precedes the 7th seal opening after which no further sealing activity occurs. The chapter begins with a command from an angel who possesses the 'seal of the living God':

"After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth (land) or sea or against any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: 'Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God'". (Revelation 7:1-3)

Whatever interpretation we might put on the 'land', 'sea' and 'trees' in this encounter, it seems clear John is telling us that the destructive forces of the wind angels are to be restrained until the process of sealing the people of God has been completed. Land and sea simply represents the full range earth's territorial extent, but the trees are

special because they are a living outgrowth from the earth, and they are especially vulnerable to damage by winds. The imagery of green vegetation as used later in Revelation, suggests that greenness represents either the presence of spiritual life or at least the potential for its presence (Rev. 9:4, compare also Matt. 7:17 and Luke 23:31). And for that reason the 'trees' are of particular concern to the angel who carries the seal of God and who is responsible for the sealing process.

Angels in Revelation are sometimes represented as being the power behind natural forces – for example, the angel of the waters (Rev. 16:5) or of fire (Rev. 14:18). Here, we have angels who control the four winds. Four is of course, John's numerical code for things earthly, and winds are earthly forces which sometimes need to be controlled because of the damage they can potentially cause. In Daniel, the four winds of the earth are associated with the national movements which result in the formation of Daniel's political 'beasts' (Dan. 7:2). In Jeremiah they are the international forces which God uses to scatter the nation of Elam in judgement (Jer. 49:36). It seems possible therefore, that the potential damage that the angel with the seal of the living God is concerned about, is damage arising from those earthly forces which are characteristic of the ministry of the red, black and pale horsemen – internecine strife, famine, the sword and pestilence; forces which have the potential to get out of hand. Despite the fact that there are only three horsemen reporting forces of this kind (rather than all four) does not rule out this possibility since the areas of operation of each horseman must be regarded as overlapping.

The opening vision of Revelation 7 therefore is intended to reassure John and his readers, that whatever forces exist on earth during the sealing process, such forces would not result in the work being compromised. It is not surprising that there might be some concern about this since those sealed during the ministries of the horsemen, appear immediately afterwards as martyrs – souls under the altar. The 'winds' however, will not be allowed to 'harm' (ESV) earth, sea or the trees until the people of God have been sealed. Every individual who

God intends to be a part of his elect will be included. It's the book of Revelation's equivalent of Christ's prayer:

"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand". (Joh 10:28-29)

The elect in double vision

After the reassurance that all those whom God has predestined to be saved will be sealed, John goes on to describe the elect in two ways – first, as the army of God, and then as a great multitude from every nation. The army of God is a picture of the role of the elect, fighting the forces of evil in the present world; the international multitude on the other hand, is a vision of the elect's eternal standing in God's sight.

First John *hears* 144,000 sealed, 12,000 from each of twelve of Israel's tribes (Rev. 7:4-8). When however he looks, he sees a great multitude that no-one can number. Here is an example of John's startling switches of images (like the Lion of Judah and the slain Lamb in Revelation 5, or the Bride and the new Jerusalem in chapter 21). It seems likely therefore that we are intended to understand that the 144,000 and the unnumbered multitude are two ways of viewing the same group of people – the redeemed. This conclusion is supported by the fact that when the characteristics of the 144,000 in Revelation 7:4-8 and 14:1-5 are combined and compared with the white robed multitude in chapter 7:9-17, the correspondences are clear: both are 'before the throne' (14:3 and 7:15), both follow the Lamb (14:4 and 7:17) and both are redeemed (14:4 and 7:14).

In passing, it is worth noting that although the 144,000 recorded by John in Revelation 7 and 14 are the same group of people, the part they play in the two sections of the prophecy is rather different. We will show below, that in Revelation 7 they are the sealed army of God selected because of their positive response to the divine calling (the 'Come' which accompanies the horsemen's emergence). In

Revelation 14 however, we shall see that the 144,000 represents the elect in active conflict with the powers of the world as represented by the beasts John tells us about in Revelation 13 (Rev. 14:14-16),

The army of God

In Revelation 7:4-8 John lists the 144,000 following a pattern similar to that in Numbers which records a census of all in Israel who were able to go to war (Num. 1:2-16). The purpose of numbering those able to go to war was to assess the strength of the army. Numerically speaking therefore, 144,000 represents the strength of the army of the redeemed. The description of the 144,000 in Revelation 14 confirms the view that they are the army of the Lamb because not only are they described as 'those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes' but also rather strangely as 'those who did not defile themselves with women, for they are virgins' (Rev. 14:4-5). This has nothing to do with the sexual behaviour of the followers of Christ, it defines the 144,000 as those who have prepared themselves to meet God (Exodus 19:15) and as the army of God in the field. In Old Testament times, the camp of Israel was to be holy; the soldiers were to abstain from sexual relations whilst fighting the Lord's battles (Deut. 23:9-10, 1 Samuel 21:5). So the 144,000 are the spiritual army of the Lamb; they follow him because he is their commander in chief. And just as the commitment of the Lamb himself led him to the cross, so too the Lord's spiritual army will fight the Lord's spiritual battles to the death if required.

In passing, the importance attached to the numbering of the army as an assessment of strength can be judged by the consequences of king David's ill-founded attempt to number Israel (2 Sam. 24:10). Both David and Joab (the army commander) knew that when David insisted that Joab count Israel's fighting men he was sinning against God. Israel were the people of God; their military strength should have been assessed not by the size of their army, but by their reliance on God.

In John's description of the 144,000, he apparently lists those sealed as coming from twelve of the tribes of Israel, even though the tribes in

John's list is rather unusual (Rev. 7:5-8). Because the sealed warriors are drawn from the Israel's tribes, some have suggested that they represent those redeemed from natural Israel only. However 144,000 in Revelation, as we have already observed, is a rather special number. Both 12,000 and 144 (12 times 12), feature in the dimensions of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:16-17). The gates of the city are inscribed with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel, and the foundations with the names of the 12 apostles; the impenetrable walls are 144 cubits thick. The New Jerusalem, the Bride, is made up of both Old and New Testament followers of Christ. It must surely follow then, that the 144,000 strong army of the Lamb consists of the true church, both Jews and Gentiles, the elect from all nations.

We observed earlier that the tribes of Israel from which John draws the 144,000 is unusual. The simplest way for John to have constructed his list would have been for him to follow the tribal order in Numbers 1. However, compared with Numbers, John brings the tribe of Judah to the head of the list; this is understandable since Judah was the tribe from which Christ came, and Christ was the commander of the army. John however, includes the tribe of Levi in his list, even though this tribe is excluded from Numbers because they were exempted from army service as being responsible for the Temple and its appointments. John also includes the tribes of both Joseph and Manasseh, even though substituting the name Ephraim for that of Joseph would have been a more accurate reflection of the fact that both Joseph's sons Manasseh and Ephraim were tribal heads. And the tribe of Dan is excluded. Many attempts to explain these differences have been put forward, but it seems simpler to accept John is making a point. John could easily have provided an accurate list of the tribes had he wanted to do so, but he wants us to know that this army was not drawn from natural Israel. It was the army of 'spiritual Israel' – the Israel of God (Gal: 6:16).

The great multitude (Rev. 7:9-17)

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples

and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev 7:9-10)

John having **heard** the 144000 listed, now **looks and sees** a great multitude who no man could number. The contrast between the numbered army and the countless multitude has to be deliberate. The numbering of the army was the means of assessing its strength. But the redeemed of God is without number, not only because we do not know how many of them there will be, but because its strength is not in its size but in the fact that it is the redeemed of the Lord.

It is an international group (nations, tribes, peoples and languages). The group stands before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in the white robes of righteousness with palm branches in their hands. The people who witnessed Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem laid palm branches before him to give a royal welcome to the King. But Jerusalem as it was then, was not ready to receive him. This vision represents the people who have received him, and they cry out 'Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb'. The host of heaven, angels, elders and living creatures respond by worshipping God and giving him thanks (Rev. 7:11-12). Unusually, one of the elders asks John who the white robed multitude are. John passes the request back: 'Sir you know'. And John is told that 'these are the ones coming out of great tribulation'.

Jesus uses the term 'tribulation' (Gk: *thlipsis*) in the Olivet prophecy (Mat. 24:9) referring to the experiences of his followers during his absence. 'Coming out of tribulation' therefore could be a reference to the traumas of the sealing process involved in the ministries of the four horsemen. Certainly, those who had responded to the first (white) horseman, who had conquered evil by their faith in the blood of the Lamb – could be described as those 'who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb'. In so doing, they had made their robes white having assumed the imputed righteousness of Christ. It seems likely also, that some will have turned to Christ as a result of the end-time

events of the sixth seal. These events are described by Jesus in his Olivet prophecy as the 'great tribulation' (Mat. 24:21, 24:29). It seems likely therefore that the white robed multitude represents all those who came to Christ as the result of the 'tribulations' involved in the sealing process.

And they are blessed, having the assurance of the presence of God and the guidance of the Lamb:

"Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Rev 7:15-17)

Such is the end-point of the sealing process. There is no more sealing to be done. All that is left is the revealing of the names written in the scroll when the seventh seal is opened.

The seventh seal (Rev. 8:1)

The dramatic events of the sixth seal will in effect be the final act in the sealing process. During these events many will attempt to flee from the wrath of the Lamb and some will repent and turn to God. When the seventh seal is broken, there are no more thunders or lightnings, no more signs in the heavenly bodies, and no more opportunities to hide from wrath. Instead, there is silence. The fact that this silence lasts for half an hour, doesn't seem to have any particular significance in John's numerical scheme. It is not however a pause for 'dramatic effect' as some suggest, nor is it a time for prayer before the trumpet visions begin. It seems to be just a simple interruption in the otherwise continuous sequence of visions. Its function is to mark the completion of the sealing process.

The absence of any visionary activity for half an hour must have seemed to John as though the angel of revelation was pausing from his labours. The creation narrative would seem to offer an obvious parallel. The interpretation of the seals which we have been offering is that they represent the birth pains of the members of God's new creation. Over the centuries from the time of the resurrection of Christ, God has been selecting and sealing his elect from all the nations of the world. There have been 6 'days' of such activity represented by the first 6 seals. On the seventh 'day' God rests, and there is silence in heaven. The work is complete and the names of the redeemed have been inscribed in the book of life. Now that the seventh seal has been opened, those whose names are written in the scroll, can be revealed. They are the Bride. They appear as the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21) with a key role in the new heavens and earth. All that is left, is for them to be manifested – and this manifestation is recorded in Revelation 20:

"I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years". (Revelation 20:4)

We will of course, have more to say about 'those who are given authority to judge' when we consider the later chapters of Revelation. For the moment however, it is enough to know that the sealed of God are in the secure keeping of the Lamb who died and that they will be revealed to the world when he returns.

Chapter 6. Four trumpet blasts

John's vision (Revelation 8:2 to 8:12)

After the seal sequence has ended with silence in heaven, John sees seven angels who stand before God given trumpets; but they do not sound their trumpets until an angel with a golden censor has offered incense on the golden altar before the throne. The angel then takes fire from the altar and throws it on the earth with the result that there are peals of thunder, rumblings, lightening and an earthquake.

The first four angels now sound their trumpets. As each trumpet is sounded, dramatic consequences follow. The sounding of the first trumpet results in hail and fire mixed with blood being thrown upon earth. The sounding of the second trumpet causes a burning mountain to be thrown into the sea. The third trumpet blast results in a great star blazing like torch falling from heaven on the rivers and fountains of water, and the fourth is followed by the darkening of the sun, moon and stars. One third of the occupants of each of the areas of earth involved in these trumpet calls are affected.

What are the trumpet calls about?

The trumpet visions are in many respects the most difficult part of the Revelation prophecy because of the complex and detailed nature of their imagery. However, when deciphering this imagery, the first question to be resolved must be: what is the significance of the fact that these events are initiated by trumpet blasts? Candlesticks are churches, seals represent the process of sealing the New Testament people of God, so what would one expect to be associated with the 'active' symbol of blowing a trumpet? Normally, a trumpet blast would be thought of as heralding a dramatic event of some kind, or perhaps signalling a call to arms. In the case of the Biblical trumpets however, it is possible to be more specific because in the Bible, the trumpet is

strongly associated with God's governance of Israel, the Old Testament people of God.

In Israel there were two kinds of trumpet, the shofar (a ram's horn) and the silver trumpets specially intended for Tabernacle service. The functions associated with the blowing of the shofar are as follows:

- The sound of the trumpet was a call to God's presence (Exo. 19:16,19).
- Trumpets featured as a series of seven in the capture of Jericho, proclaiming that the army of God was poised for conquest (Jos. 6:2-21).
- Trumpets were also sounded at the coronation of the king (1Kings 1:34,39).
- A trumpet call formed part of the watchman's warning to alert the nation to the danger of their departing from the worship of the true God (Eze. 33:3-6).
- A trumpet blast announced the day of the Lord, and called Israel to turn back to God (Joel 2:1, 2:15).
- The feast of Trumpets marked the beginning of the seventh month of the Jewish year and was followed by a further trumpet blast on the Day of Atonement (Num. 29:1, Lev. 23:24, 25:9).

The silver trumpets were used as follows:

- The trumpets were sounded to call Israel to God, and to get the camp of Israel moving (Num. 10:2-10).
- Trumpets were blown when the Ark of God was brought up to Jerusalem and in the rejoicing which followed (1Chr. 15:24, 28).
- Trumpets were also blown in the ceremony of swearing allegiance to God (2Chr. 15:14).

It seems fairly clear from this survey, that the sounding of a trumpet was an important part of the nation's religious life. This is such a significant feature of trumpets in the Bible that the sounding of trumpets would seem to be an entirely appropriate symbol for God's dealings with Israel. If this is indeed the point of the seven trumpet

calls in the book of Revelation, we would expect to find that the images John sees in his visions as the trumpets sound are appropriate to Israel. Moreover, if true, this line of interpretation implies that God has not forgotten his promises to Israel, but that the nation still has a role to play in the outworking of his plans. Followers of replacement theology, which sees the New Testament church completely taking over the role of ancient Israel, will find this approach problematic. However, the following observation by Paul suggests that he at least believed that Israel has a further part to play in God's plan of redemption for the world:

“Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob’; ‘and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins’. As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable”.
(Rom 11:25-29)

The trumpets: God's call to Israel

Of all the functions a trumpet blast played in Israel's relationship to God, the dominant one is probably that of calling Israel to God – or of calling them back to God. Allied with this is the requirement that Israel should recognise that they are his covenant people. It is worth recalling the first time the sound of the trumpet was heard in Israel; it was on that most dramatic of occasions, the theophany of God at Sinai. This is how Moses describes it:

“On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount

Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder". (Exo. 19:16-19)

The trumpet blast heard on that occasion was a supernatural one. The sound of the trumpet was calling the people into the presence of God for the purpose of confirming God's covenant with them. In the later prophets, the prophet's words would act as a metaphorical trumpet call reminding the people of that covenant, and of the consequences of departing from it (Isa. 58:1, Jer. 6:17-19).

We propose then in what follows, to treat the trumpet calls in Revelation as God interacting with the Jewish people. They are a people who were unable to recognise Jesus as their Messiah at his first coming, probably because their understanding of the role of the Messiah was faulty. Many were unable to recognise a suffering Messiah, and were looking for a triumphant conqueror. God through Jeremiah promised a New Covenant based on different principles; it is important however, in this context not to minimise what God says about his ancient people:

"Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar— the LORD of hosts is his name: 'If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the LORD, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever'." (Jer. 31:35-36)

The significant feature of this statement is that as a part of his future plan, God intends to retain his regard for the people of Israel as a nation. Of course, in the New Testament era, many Jews will become Christians and join the multi-ethnic assembly of the followers of Christ under the new covenant. But God will not forget his Old Testament people as a national group. We will see how this might work out in the later trumpet visions.

There is another significant interpretive consequence of treating the trumpets as God calling Israel. The seals, representing the divine sealing of his New Testament people, could only be realised historically after the death and resurrection of Jesus. God's dealings with his Old Testament people as a nation however, stretch back more than 1000 years before the resurrection of Christ. Even though Israel as a nation obviously cannot respond to the risen Christ (through the trumpet calls) until after his resurrection, and probably will not respond until shortly before his second coming, it is still to be expected that the imagery of the trumpet visions will draw on God's dealings with Israel in the past; indeed, such historical references should go some way to validating the interpretation of these visions as relating to Israel. We begin however, by briefly outlining the structure of the trumpet sequence.

The trumpet sequence

Following a brief opening vision (Rev. 8:2-5), the seven trumpet visions are divided into a set of four (Rev. 8:6-12) followed by a set of three labelled 'woe' trumpets (Rev. 8:13 – 11:19). It is worth observing that this 4-3 structure is the same as that found in the seal sequence. In the case of the seal visions, the first four are identified as the four horsemen which have the 'four quarters of the earth' as their area of operation. Moreover, including the fifth seal (souls under the altar) they span the whole time period from the resurrection of Christ until the end-time events of the sixth seal. The seventh seal terminates the sequence, but involves no further action. We shall argue that the trumpet sequence has a similar pattern, though in this case, the split is identified by defining the final three trumpets as 'woe' trumpets. The seventh trumpet (and the third woe) terminates the sequence.

We shall consider the opening vision and the first four trumpet visions in this chapter and the 'woe' trumpets in the next two chapters.

The trumpets – the opening vision

“And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake’.
(Rev. 8:2-5)

The angelic trumpeters are given trumpets, but they sound their trumpets only after an angel with a censor offers incense with the prayers of the saints on the golden altar before the throne. We have already reviewed the various elements of the heavenly Temple and drawn attention to the links between what John sees of the heavenly Temple and the earthly Tabernacle/Temple which had previously existed. The opening vision of the trumpet sequence however is the first time that the golden incense altar has been mentioned. In the Tabernacle/Temple of Israel, the incense altar was situated immediately in front of the ark of the covenant which was itself the earthly representation of the throne of God. It was separated from the ark by the veil which divided the Tabernacle/Temple into the Holy place and the most Holy place. The incense altar in the Holy place was used daily by the priests to burn incense morning and evening, though in carrying out their daily duties these priests would not pass through the veil into the most Holy place. On the Day of Atonement however, the incense altar performed a much more significant function. On that Day a trumpet would be blown throughout the land calling the people to the ritual of atonement (Lev. 25:9). The High Priest would then take the blood of the atoning sacrifices, a bull for himself and a goat for the people, into the most Holy place and sprinkle the blood on the ark (the throne). To do this, he would presumably draw the veil aside to allow him access. While the atoning blood rituals were in progress, incense would be burnt on a censor that the High Priest would take with him

into the most Holy place bearing fire from the golden altar; the cloud arising from the burning of this incense gave the High Priest protection from divine judgement:

“And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die”. (Lev 16:12-13)

Incense in scripture is normally taken to symbolise prayer, and this certainly seems to be the case in Revelation – for example, when the slain lamb has taken the scroll from the one on the throne, the living creatures and the elders hold ‘golden bowls full of incense’ which are said to be ‘the prayers of the saints’ (Rev. 5:8). Applying this principle to the opening section of the trumpet visions tells us that the prayers of the saints form an essential element to the fulfilment of the trumpet prophecies. Why do the saints need to pray? In the ritual of Israel’s Day of Atonement, the High priest, who represented of the people, would be protected from God’s judgement by the cloud of incense. Under the New Covenant, the prayers of the ‘saints’ appear to be performing a similar function. Although God will bring judgements on his Old Covenant people while the trumpets sound, the saints are asking God in their prayers to limit those judgements so as to mercifully preserve the nation. Moses prayed for just such clemency after the sin of the golden calf, and God heard him – despite which their sin was not without God’s judgemental consequences (Exo. 32:32-35). The same is true of other men of God notably Daniel (Dan. 9:3-19) and Nehemiah (Neh. 9:6-38).

There are many Biblical verses which encourage prayer for Israel. This is not the place to review them in detail, but the following are examples: 1Samuel 12:23, Psalm 122:6, Isaiah 62:6-7, and Romans 10:1. Admittedly most of these are appeals to Old Testament Jews to pray for their own nation, but it is clear that statements such as ‘Pray for the peace of Jerusalem’, imply that the purpose of God for the

whole of mankind is tied up with the restoration of Israel. The prayers of the 'saints' will not only include a request for protection for Israel from divine judgement, but will also include prayer for the return of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom. After all, that is the climax of the trumpet sequence, because when the seventh trumpet sounds, 'the kingdom of the world' will have become 'the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ' (Revelation 11:15).

But before this climax, it would appear that the trumpet visions will bring unpleasant experiences for the Jewish people. This is demonstrated in the vision by the fact that the very same censor which was used to offer the prayers of the saints is also used by the angel to take fire from the altar and hurl it to earth. This fire results in the usual manifestations of God at work – thunder, voices, lightning and an earthquake. However, as Amos makes clear, painful events are sometimes how the disciplinary hand of God is manifested (Amos 4:6-13). Amos was a prophet sent by God to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He tells the people that God had given them 'lack of bread in all their places', that he had 'withheld rain from them as harvest approached', that he had 'struck them with blight and mildew', and that he had sent 'pestilence among them', but the sole purpose of all this unpleasantness was to persuade them to 'return to him'. Undoubtedly in all these events there was an element of divine punishment or discipline, but the underlying purpose of God was a loving one – that Israel should turn back to him. It is in this light that we must regard the 'thunder, voices, lightning and earthquakes' of the trumpet visions.

Trumpet events

The first four trumpets are brief. Conforming to John's numerical scheme (see chapter 1), they affect the four components of God's peopled world, earth or land (Gk: *gē* see note below), sea, rivers and fountains (fresh waters), and sun, moon and stars; these four components of the created order standing for different groups or classes of people in different places and in a range of circumstances. If these trumpet calls are addressed to Israel, the regions affected would represent Jews in the diaspora wherever they are, and in

whatever circumstances they find themselves. We are suggesting that like the first four seals, the first four trumpet events are not geographically defined or limited; neither are they necessarily sequential in time. What they do have in common however, is that their effect is partial. The fraction 'one third' is common to all the trumpets. This feature is no doubt meant to indicate that though the events symbolised are designed to have impact, they are limited in their severity. It is a limitation which may well even be the answer to the prayers of the saints. The function of the trumpets is not to annihilate but to bring the recipients to the point where they will turn to God in repentance and obedience.

Note: The Greek word *gē* can mean earth (in the sense of the whole earth or world) or it can mean country or land (including land as distinct from sea). In the above context the most appropriate English word to use would be 'land' since 'land' and 'sea' are two obviously contrasting parts of the created order.

The first trumpet sounds

“The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth (land). And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up”.
(Rev. 8:7)

We have already observed that natural phenomena, including hail, are often used to represent God in action. Hail was of course, the key component in the seventh plague inflicted by God on Egypt in order to persuade Pharaoh to let Israel go – that hailstorm too contained fire (Exo. 9:23, Psa. 105:32). The hail and fire of the plagues was a wakeup call to both Pharaoh and Israel. To Pharaoh it was a demonstration of God's power to punish and destroy; to Israel it was a demonstration that God's power was a power to save. In this first trumpet the hail and the fire is mixed with blood, implying dire consequences for those affected. The fire is a destructive force since a third of the earth, trees and grass are burned up. God speaking

through Jeremiah at a time when the sinful nation of Judah was about to be punished by the armies of Babylon, said:

“Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, upon man and beast, upon the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground; it will burn and not be quenched.” (Jer. 7:20)

God’s judgements would be poured out to remind Israel that God was both their judge and their hope of salvation:

“For I am with you to save you, declares the LORD; I will make a full end of all the nations among whom I scattered you, but of you I will not make a full end. I will discipline you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished”. (Jer. 30:11)

So the trumpet sounds a serious warning to Israel, but it makes clear at the same time, that the warning does not mean total extinction. There would be loss, the burning of a third of earth, trees and grass, but this loss would be limited; and the very fact that the trumpet was sounding, meant that God was active on their behalf, and that he was a saviour (see for example, Isaiah 27:13 or Joel 2:15-17).

The second trumpet sounds

“The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood. A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed”. (Rev. 8:8-9)

Mountains in scripture are sometimes used as figures of elevated national powers. A prime example would be: ‘in the last days the mountain of the House of the Lord will be established as the highest of the mountains and it shall be lifted above the hills’ (Mic. 4:1-2). Micah is telling us that in the future age, the House of the Lord will become the primary source of law and teaching for all nations. But although

God would elevate some 'mountains' he would raze others to the ground. In the case of Babylon, it is described as a 'destroying mountain' because of its involvement in bringing about the captivity of Israel. In its hey-day Babylon was a 'mountain' of some power but after God had finished with it, Babylon would be nothing but a burnt mountain – burnt by the wrath of God (Jer. 51:25).

The second trumpet however, speaks not of a burnt mountain but a burning mountain. The reference would seem to be Sinai, the mountain where the law was given (Deut. 4:11). The fire in this case was the presence of the Lord. The people heard God's voice out of the midst of the fire as he declared his covenant with them (Deut. 5:23). And now, the second trumpet is predicting that this burning mountain would be 'thrown into the sea'. It is difficult not to connect this striking phrase with the remarkable saying of Jesus:

“And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen”. (Mat. 21:21)

We have already observed during our discussions of the sixth seal (Chapter 5) that the fig tree is a well-known scriptural figure for Israel. We also drew attention to the fact that cursing the fig tree was Jesus' response to the failure of the Jewish nation to respond to his teaching. In the verse quoted above (Mat. 21:21), Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is paralleled with his saying about a mountain being thrown into the sea. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that Jesus is deliberately linking the failure of Israel (the fig tree withers) to its future dispersion (mountain being thrown into the sea of nations). This happened forty or so years after the time of Christ when in AD 70 the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple.

For the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day, the burning mountain (Sinai) of the second trumpet, would represent the Old Covenant form of national redemption. Throwing this particular mountain into the sea (of the nations) would represent the scattering of Jews throughout the

world – as predicted by many Old Testament prophets (e.g. Lev. 26:33, Deut. 4:27, 28:64, Jer. 9:16, 16:13, Eze. 20:23, 22:15, Neh. 1:8, Zech. 7:14). There is a sense therefore that the second trumpet looks both backwards and forwards. The dispersion of the Jews had started only a few hundred years after Israel became a nation. The Assyrian captivity in BC 722 was the beginning; it was followed by the Babylonian captivity in BC 586, and brought to a culmination with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in AD70. Since then the Jews have been dispersed among all nations and have become as predicted, the wandering Jew (Deut. 28:65). In the Christian era, the Jews go on suffering. If God's involvement with Israel in Old Testament times can be thought of as the divine trumpet sounding in the past, the suffering of the Jewish nation in the New Testament era tells us that the divine trumpet is still sounding, perhaps even more urgently.

Once again, the effects of this trumpet call would be painful but partial. This trumpet clearly had its main effect on the sea into which the burning mountain was thrown. And as a result, one third of the sea became blood, and one third of the users of the sea (creatures and ships) were destroyed. It doesn't seem helpful to press the interpretation of these details too far, they are simply illustrative of traumas associated with being adrift on (or in) the sea.

The third trumpet sounds

“The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it had been made bitter”. (Rev 8:10-11)

The third trumpet is directed towards a third region of the created order – rivers and springs of water. Again pressing the interpretation of these symbols (fresh water as distinct from sea) is not helpful; the fresh water resources are simply a part of John's fourfold partition of

this created order. In the third trumpet this component of the created order is struck by a blazing star whose name is Wormwood. The falling star is reminiscent of Isaiah's taunt against the King of Babylon. According to Isaiah, the Babylonian monarch had said in his overweening pride, 'I will ascend to heaven, above the stars of God'. But God would bring him and the nation he represented, down to earth in judgement: 'How are you fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn' (Isa. 14:12-15). The third trumpet vision is clearly not referring directly to ancient Babylon, but is identifying an inappropriate element of pride in Israel, a nation whose role is 'heavenly'. The picture conveyed by this trumpet is that of a shooting star – a meteorite. A brief burst of light (the blazing torch) followed by rapid extinction – a fallen 'star' in fact, representing a dramatic change from an elevated status to a much more lowly one.

The nation of Israel and its kings certainly fit the 'heavenly' status of the star in this vision (see Chapter 1 on the significance of 'heavenly'). They had been chosen by God to be 'his treasured possession':

"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers ..." (Deut. 7:6-8)

God's choice of Israel was not based on any outstandingly positive characteristic of the nation. It was based solely on his faithfulness to the promises he had made to their Fathers. But this elevated status was likely to be a source of pride. Again, the vision seems to be looking as much backwards as forwards. The brightest period of Israel's history was the reign of Solomon, and it was certainly short lived. Following the brilliance of Solomon's reign, the Kingdom was split in two. The star of the Northern Kingdom certainly fell from 'heaven'; its rulers were largely usurpers and in 722 BC the Kingdom

was overthrown by the Assyrians. The southern Kingdom of Judah lasted a bit longer. They were taken captive by the Babylonians in 586 AD, but returned from exile after 70 years; and then, until AD 70, they became a nation who for most of the time was in subjection to the dominating powers of Persia, Greece and Rome. After AD70 Judah ceased to be a Kingdom; it was a people without a country, a Capital City (Jerusalem) or a Temple. The Jewish people, having rejected the sovereignty of God in the person of their Messiah (Christ) had fallen from 'heaven'. In the next three chapters we shall see how God intends to bring them back into a 'heavenly' association with himself.

The name of this fallen star was 'wormwood'. The term 'wormwood' refers to a kind of bitter potion or poison. If the second trumpet refers to the dispersion of the Jewish nation, this trumpet refers to some form of bitterness arising from a misplaced pride in God's purpose for them. Moses had predicted something of the kind. When he was renewing the covenant with the people of Israel just before they entered to promised land, Moses said:

“Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit (AV: gall and wormwood), one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.’” (Deut. 29:18-19)

Jeremiah goes further in suggesting the this bitterness was punishment by God because of their waywardness:

“Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will feed this people with bitter food (AV: wormwood), and give them poisonous water (AV: water of gall) to drink. I will scatter them among the nations whom neither they nor their fathers have known, and I will send the sword after them, until I have consumed them.” (Jer. 9:15-16)

Israel's inability to recognise Christ as their Messiah is perhaps the fruit of this root of bitterness. They expected a very different kind of Messiah, one who would restore Israel to the kind of status it had in Solomon's time. After the feeding of the 5000 the crowd wanted to make him a King (John 6:15). But they wanted the kind of King who would shake off the yoke of Rome and restore the nation to its former status among the nations.

Paul in Romans does not use the poison metaphor, but he is no less outspoken about the consequences of Israel's inability to recognise Christ:

“God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day. And David says, Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever.” (Rom 11:8-10)

One again the consequences of this trumpet are partial – only a third of the waters were poisoned. The 6th trumpet will show that there will eventually be an antidote for this poison – though again it will not be easy or painless.

The fourth trumpet sounds

“The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night”. (Rev 8:12)

We observed in the previous chapter that the darkening of sun, moon and stars which featured in both the sixth seal and in Jesus' Mount Olivet prophecy could well refer to Israel because of its use of the imagery of Jacob's dream and the references to the darkening of the sun, moon and stars in other Old Testament prophecies. However, the picture given to us by the fourth trumpet, is quite different from either

the sixth seal or the Mount Olivet prophecy. In both of those prophecies the darkening is extreme and sudden. In the case of the sixth seal the sun became black as sackcloth, and the moon became blood (Rev. 6:12). In the Olivet prophecy the darkening will occur 'immediately after the tribulation of those days'. We suggested that in both those prophecies the darkening was associated with end-time events preceding the second coming of Christ. The fourth trumpet is not as extreme nor is it an end-time event. The 'striking' of the sun, moon and stars did not extinguish them it merely reduced their brightness. Again this trumpet seems to be in line with the preceding ones and represents the loss of Israel's power and prestige in the world following the events of AD 70.

The first four trumpets as a whole

At the beginning of this chapter we argued that the trumpet visions are about God's dealings with the Jewish people. There can be little doubt that the structure of the sequence requires that we take the first four trumpets as a group. Moreover, in assessing the significance of the trumpets in a Jewish context we have drawn on historical precedents involving God's dealings with Israel in the past – the deliverance from Egypt, the dispersion of the Jews by foreign powers, and the loss of their standing progressively over the centuries up to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70.

We need however, to remind ourselves that Revelation is about 'things that must soon take place' (Rev. 1:1), which from John's point of view means things that will take place in the New Testament era. Perhaps the best way therefore of thinking about the first four trumpets is to see them drawing their imagery from God's dealings with his people throughout their history, but that after Israel's rejection of Christ and the scattering of the Jews among the nations after AD 70, the 'trumpet calls' continue down to our time. The history of the Jews throughout the world since the time of Christ has been an ongoing story of suffering and isolation. The Appendix to this chapter lists examples of the sufferings experienced by Jews from AD70 to the present, taken from a calendar published by the organisation 'Prayer for Israel'

(www.prayer4i.org). The ultimate irony however, is that the cause of a great deal of the suffering of the Jews (and of anti-Semitism through the ages) has arisen from Christians.

A striking ‘coincidence’

The one-third fraction in the trumpet visions reflects the fact that God promised that the nation of Israel would never be totally destroyed. Despite the sufferings of the Jews scattered throughout the world, in 1948 they became a nation once more as God promised through the prophets (Jer. 23:8, 32:37-38, Eze. 11:17-18, 34:13, 36:28, 37:21). The actual one-third fraction in the trumpets need not perhaps be taken too literally, it simply implies a part rather than the whole; but it is striking nevertheless that this same fraction features in two significant prophecies about God’s dealings with Israel. Ezekiel prophesied to a group of Jewish captives in Babylon a few years before the destruction of Jerusalem in BC 586. He was told by God to shave off his hair and his beard and to divide the hair carefully into three parts. This is what God asked him to do with the hair:

“A third part you shall burn in the fire in the midst of the city, when the days of the siege are completed. And a third part you shall take and strike with the sword all around the city. And a third part you shall scatter to the wind, and I will unsheathe the sword after them”. (Eze. 5:2)

God’s judgements were about to fall upon the people of Jerusalem in a variety of forms – the fire, the sword and the power of the winds to scatter. But in addition, Ezekiel is told to keep back a few hairs and keep them safe in his robe. A remnant was to escape judgement. This remnant would return to the land of Israel 70 years after the exile to restore the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. At the time of this restoration, Zechariah prophesied that God would, in the future, cleanse the nation from their rebellion against him. But there would be a price to pay:

“In the whole land, declares the LORD, two thirds shall be cut

off and perish, and one third shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The LORD is my God.'" (Zec. 13:8-9)

Of course, the fact the both Ezekiel and Zechariah convey messages which feature a third as a significant fraction in God's treatment of Israel has no direct connection to the trumpets in Revelation. But it is nevertheless a striking coincidence, especially as it relates to God's dealings with Israel. The key point of Ezekiel's message is that Israel will suffer, but a remnant will be preserved. Zechariah's prophecy is an end-time prophecy which tells of a future time of testing for Israel, the purpose of which was to bring Israel back to God. So, the one-third fraction involved in Revelation's trumpets can be seen as having an element of punishment (as in Ezekiel's prophecy), but more importantly as a call to repentance that the people might return to God (as in Zechariah's). Throughout the sounding of the trumpets, we shall observe that sadly, the call to return to God will not be heeded, and something as extraordinary as the ministry of the two witnesses will be needed before the Jewish people will be able to say, 'the Lord is my God' (Zec. 13:9) or "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (Mat. 23:39).

In the following chapters we turn to the three 'woe' trumpets and the complex vision of the two witnesses.

Annex to Chapter 6 – the first four trumpets

Persecution of Jews from AD 70 to 1980.

Extracted from a 'Calendar of Jewish Persecution' published by
Prayer for Israel, Telford, England.

- 70 A.D. Jerusalem destroyed: 1,100,000 Jews killed and 97,000 taken captive.
- 132-135 Bar Kochba Rebellion: Caused the death of 500,000 Jews, thousands sold into slavery or taken into captivity.
- 135 Roman Emperor Hadrian begins the persecution of the Jews.
- 315 Constantine established Christianity as state religion, many anti-Jewish laws issued.
- 375-395 Theodosius expelled Jews from official state positions and permitted the destruction of synagogues.
- 613 Spain: Jews persecuted and forced to be baptised or leave the country.
- 640, 873 Byzantine Empire: Jews forcibly converted to Christianity.
- 1096 Germany: Bloody persecution of the Jews at the beginning of the first Crusade.
- 1099 Jerusalem: the Jewish community massacred by the Crusaders.
- 1121 Flanders: Jews driven out.
- 1146 Spain: Jews forcibly converted to Christianity.
- 1146/47 Germany: Renewed persecution at the beginning of the second Crusade.
- 1181 France: King Philip banished Jews.
- 1189 England: Jewish persecution following the coronation of Richard the Lionheart. Jewish possessions claimed by the crown.
- 1215 Rome: IV Lateran Council issued restrictions on Jews.
- 1290 England: Edward 1 banished the Jews, 16,000 left the country.
- 1298 Franconia, Bavaria and Austria: Persecution of Jews. 140 Jewish communities destroyed.

- 1306 France: King Philip banished the Jews. 100,000 left the country.
- 1321 Guienne, France: Jews accused of inciting outlaws to poison wells. 5000 burnt at the stake.
- 1348 Europe: Jews blamed for the plague. Many were killed or burned.
- 1355 Toledo, Spain: 12,000 massacred by a mob.
- 1349-1360 Hungary: Jews expelled.
- 1370 Brabant: Jews blamed for defiling the wafer used in the Mass. Accused burnt alive.
- 1391 Spain: Further persecutions.
- 1394 France: Jews banished again.
- 1490 Toulouse, France: Jewish community annihilated.
- 1421 Austria: Jews expelled.
- 1453 Poland: Rights of citizenship withdrawn from Jews.
- 1478 Spain: The inquisition directed against the Jews.
- 1492 Spain: Jews banished. 300,000 refused to be 'baptised'.
- 1495 Lithuania: Jews expelled.
- 1497 Sicily and Sardinia: Jews expelled.
- 1497 Portugal: Jews banished.
- 1502 Rhodes: All Jews forcibly converted, expelled or taken into slavery.
- 1516 Venice: First ghetto established.
- 1540 Naples: Jews banished.
- 1593 Vatican State: Jews banished by Pope Clement VIII.
- 1648-1656 Poland: 100,000 Jews massacred in the Chmielnicki massacres.
- 1727/47 Russia: Jews expelled.
- 1794 Russia: Jewish men forced to serve in the military. Many left Russia.
- 1838 Meshed, Persia: Entire Jewish community forcibly converted to Islam.
- 1846-1878 Vatican State: Restrictions against Jews reinforced by Pope Pius IX.
- 1871-1921 Russia: Anti-Jewish pogroms.
- 1882-1890 Russia: 750,000 Jews forced to re-settle.
- 1891 Moscow and St. Petersburg: Jews expelled.

- 1903 Russia: Frequent pogroms.
- 1933 Germany: Jewish persecution. Hitler: Inception of the systematic destruction of Jews.
- 1939-45 The Holocaust.
- 1941 Baghdad: Jewish community attacked by mobs, 200 killed.
- 1946 Kielce, Poland: 37 Jews massacred and 80 wounded.
- 1948 May 14. State of Israel declared.
- 1967 The six-day war.
- 1970's International terror attacks. Lod airport massacre. Munich Olympics massacre. Entebbe hostage taking. State sponsored persecution in the Soviet Union.
- 1973 Yom Kippur attack by Syria and Egypt.
- 1979-1980 Iranian Jews persecuted by Islamic Republic of Iran.

Chapter 7. The woe trumpets sound

John's vision (Revelation 8:13 to 9:1-21)

After the first four trumpets had sounded, John sees an eagle flying overhead crying with a loud voice 'Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth'. The woes are the blasts of trumpets five, six and seven.

When the fifth trumpet sounds, John sees a star which had fallen from heaven who was given the key to the bottomless pit. The star opens the pit and smoke emerges, and with the smoke a locust invasion. With the exception of those sealed by God, the inhabitants affected by the locusts are tormented for five months. The sixth trumpet blast heralds a command from the golden altar in the Temple to release the four angels who are bound by the river Euphrates. An invasion of 200,000,000 mounted troops results. A third of mankind was killed in the battle but the remainder did not repent of the works of their hands.

The woe trumpets as a sequence

In the previous chapter we attempted to show that the trumpet visions represent God's dealings with Israel, his Old Covenant people. The seven trumpets are presented as a set of four followed by a set of three, and John's symbolic use of the number four (related to earth), suggests that as with the four horsemen (seals), the first four trumpet events are not specifically linked with any specific geographical area or to any specific time; in fact, we have interpreted the first four trumpets as events affecting the various elements of the Jewish diaspora from AD 70 up to modern times. The final three of both the seals and trumpets have a more forward looking focus. The final three seals look forward to the revealing of the sealed people of God when Christ returns. We will suggest that the three woe trumpets relate to events leading up to the sounding of the seventh trumpet (which is itself the third woe trumpet), because when this trumpet sounds, 'the kingdom of

this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ' (Rev. 11:15). The first two 'woes' are fearsome invasions. Trumpet five is an invasion of a locust hoard patterned on Joel's visions concerning the Day of the Lord (Joel 1 and 2), and trumpet six a large army which originates from beyond the Euphrates. Trumpet seven is the establishment of Christ as King in Jerusalem. The term 'woe' (Gk: *ouai*) is an exclamation of grief which is translated 'alas' in Revelation 18. It suggests that these trumpet calls will cause greater distress to the people involved (both Jews and Gentiles) than was the case with the first four trumpets.

In the text of Revelation, the three woe trumpets form a sequence. The end of the first woe trumpet (the fifth trumpet) is indicated by John with the words, 'the first woe is passed; behold two woes are still to come' (Rev. 9:12). The sixth trumpet then begins at Revelation 9:13, and many commentators suggest that John's account of it ends at the end of that chapter (Revelation 9:21). However, the seventh and final trumpet is Revelation 11:15-19, so that the passage between the sixth and the seventh trumpets (Revelation 10:1 to 11:14) would seem to be an 'interlude' in the same way that Revelation 7 is usually thought of as an interlude between the sixth and the seventh seal. However, in discussing the seal sequence we took the view that Revelation 7 was in fact, the proper termination of the sixth seal. In the case of the trumpets, we propose to regard Revelation 10 (the rainbowed angel) and 11:1-14 (the two witnesses) as the climax of the sixth trumpet. In fact, John seems to indicate as much, because in the last verse of this section (Rev. 11:14), John writes, 'the second woe has passed, behold the third woe is soon to come'. In this way, he makes the ministries of the rainbowed angel and of the two witnesses continuations of the sixth trumpet; these are the necessary events which bring the trumpet sequence to the point where the seventh trumpet can be sounded.

What is the purpose of the woe trumpets?

The woe trumpets describe symbolically that divinely controlled sequence of events which will end with the Lord Jesus Christ becoming king in Jerusalem. We suggest that a critical part of this

process involves convincing the Jewish people to recognise Jesus as their Messiah. What reason is there for thinking this? Jesus' own reaction to the failure of his mission at the time of his first coming provides the clearest indication. The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem was an enactment of Zechariah's prophecy foretelling the arrival of the King (Zech. 9:9). As such, it was a demonstration to the people of his day that Jesus was destined to be their future King. The onlookers were enthusiastic as they watched Jesus ride into Jerusalem on a donkey (Matt. 21:9). They voiced their enthusiasm using words borrowed from the Psalms, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (Psa. 118:26). But the Triumphal Entry came to nothing – Jesus did not become King, and the Kingdom of which he had spoken, did not happen. Although the people had been enthusiastic in their welcome of their future King, the Jewish rulers were certainly not; even as the Triumphal Entry was taking place, they were plotting to kill him. Matthew records Jesus' judgement of the Jewish leadership in a series of 'woes' (Matt. 23). Immediately afterwards he goes on to record Jesus' lament over Jerusalem:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” (Matt. 23:37-39)

Christ had been rejected by the leaders of his own people. He tells them in no uncertain terms that they would not see him again **until** they were able to apply words of Psalm 118 to him and really mean what they said. The key word here is 'until'; it is a word which implies not only a need for the people who once rejected him to undergo a change of heart, but more significantly, it is a promise that such a change of heart would actually happen. And since the seventh trumpet heralds the reign of Christ as King, this change of heart has to occur before the seventh trumpet sounds. Peter virtually says as

much when addressing his Jewish audience in the Temple shortly after the day of Pentecost:

“But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.” (Acts 3:18-21)

In our review of the woe trumpet sequence therefore, our main objective is to assess the nature of the events which will convince Israel to accept Christ as their Messiah. To do this, we will begin with an examination of the detail of John’s vision of the fifth trumpet (the first woe). We shall then attempt to relate the features of this vision to historical fact, by seeing how well the predicted events fit into what we know of Jewish history. In the remainder of this chapter we shall consider the opening events of the sixth trumpet (up to the end of Revelation 9), before, in the following chapter, considering the ministry of the rainbowed angel and that of the two witnesses (Rev. 10 and 11).

The first woe trumpet

“And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth”. (Rev 9:1-3)

The imagery of the fifth and six trumpets is complex and detailed. The fifth trumpet involves a star having fallen from heaven to earth. We observed a ‘shooting’ star falling from heaven as a result of the third trumpet blast. There, we suggested that this ‘shooting star’

represented the leadership of the nation of Israel who had been poisoned by the ‘wormwood’ of mistaken national pride. In the fifth trumpet, the consequences of the fallen star’s actions are altogether more serious; the star is given the key to the bottomless pit, and when the bottomless pit is opened, smoke emerges filled with locusts. To be consistent, the symbol of the star should be interpreted as some kind of national leader. This leader would be a ‘fallen’ star because as we suggested in the previous chapter, since AD 70, and even since the formation of the nation of Israel in 1948, the Jewish people have been a nation whose status is that of having fallen from God’s figurative ‘heaven’ – they are not, as a nation, in fellowship with him. But who is this fallen star, and why should a Jewish leader (the star) be given a key which would unleash such a swarm of destructive locusts on his own nation. Let us consider first what John tells us about the locusts

The locusts

There is some considerable descriptive detail of the appearance of these locusts in Revelation 9:5-10 – scorpion stings in their tails, horses with golden crowns on their heads, human faces, women’s hair, lion’s teeth, breastplates of iron, beating wings sounding like chariots and horses rushing into battle. It doesn’t seem helpful to attempt to interpret this detail – it is a description by John of a visually complex scene. Some commentators see this as an actual locust invasion, but it is much more likely that it represents a fearful attack in which the country (Israel) is overrun by an enemy. There are two impressive Old Testament examples of John’s locust imagery. The first is the attack on Israel in the time of the Judges. In the days of Gideon, Israel suffered regular attacks by surrounding nations. These attacks are described as follows:

“They (Midian) would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number—both they and their camels could not be counted—so that they laid waste the land as they came in.” (Jdg. 6:4-5)

When the people cried out to the Lord about the oppressors, he provided a deliverer – in this case, Gideon. In fact, the repeated cycle of events in the time of the Judges provides a powerful example of God’s strategy in dealing with his people. The people turn their backs on God, and as a result they are oppressed by their enemies; in their distress they turn to him for deliverance, and when they do, he sends a saviour. The important point to note however is that only when the people can see no means of delivering themselves by their own efforts are they prepared to recognise their need for God. It is what Moses warned them of in his ‘song’:

“For the LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free. Then he will say, ‘Where are their gods, the rock in which they took refuge, who ate the fat of their sacrifices and drank the wine of their drink offering? Let them rise up and help you; let them be your protection!’”.
(Deut. 32:36-38)

In order for God to deliver Israel, the people have to have exhausted their own defensive resources and reached rock bottom. Relying on their own ‘gods’, or their own powers, will not bring deliverance.

The other Old Testament reference to a locust invasion is to be found in the prophecy of Joel:

“What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten”. (Joel 1:4)

It is a national calamity – a plague of locusts. But again, Joel is not speaking of literal locusts, he is reflecting on the effects of an aggressor – probably Assyria or Babylon in collaboration with the local nations round about Israel. The date of Joel is unknown, so we do not know precisely who the aggressor was. But Joel calls for a day of national repentance and of asking God for help:

Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD. ... Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near ...” (Joel 1:14, 2:1)

The prophecy goes on to describe in dramatic terms an invasion using language not dissimilar to that of the fifth trumpet. Assuming then, that the various locust invasions from Israel’s past history are in some sense a pattern for the invasion of the fifth trumpet, it seems likely that the locusts are aggressors arising from local nations, Israel’s ancient enemies.

The destroyer from the bottomless pit

Identifying a specific aggressor is problematic; it seems likely to be a consortium of nations. The bottomless pit (Gk: *abussos* - abyss) from where the aggressors emerge is not an identifiable location. It is the place where the pigs in Jesus cleansing of Legion were sent (Luke 8:31); it is also the place where the deceptive evils of the world will be constrained during the Millennial age (Rev. 20:3). This consortium of nations has a king over them, designated by John as the angel of the bottomless pit; his name is ‘the destroyer’ given by John in both Hebrew and Greek (Rev. 9:11). The ‘angel’ here is not a supernatural agent, but merely a label conveying the idea that the message the aggressors bring is one of enmity and destruction (the term angel (*aggelos*) meaning messenger). There have been many nations throughout the history of Israel who have wanted to destroy Israel and occupy its land. Psalm 83 is explicit:

“For behold, your enemies make an uproar; those who hate you have raised their heads. They lay crafty plans against your people; they consult together against your treasured ones. They say, “Come, let us wipe them out as a nation; let the name of Israel be remembered no more!” (Psa. 83:2-4)

Ezekiel includes a prophecy addressed to the ‘mountains of Israel’ (Eze. 36), in which God condemns those who have taken delight in occupying Israel’s ancient heights and in which he promises to act on Israel’s behalf:

“Therefore prophesy concerning the land of Israel, and say to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I have spoken in my jealous wrath, because you have suffered the reproach of the nations. Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: I swear that the nations that are all around you shall themselves suffer reproach”. (Eze 36:6-7)

Invasions of the kind we are suggesting would hardly have been considered by the original recipients of John’s prophecy because Israel as a nation did not exist; but they are familiar to us in modern times. The war of Israel’s independence following the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948 when the land was overrun by a consortium of Arab states is the prime example – a fact we shall return to shortly. It is also worth bearing in mind that we will meet the aggressor of the fifth trumpet again in the later stages of the work of the two witnesses (Rev. 11) where it is called the ‘beast from the bottomless pit’ – of which more later.

As with the first four trumpets, the consequences of the fifth trumpet are partial. The locusts (unlike real locusts) were ordered not to harm grass, green plant or tree, but only those who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads (Rev. 9:4). The green growths presumably represent the sealed people, who are the true believers who are living in Israel at the time. Exactly how they will be protected from the power of the locusts is not clear. But those who fall prey to the locusts will be tormented for limited period of five months (Rev. 9:5-6). The number five does not seem to have any particular significance in Revelation, so that this probably indicates a period of considerable ferocity but of relatively short duration.

The 'woe' trumpets in Israel's history

It would considerably strengthen our view that the trumpet sequence concerns Israel, if we could match the trumpet events with some indications of Israel's future history in God's plans for them. Ezekiel's prophecies make some quite specific statements about Israel's future which should help us in this respect. Ezekiel 20 is a commentary on Israel's failure in Old Testament times to live up to their calling as the people of God. But God refuses to give them up; he says:

“And I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face. As I entered into judgment with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you, declares the Lord GOD. I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant.” (Eze. 20:35-37)

We have taken the view that the first four trumpets represent God bringing the people of Israel into the wilderness of the people and entering into judgement with them there. But promises God, there is more to come; they will have to 'pass under the rod'. Somewhat later in his ministry, Ezekiel adds further prophetic detail which take the history of Israel forward to the kingdom age (Eze. 37:1-14). God takes Ezekiel to see a valley full of dry bones, and he is told that these bones are the whole house of Israel. The prophecy itself however, proceeds in distinct phases as follows:

1. Eze. 37:1-6. The valley is full of bones, and the bones are 'very dry'. Ezekiel is challenged to say whether these bones can ever come to life, and it would appear that Ezekiel is reluctant to offer a view. This suggests that that Ezekiel believes the bones can only recover if God empowers the recovery. He is then commanded to prophesy to the bones.
2. Eze. 37:7-8. He prophesies for the first time. The bones come together with sinews, flesh and skin; but there is no breath in them, they are a dead army.
3. Eze. 37: 9-14. He prophesies for the second time, and the

breath enters them and they stand up as an exceedingly great army. God has opened their graves and put his spirit within them; they have been resurrected.

4. Eze. 37: 15-28. The divided Israel are to be reunited and cleansed of sin to become God's people. God's servant David (Christ) will be their King and shepherd. And God will make a covenant of peace with them.

It seems appropriate to take phase 1 of the above sequence as corresponding to the first four trumpet period. After AD 70, God certainly did bring Israel into the wilderness of the nations, where they were in effect, the 'bones' of the Jewish nation – and these bones have been 'very dry' for nearly two centuries. There have been no national movements in this time whose objectives were to return the nation to God or to recognise Jesus as Messiah, just as first four trumpet appeals in Revelation go unheeded. But regardless of this lack of response, God regathers them into their own land to enter the second phase (above) of Ezekiel's prophecy. And we can be precise about the details and the timing of this regathering. In May 1948 Israel became an independent state with David Ben-Gurion as its prime minister. This would be the first time since AD 70 that Israel could claim to be a nation, and it is the crucial event which marks the transition between phases 1 and 2 of Ezekiel's prophecy. It also marks the transition between the end of the period of the first four trumpets and the events of the fifth trumpet.

If the foregoing assessment is accepted as reasonable, it becomes possible to give historic details to the fifth trumpet events. The 'fallen star' referred to in the fifth trumpet as the initiator of the locust invasion, would be David Ben-Gurion, and the 'key' he was given to the bottomless pit would correspond to the opportunity that he had, following difficult political manoeuvres, to declare Israel an independent state. The political consequences of the declaration of the state of Israel were immediate. Five Arab states (Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon) invaded the new state like a swarm of locusts – the fifth trumpet was sounding. And it continued sounding, because the Arab-Israel war of 1948 was followed by the six-day war of 1967,

and the Yom-Kippur war of 1973. Moreover, these wars between Arab and Israeli forces do not necessarily exhaust all the conflicts predicted by the fifth trumpet. Arab-Israeli antagonism continues, and it is quite possible that the fifth trumpet has not yet stopped sounding. The key to the first Arab-Israeli war was the declaration of the state of Israel. But the political sensitivity of the area is so great that it's not difficult to envisage other 'keys', especially initiatives related to Jerusalem or the Temple Mount, wielded by other 'stars', precipitating dramatic conflicts in Israel.

It is notable however, that the people of Israel have been very successful in defending themselves in these various conflicts – indeed at present, they are one of the strongest powers in the middle-east region. The condition Moses suggested would have to apply before Israel turned to God for support ('when their power was gone') has certainly not applied to the Arab-Israeli wars so far. And this would seem to make a national appeal by them to God for help unlikely in present circumstances (Deut. 32:36). Indeed, Israel's military strength at present is such that it's difficult to see how they could be brought to recognise their need to call upon God as their deliverer. There is certainly no indication that the fifth trumpet (or the invasion of the sixth) produce this kind of response.

Moving forward

But let us return to the phases of the prophecy set out above to see what Ezekiel tells us to expect regarding the future of Israel. We have suggested that Phase 2 relates to the time when Israel has been regathered and is a nation state one more. But according to Ezekiel it is a state made up of dead people – there is no spiritual life in them. This we suggest is the spiritual state of Israel throughout the fifth trumpet and into the first part of the sixth trumpet periods. But phase 3 of Ezekiel's prophecy (above) tells us that Israel is to be brought to life when God puts his spirit in them – they are to be resurrected, which means presumably that their relationship with God and the Lord Jesus Christ will be restored. We must expect therefore, moving forward in the trumpet sequence, that the sixth trumpet (including the ministries of

the rainbowed angel and the two witnesses) will result in the spiritual resurrection of Israel who will then be prepared to acknowledge Christ as their Messiah. Then as phase 4 of Ezekiel's prophecy (above) reveals, this resurrection will be followed by national unity, the appointment of a King, and a new covenant of peace. The King will not of course be the king David of the Old Testament, but David's greater son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And we will see that this is precisely the outcome which corresponds to the sounding of the seventh trumpet. But now, we must return to consider the details of the sixth trumpet.

The sixth trumpet

“Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, ‘Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.’ So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number.” (Rev 9:13-16)

The effect of sounding the sixth trumpet is that four angels who stand ready for this precise moment (the hour, the day, the month and the year) are commanded by a voice from the horns of the golden altar to release forces bound at the great river Euphrates – these are forces which obviously were not involved in the locust invasion of the fifth trumpet. Since we are assuming that the trumpet visions relate to Israel, the sixth trumpet invasion will be an attack on Israel by a significantly larger force than the one described in the fifth trumpet. The number of the mounted troops is given explicitly as twice 10,000 times 10,000 – numbers not to be taken literally but which simply indicate a large and powerful force. Once again as in the case of the fifth trumpet aggressor, John gives us details of the characteristics of this army. He sees riders on horses who were wearing impressively illuminated breastplates (of fire, sapphire and sulphur) and whose horses had lions heads breathing out fire, smoke and sulphur. The

power of the horses was in their mouths and they had tails which were like vicious serpents (Rev. 9:17-19). Although it would certainly be possible to see in these images a visual impression of modern warfare, it seems better to simply accept that John is describing of a fearsome battle in terms that would have been familiar to him and his readers at the time. The details of the aggressors is unimportant, what matters is what they achieve.

The facts we are given about the origin of this force are limited; it was initiated by a command from the golden incense altar, and it involved a release of forces at or beyond the River Euphrates. We noted in the previous chapter that the golden altar was featured in the introduction to the trumpets and the incense offered there represented the prayers of the saints. The sixth trumpet command however, would seem to have little to do directly with the saintly prayers, but comes from the four horns of the altar – and horns in scripture stand for strength. God is turning up the pressure. Even so, coming from the altar of incense suggests that the purpose of the command is still basically one of compassion and deliverance; God wants his people to take notice. Like the earlier trumpets this invasion though it will be traumatic for those involved it will not mean total destruction – only ‘a third of mankind’ will be killed (Rev. 9:15, 18).

The aggressors come from beyond the River Euphrates. The river Euphrates was the northern boundary of the land promised by God to Abraham (Gen. 15:18, Deut. 11:24) and the northern boundary of Israel’s actual Kingdom in Solomon’s time (1 Kings 4:21). It was also the boundary between Israel and the oppressor nations Assyria and Babylon in Old Testament times. At the time John wrote Revelation the river Euphrates (or at least part of it) was the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire, and to the east of the river was the powerful Parthian empire regarded by Rome as a threat. In modern times to the east of the river Euphrates are Iraq and Iran – in fact, Parthians and Iranians come from the same stock. It would appear therefore that the sixth trumpet may be predicting a dramatic invasion of Israel from its eastern neighbours. The question is, will such an invasion bring Israel

to the point where they will feel the necessity of turning to God for help? The trumpet vision's answer is clear:

“The rest of mankind (or of the people) who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts”. (Rev 9:20-21)

The consequences of the sixth trumpet invasion were to be limited (to one third), but even those who were not affected, did not repent. It would appear that these survivors did not feel that they needed to turn to God, but were content to rely on 'their own gods'. The passage describing these 'gods' is remarkable – gods of gold, silver, bronze, wood and stone and the immoralities that went with such worship. It is as though John is deliberately referring to the gods which caused the downfall of Babylon (Dan. 5:4). And Daniel's assessment on Belshazzar's commitment to these 'gods' is very relevant:

“... but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honoured”. (Dan 5:23)

The condemnation of Belshazzar was that they were using the sacred vessels of the Jewish Temple to 'toast' the gods of Babylon. Daniel was shortly to read the 'writing on the wall'. He would tell Belshazzar that God had found him wanting and that the Kingdom he thought to be indestructible, was about to be handed over to others. The gods of this world however impressive – gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood or stone – were not able to save him. In the military sphere of today the reliance on modern weapons including nuclear weapons may turn out to be a reliance on false gods. Modern Israel must have one of the

best equipped defence forces in the Middle East – why should they even consider calling on divine resources when faced with a threat from a neighbour, they had dealt successfully with all such onslaughts in the past!.

So, if Israel's defences once again withstand the aggressor from beyond the Euphrates, how will the Old Covenant people of God be persuaded to turn to him and to recognise Jesus as Messiah? We move on to the revelation of the rainbowed angel. As we do so however, it is worth remembering that although the invasions of the fifth and sixth trumpets did not elicit any response from the Jewish community in Israel, they would certainly have devastated the country itself. The work of the rainbowed angel and the two witnesses in Revelation 10 and 11 has to be set against such a situation.

Chapter 8. Israel – the turning point

John's visions (Revelation 10:1 to 11:14)

After John hears that the sixth trumpet invasion has not brought a response from the Jewish people, he sees a mighty angel descend from heaven with a small scroll in his hand. The angel calls out with a loud voice, and seven thunders sound which John is told not to record. He is also told that there would be no more delay because when the seventh trumpet sounds the mystery of God would be fulfilled.

John is told to take and eat the little scroll and to prophesy. He then measures the Temple of God and the worshippers. Two witnesses dressed in sackcloth with awesome powers are commissioned. When they have finished prophesying they are killed by the beast from the bottomless pit and their bodies lie in the city street while their enemies rejoice. After three and a half days they are miraculously brought to life and they ascend to heaven. There is a great earthquake and those not killed in the earthquake give glory to the God of heaven. The sixth 'woe' is thereby ended.

The rainbowed angel

We have been taking the view in this commentary that the sounding of the trumpets represents God working to restore the relationship between the Jewish people and himself. More specifically, we have suggested that the fifth and sixth trumpet invasions were intended to reveal to Israel their need for God as their defender, and to persuade them to turn to Christ as Messiah and saviour. So far, we have seen that neither the fifth trumpet nor the first part of the sixth trumpet – the invasion from beyond the Euphrates – resulted in any response of Israel towards God (Rev. 9:21).

John now sees ‘another’ mighty angel descend from heaven to earth (Rev. 10:1):

“Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. When he called out, the seven thunders sounded”.
(Rev 10:1-3)

We have already encountered a ‘mighty’ angel who asked the question, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seal’ (Rev. 5:2). John now sees a different mighty angel, one it would seem, he wants us to recognise. This angel’s face is like the sun and his legs are like pillars of fire; he has a cloud wrapped around him (Gk: *periballo* – literally, thrown around him). John’s description is surely intended to remind us of the angel who guided Israel out of Egypt at the time of the Exodus, sometimes referred to as the angel of the presence (or face) of God (Exo. 33:14). The brightly lit face and the fiery legs of the angel when wrapped in a cloud would be seen by Israel as a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night (Ex. 13:21-22). On his head was a rainbow like the one John had seen covering the one seated on the throne in the heavenly Temple and recalling God’s covenant with Noah (Rev. 4:3). This was particularly relevant to Israel as God says through the prophet:

“This is like the days of Noah to me: as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,’ says the LORD, who has compassion on you.” (Isa. 54:9-10)

In a very real sense, the task of the angel of the presence in the years following the Exodus was not fully completed. Despite the glories of

the years of David and Solomon, the land of Israel was never quite the 'land flowing with milk and honey' envisioned in the promise made by God at the burning bush (Exo. 3:8). That being the case, the argument of the writer to the Hebrews that 'there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God' applies just as much to the Old Testament people of God as it does to the New Testament church (Heb. 4:1-9). In Revelation 10 and 11, the unfinished task of the angel of the presence will be completed. It also makes a lot of Biblical sense to link the ministry of the rainbowed angel with the role of the archangel Michael mentioned in Daniel:

“At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.” (Dan 12:1)

The archangel Michael's responsibility was to guide Israel through a 'time of trouble' the like of which they had not seen before. The cryptic time periods of Daniel – three and a half 'times' (years) and 1260 days – also feature in the ministry of the witnesses. Indeed, it seems likely that the events of Revelation 10 and 11 which bring the sixth trumpet to its conclusion is actually a vision covering the time of Israel's trouble, out of which the people will be delivered.

The seven thunders

The mighty angel has a little scroll open in his hand. This is not the same scroll as John saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne (Rev. 5:1) – not only is it a 'little' scroll (Gk: *bibliaridion*) but it is open (unsealed). It is clear however that this little scroll contains a vital message which the angel initiates by calling out 'like a lion roaring'. It is possible that in this roaring call John is telling us who the message is from, by reminding us of the title given to Christ earlier as 'the lion of Judah' (Rev. 5:5); more likely however, it is a reference to the urgency and power behind the message (Amos 3:8). Whatever the reason, the result is that seven thunders sound. John was about to

record what he heard but he is commanded not to do so; instead he is told to seal up the message of the thunders! What are these thunders and what part do they play in the events about to be disclosed? The honest answer is we don't know. What does seem clear however, is that the seven thunders are not an independent series of sevens like the 'seals' or the 'trumpets' since they are a complete set within the sixth trumpet. We have previously seen 'thunders' together with other natural phenomena as signifying God in action. However, thunder is quite often a representation of the voice of God, and it seems likely that the seven thunders John heard were spoken words capable of being written down. Thus the Psalmist writes:

"The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters". (Psa. 29:3)

Remarkably this Psalm includes seven thunders – the voice of God is mentioned exactly seven times. It's a Psalm which is certainly relevant to the need for Israel to recognise its King; it concludes as follows:

"The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever. May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!" (Psa. 29:10-11)

Some have suggested that the thunders represent future judgements which were cancelled by God as unnecessary or ineffective. This is of course possible, but it seems more likely that the thunders were a positive part of the rainbowed angel's message which, at the command of God, was 'sealed' – i.e. not made available to the readers of Revelation. Psalm 81 offers an intriguing insight into a God who 'thunders', and it is a Psalm which is relevant to the trumpet sequence since it was probably written for the feast of Trumpets (Ps. 81:3). Of Israel's Exodus and wilderness journey the Psalmist writes:

"In distress you called, and I delivered you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder; I tested you at the waters of Meribah". (Psa. 81:7)

Meribah was the place at which, during the wilderness journey, the people complained to God about the lack of drinking water; they were effectively asking ‘is the LORD among us or not?’ (Exo. 17:7). The ‘secret place of thunder’ was either Sinai where the covenant was given or more likely a reference to the power of God manifested by the angel of God’s presence (Exo. 14:24-25). It was ‘secret’ because Israel failed to perceive the source of this power – they were too wrapped up in their own concerns. In fact, the whole Psalm is a plea for Israel to listen to God. This insight from the Psalm suggests that the thunders could well be divine words of judgement or of appeal to Israel which it was God’s wish not to reveal at this point. In view of the fact that God’s words are never spoken without consequence (Is. 55:11), it is likely that the thunders do in fact play a significant role in the events leading up to the seventh trumpet, even though the actual words have not been revealed to us.

No more delay

The sealing of the thunders might have suggested to John that the execution of God’s plan was to be delayed. The rainbowed angel however, now swears with upraised hand that there will be no more delay:

“And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, there would be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.”
(Rev 10:5-7)

God’s purposes with Israel and through them with the world will move rapidly to a conclusion once the seventh trumpet has sounded, for then the mystery of God will be fulfilled. The term ‘mystery’ (Gk: *musterion*) basically means something hidden, but as the above verse indicates the particular ‘mystery’ referred to here is one which is no longer

hidden but which has been announced by the prophets of old – it is the redemption of Israel and the establishment of the kingdom of Christ on earth. The angel's action, standing on sea and land with upraised arm is in effect an oath which gives reassurance to John (and to us) that God controls events on earth (both land and sea) and that he will surely bring his purpose to its planned conclusion. Historically, this action of the angel reflects the promise of God through Moses when he swore to take vengeance on the enemies of Israel and to cleanse his land and his people (Deuteronomy 32:40-43). It also reflects the authoritative action of the man clothed with linen in Daniel's prophecy as he speaks about the time when the shattering of the holy people will come to an end (Daniel 12:7). Both of these earlier oaths are relevant to the situation envisaged in Revelation 10 as the rainbowed angel reaffirms that the climax of God's purpose through Israel approaches.

John's commission

John is now told to take the scroll from the hand of the angel and to eat it:

“So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, ‘Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.’ And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter.” (Rev 10:9-10)

John at this point is being commissioned to become a participant in the action. He is to become a prophet, and the book in the hand of the rainbowed angel represents the prophecy he is to first assimilate and then deliver. The commissioning process follows the same pattern as that of Ezekiel (2:9 - 3:3). John takes the scroll and eats it, and just as in Ezekiel's experience, in his mouth the scroll tasted as sweet as honey, but after eating it, his stomach was made bitter. The word of God would probably always strike a true prophet as being sweet to the taste, but its outworking often involves bitterness both for the prophet himself and for those to whom he prophesies. Two questions arise:

who does the prophet John here represent, and to whom will this prophet be prophesying?

John as an Apostle (meaning one sent), could represent a Christian individual who is raised up specifically to deliver a message shortly before the coming of Christ. It seems more likely however, that John represents the New Testament church. We have already seen that the 'saints' are to become 'prayer warriors' for the trumpet sequence (Rev. 8:3), and it is entirely logical for the church as a whole to play a prophetic role in God's future purposes for Israel. We shall find out soon what the message is, but before we do, we need to consider who the target audience was intended to be. John was told clearly that he must prophesy about (or to?) 'many peoples and nations and languages and kings'. This is a unique variant of John's four-fold identification of the world's inhabitants – he has substituted 'kings' in place of 'tribes'. Perhaps one should not read too much into small verbal differences which may be simply stylistic, but this particular change does suggest that the message is intended to be addressed to the rulers of the nations (kings). And there's little doubt, as the later visions of Revelation will show, that the establishment of Christ as king in Israel will have a far-reaching effect on the world's nations.

The message

“And I was told, ‘You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings’. Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, ‘Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there ...’” (Rev 10:11 - 11:1)

In the passage above the chapter division has been omitted to make the link between John's angelic instruction to prophesy and what immediately follows more direct. John is told to measure the temple (Gk: *naos* – the sanctuary) and the altar and to measure (or count) the worshippers there. What is the significance of these measurements? To view the Temple of his prophecy, Ezekiel was taken to a high vantage point from which he sees the Temple being measured by a

man with a measuring rod (Ezekiel 40 et seq.). Later in Revelation John also sees an angel with a golden reed in his hand measuring the New Jerusalem – also from a high vantage point. In both cases, the prophets were shown these measurements being made to give them assurance that the structures so measured would really be a part of God's future plan. An illuminating example of this principle is Zechariah's vision of the man with the measuring line in his hand who was on his way to measure Jerusalem. It became clear when Zechariah enquired, that the process of measurement was intended to give assurance to the returned exiles that although Jerusalem was then in ruins, it would be rebuilt bigger and better (Zech. 2:4-5).

But why was John told to measure not just the temple but also the altar and the worshippers? From a Christian perspective we understand that the true temple of God is not the building but the worshippers (1Cor. 3:16). And yet in this sixth trumpet vision John is told to measure what we might call the 'hardware' of worship (temple and altar) in addition to the worshippers. This suggests that John's prophecy is concerned not merely with the community of believers but also with the physical components of the means of worship.

In Jewish thinking these physical aspects were a vital part of the Jewish approach to God, and they had become even more important for the future of Jewish worship since the second temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. That being the case, it would not be unreasonable to see the angel's instructions to John as indicating that some form of traditional Jewish worship is to be re-established in the future kingdom age. The angel's words do not necessarily imply an immediate change to Jewish worship before the return of Christ, like for example, the building of a third Temple, but they do suggest that the Christian-church has a prophetic role to convey to the world (peoples and nations and languages and kings) that such a change in the Jewish approach to God is to be a part of the divine plan. The positive aspect of John's prophetic briefing is reinforced by the following negative:

“... but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations (Gk: ethnos), and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months.” (Rev 11:2)

The Greek word ‘*ethnos*’ is sometimes translated ‘Gentile’, so that the outer court referred to above may well refer to that outer court in Herod’s Temple called ‘the court of the Gentiles’. In the Tabernacle, and in Solomon’s Temple, there was no court of the Gentiles, but Herod in his rebuild of the second Temple added a separate outer court accessible to all races. If therefore the angel’s instruction to measure the temple signifies assurance about reinstatement of Jewish forms of worship, the instruction not to measure the outer court would indicate that whatever form this reinstated worship takes, it would be purely Jewish. It is also clear that the order not to measure the outer court – i.e. to exclude Gentiles – is linked with the future of Jerusalem (the holy city) which is to be ‘trampled’ by the nations (Gentiles) for the apocalyptic period of 42 months (Rev. 11:2). The phrase ‘trampled on’ (or ‘trodden down’) by the nations (Gentiles) reflects Jesus’ own words in Luke’s account of the Mt. Olivet prophecy. There Jesus says that Jerusalem will be ‘trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled’ (Luke 21:24).

The context of Luke 21 suggests that the trampling of Jerusalem began with the Roman destruction of the city in AD70. But the word ‘until’ also tells us that the trampling will come to an end, and Luke makes it clear that the end will coincide with signs in the sun, moon and stars which will herald the coming of the Son of Man. There are of course, those who would say that the ‘trampling of the holy city’ came to an end in 1967 when Israel took control of Jerusalem. However, the situation in Jerusalem at the present time, particularly the occupation of the Temple mount by Islamic shrines, surely indicates that the times of the Gentiles are not yet over. And indeed, since the part of Revelation we are currently considering follows two extensive invasions by Gentile nations (the fifth and sixth trumpets) it would appear likely that the treading down of Jerusalem will continue until Israel is delivered from its enemies by the return of Christ.

The ministry of the two witnesses

We began this evaluation of the extended sixth 'woe' by suggesting that the events predicted by this trumpet would result in Israel turning to God and recognising Christ as their Messiah. So far there has been little evidence of this happening. We do not know what the thunders will achieve, and the commission to John about the temple though it may be congenial to Jewish worshippers, does not directly proclaim Christ as Messiah. So how will Israel be brought to Christ? Looking forward a few verses it is clear that the conversion which occurs at the end of the sixth trumpet (Revelation 11:13) does not come as a result of the preaching of John but as a result of the ministry of the two witnesses.

We must first consider why these individuals are referred to as 'witnesses' (Gk: *martus*) and why are there two of them. Three aspects of the role of witnesses seem relevant:

- Under the law of Moses, to establish the legal acceptability of evidence, a minimum of two witnesses was required (Deut. 19:15). The witnesses would then give their testimony (Gk: *marturia*) as though in a court of law.
- Describing these individuals as 'witnesses' forges a significant link with God's stated relationship to his people in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 43 the prophet tells us that God assembles a court of the nations and calls Israel as a witness. He makes some very strong statements about his relationship to Israel: they are precious in his eyes, and honoured, and he loves them and he will re-gather them from the nations (Isa. 43:4-6). In this treatment God tells them, they are unique. Through the prophet he challenges the other nations to demonstrate that they too are recipients of such treatment – but, of course, they cannot. And the fact that Israel has been treated in this way is a witness to all nations that God is both their God and their saviour. This prophetic background stands behind the sixth trumpet witnesses; they are a reminder of the

special place Israel occupies in God's sight and in his purposes for them.

- John in his introduction describes Christ as 'the faithful witness' (Rev. 1:5). His faithfulness as a witness (Gk: *martus*) refers to the fact that he witnessed to the saving purpose of God even to death. In doing so, he became a 'martyr' and he revealed the quality which will be shared in various degrees by all those who aspire to be witnesses for Christ. The related word 'testimony' (*marturia*) is also a term descriptive of the response of the followers of Christ to his victory over the dragon (Rev. 12:11). And the witnesses we are currently considering are individuals who are ready to witness to their people as Christ himself witnessed – by dying.

The role of the 'witnesses' therefore was to provide a legally binding witness to the truth of God in the eyes of those to whom they witnessed, and to do so by demonstrating that they are prepared to witness (testify) to the truth of God's salvation if necessary, by dying.

So what does John tell us about these witnesses?

- They witness for 1260 days clothed in the sackcloth of repentance (Revelation 11:3).
- They preach with power supported by miraculous signs, and are protected by God for the duration of their ministry (Revelation 11: 5-6).
- When their ministry is completed (but not before) they are killed by the beast from the bottomless pit and they lie dead in the street of the city 'where their Lord was crucified' for 3½ days (Revelation 11:7-8).
- They are brought to life again, and taken up into heaven in a cloud (Revelation 11:11-12).

We observed in the introduction to this commentary that the time periods of 42 months and 1260 days are identical and that it is unclear whether they are intended to be taken literally or as a figure symbolising a period of persecution and trouble. It's not even clear

whether the 42 months the Holy City is trampled down (Rev. 11:2) and the 1260 day ministry of the two witnesses (Rev. 11:3) is the same 3½ year period – though they are both likely to occur at about the same time historically. Rather than interpreting these periods of time as specific literal periods, the most reasonable view is to assume that they represent relatively short periods of distress after which God's dealings with his people will be completed.

Who are the witnesses?

We need now to consider the identities of the witnesses. They are described as the two olive trees and the two lampstands which stand before the Lord of all the earth – images drawn from one of Zechariah's visions (Zechariah 4). The purpose of Zechariah's visions were to re-vitalise the people of Israel during the time the second Temple was being built. Zechariah sees a golden lampstand. On the top of the lampstand was a bowl which collected oil from two olive trees standing on either side of it; the oil presumably powered the lamps. The lampstand represented Israel, the light of whose lamps were to be maintained by the oil (spirit) coming from the olive trees. Zechariah is told that the two olive trees – or more precisely the two branches which supply the oil – were the anointed ones who stand by the Lord of all the earth (Zech. 4:14). In Israel, both kings and priests were anointed, and in Zechariah's day the two active olive branches would have been Zerubbabel the Governor (a member of the Davidic line) and Joshua the High Priest. The functions of king and priest are key roles in the governance of Israel; the two offices are intended to maintain a divinely ordained balance between practical government and the religious awareness of the people. The witnesses in John's vision are empowered with divine authority (Rev. 11:3). They are unlikely to be the actual government in Israel after the fifth and sixth trumpet invasions; they are more likely to be advisers to whatever residual government exists at the time. The witnesses are not equipped for either a kingly role or a priestly one; they are dressed in the sackcloth of contrition and repentance. Nevertheless they are imbued with the spirit of God just as the leaders in Zechariah's day had been – 'not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of

hosts' (Zech. 4:6). In fact, the witnesses come as successors to Moses and Elijah performing miraculous signs.

“And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed. They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire”. (Rev 11:5-6)

It is tempting to think that the witnesses could well be Moses and Elijah in person. It was after all, Moses and Elijah who talked with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration. Malachi had also prophesied that the role of Elijah would be to reconcile Israel to God (Mal. 4:5-6). Indeed, the Jewish people expected Elijah to come before the coming of Messiah – and Christ confirmed this expectation when he tells his disciples that John the Baptist fulfilled this role (Mat. 17:10-12). Jesus however, was not expecting Elijah to come in person; he knew that it was foretold of John at his birth that he ‘would go before Christ in the spirit and power of Elijah ... to make ready for the Lord a people prepared’ (Luke 1:17). It seems reasonable therefore, to infer that the witnesses probably will not be Moses and Elijah in person, but will be divinely ordained prophets who will come in the spirit and power of Moses and Elijah. It is impossible to say whether the miraculous character of their witness should be taken literally or symbolically, but it is clear that they have divine protection against those who oppose them, and bearing in mind the miraculous manifestations of Apostolic times there is no reason why such miracles should not be in evidence again.

The results of the witnesses ministry

But just as was the case with the miracles of Jesus, the miracles performed by the witnesses do not of themselves bring a change of heart in Israel – though it’s difficult to believe that such events would not have influenced to some degree those who witnessed them. These events certainly seem to have attracted the attention of the

beast from the bottomless pit. We have already encountered this beast in the fifth trumpet – it is a consortium of local nations who are antagonistic to Israel. At this critical moment the ‘beast from the bottomless pit’ sees an opportunity for victory. Their first attempt to overthrow Israel (the fifth trumpet) had been repulsed. The more dramatic invasion from beyond the Euphrates had also been resisted – probably with the support of other world powers. But such conflicts would certainly have taken their toll on Israel and its government. The beast detects weakness, sees its opportunity, and overthrows the witnesses in an attempt to squash any recovery:

“And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.” (Rev 11:7-8)

Jerusalem is the focal point of this conflict – at this time it is still trodden down of the Gentiles. Symbolically, it is Egypt (where Israel were once enslaved captives) and Sodom (destroyed for immorality). It is the city where Christ was crucified, still possessing the same animosity towards him and his followers. At the time of Jesus’ first coming it was the Jews backed by the power of Rome who had brought about his death. Now the Jews have a different choice before them. Will they stand by and allow the beast from the bottomless pit to destroy the work of the witnesses, or will they turn to God for help? At first it seems as though all is lost. The beast seems to have won and the various nations who are looking on rejoice. They make merry sending presents to one another – a mirror image of the defeat of Haman at the time of Esther (Est. 8:17). For 3½ days they gloat, leaving the dead witnesses as a spectacle for the world. But then after 3½ days God intervenes. The witnesses are raised from the dead and they ascend up to heaven in a cloud. And there is an earthquake.

It’s difficult to determine whether these visionary events should be taken literally or figuratively. 3½ days is certainly a realistic period of time for the dead to lie exposed and it approximates to the period

Christ spent in the tomb. But the resurrection of the witnesses and their ascension to heaven may well be a way of representing the reinstatement of their governing authority. We have argued previously that 'in heaven' represents the realm of God's authority – including his ruling authority. Now, it would appear, that the witnesses are miraculously raised to 'heavenly' status in preparation for the sounding of the seventh trumpet.

When the witnesses ascend to heaven there is an earthquake, and a tenth of the city (the holy city Jerusalem) collapses and 7,000 people are killed. The rest however, give glory to God. Seven thousand was the number who remained faithful to God during the 3½ years of drought in Elijah's time. And it is hardly coincidental that this historical fact forms a key part of Paul's argument in Romans 11:

"I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! ... God has not reject his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? ... But what is God's reply to him? 'I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal'". Romans 11:1-4

In Elijah's day, God had protected a remnant of 7,000 from the false worship of Baal and its consequences. The response to the ministry of the witnesses, is an inversion of this – 7,000 perish, but the majority repent and give glory to God. The connection with Elijah's experience is clear. The witnesses are, after all, functioning in the spirit and power of Elijah and Moses. Moreover, it cannot surely have escaped the notice of the Jewish onlookers that what happened to the witnesses is in effect a re-enactment of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. This time, they were not directly responsible; they had seen that the events were orchestrated by the beast from the bottomless pit. In the case of the Lord Jesus, his death was very much their responsibility. And having observed the dramatic events which had accompanied the witnesses death and resurrection, all, with the exception of the 7000 who are slain in the earthquake, were obliged to

acknowledge that God was calling them as Elijah did on Carmel – and for the same purpose:

“Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” (1Kings 18:37)

And the people were terrified, but they responded as the Jewish nation did on that occasion on Carmel: ‘the LORD, he is God; the LORD he is God’.

Connections

What of the great earthquake (Rev. 11:13)? There are other earthquakes mentioned in Revelation (Rev. 6:12, 8:5, 11:13, 19, 16:18) and it is not always clear whether these visionary earthquakes are to be taken literally or not; neither is it clear whether they refer to a single earthquake or several different ones. Two of the earthquakes are termed ‘great’ (Rev. 6:12 and 11:13) and the final one is clearly different – it is said to be unique (Rev. 16:18). The earthquake that concludes the ministry of the witnesses is certainly very real since it results in the collapse of part of the city (Jerusalem). And it seems very likely that this earthquake is the same earthquake mentioned as part of the sixth seal (Rev. 6:12) since both occur shortly before Christ’s second coming.

Is there any connection with the earthquake of Zechariah’s prophecy which also occurs at the return of Christ? The events which cause the majority in Israel to ‘give glory to God’ concludes the ministry of the two witnesses. The imagery of the witnesses is taken from Zechariah’s visions and it is tempting to see the events which terminate the sixth trumpet as Revelation’s re-statement of the later chapters of Zechariah. In that prophecy there is a detailed account of the way that the Jews will come to recognise Christ as their Messiah and it is certainly possible see the extensive repentance process Zechariah describes as being a part of the work of the rainbowed angel – or even of the thunders that John was told not to write down.

Certainly the final dramatic battle for Jerusalem and the earthquake could well be the events spoken of in Zechariah 14; events which will see Jerusalem being trodden down of the Gentiles no more. Perhaps when this happens, the work of the rainbowed angel will be complete.

God through the prophet Ezekiel gave the exiles in Babylon a downbeat portrait of Israel's rebellious response to him at the various stages of their history – in Egypt, in the Wilderness, and as a nation in the land of promise (Eze. 20). But despite all, God's account finishes on a positive note:

“As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out I will be king over you.” (Eze. 20:33)

It would be a second Exodus, but one not without suffering for the people – ‘with wrath poured out’. But the end point would be nothing short of Israel's salvation:

“For on my holy mountain, the mountain height of Israel, declares the Lord GOD, there all the house of Israel, all of them, shall serve me in the land. There I will accept them, and there I will require your contributions and the choicest of your gifts, with all your sacred offerings. As a pleasing aroma I will accept you, when I bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you have been scattered. And I will manifest my holiness among you in the sight of the nations.” (Eze. 20:40-41)

Although the end point of God's dealings with Israel is clear, a great deal of the historical route by which these ends will be arrived at is uncomfortably speculative. There is no doubt however, that these events will be world shaking and extensive. The language used in this final section of the sixth trumpet is universal language – ‘peoples and nations and tongues and kings’, and ‘the God of Heaven’. These things will not be done in a corner, and they will undoubtedly bring to the notice of all the peoples of the world the fact that God is at work in

the world in a way that cannot be gainsaid. Once again the Jewish people will be God's witnesses (Isaiah 43), though this time they will not be reluctant witnesses, but will be witnessing to the power and presence of their Messiah and King.

Chapter 9. The seventh trumpet sounds

John's visions (Revelation 11:15 to 19)

The fifth and sixth trumpets had been invasions of the land of Israel; neither had resulted in Israel turning to God. The ministry of the rainbowed angel and of the two witnesses ends with an attack from the beast from the bottomless pit who was the fifth trumpet aggressor. This was followed by the resurrection of the witnesses and a destructive earthquake; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake but the majority of the survivors gave glory to God.

The seventh trumpet is then sounded and loud voices in heaven announce that the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign for ever and ever. Dramatic events follow; the nations rage, God's wrath is poured out, God's servants are rewarded and the destroyers of the earth are destroyed. God's Temple is opened and the ark of the covenant is seen in heaven. Finally, there are lightnings, rumblings, thunder, an earthquake and heavy hail.

The seventh trumpet sounds

"The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.' And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshipped God, saying: 'We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign.'" (Rev. 11:15-17)

The immediate response to the sounding of the seventh trumpet is a declaration from heaven that ‘the Kingdom (singular) of the world (Gk: *kosmos*) has become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever’. This heavenly declaration might sound as though the kingdom is being announced in heaven with no corresponding effect on earth, but we need to remember that ‘heaven’ is not geographically located (‘up there’) it is the totality of God’s sovereign realm and certainly includes those parts of the earth that come under his control. The thanksgiving voiced by the twenty-four elders makes it absolutely clear that the Kingdom has actually been established, and that Christ the King of this Kingdom is in control: ‘you have taken your great power and have begun to reign’. Thus, when the kingdom announcement is made, there is rejoicing in the heavenly Temple in which the elders worship by thanking God that the King’s reign has begun.

In passing, it should be noted that it is the elders who respond; there is no mention of the living creatures taking part in this thanksgiving, despite their featuring so prominently in the seal sequence. In fact, as we have already noted, the living creatures play no part at all in the trumpet events because their function is that of calling people to Christ as part of the sealing process. The role of the trumpets on the other hand, is to bring the old covenant people of God (Israel) to the point when they recognise Jesus Christ as their Messiah.

It is also significant to observe that the elders describe God as the one ‘who is and who was’. The final phrase of the full threefold divine title, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come’ (Rev. 1:4) has been omitted. The reason is clear: Christ as God’s King has already come, confirming the fact that the ‘kingdom of the world’ has indeed become God’s kingdom with Christ as its King. Moreover, the fact that the word kingdom (Gk: *basileia*) is singular, suggests that the seventh trumpet refers to a specific ‘kingdom’ – almost certainly the kingdom of Israel under the risen Jesus.

The coming of Christ the King

We hardly need comment on the appropriateness of Jesus becoming the 'King of the Jews'. It was the fulfilment of the promise made by the angel Gabriel when announcing his birth:

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (Luke 1:31-33)

It was also the title that Pilate displayed on his cross – a title which was acknowledged by Jesus in his conversation with one of the criminals crucified with him. The criminal had said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom', and Jesus promised that he would respond positively to the criminal's request (Luke 23:42-43). And when the seventh trumpet sounds, to use the criminal's phrase, Jesus the Christ (Messiah) 'comes into his kingdom'.

Neither the actual physical details of Christ's return to the earth, nor the exact timing of the events involved, are easy to establish with any precision. At his ascension the angels simply told the disciples that 'he would come in the same way as they had seen him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11) – a statement which suggests an actual visible return through the clouds. In the Olivet prophecy Jesus goes further by saying that 'as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man' (Mat. 24:27) – a statement which implies that his return will be an unmissable event which will probably be broadcast worldwide by the international media. However, beyond his mere presence in the earth it is clear also that Christ's coming will herald far-reaching consequences for Israel, for his followers, and for the rest of the world. Luke records the coming of Jesus in these terms:

“And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:25-28)

Luke’s account suggests that the coming of the Son of Man will certainly take place at a time of considerable turbulence in human affairs. But his coming will not mean the immediate end to turbulent events in the world, but rather the beginning of further dramatic events – ‘when these things *begin* to take place’, believers are to ‘raise their heads because their redemption is drawing near’. ‘These things’ are signs in the sun moon and stars which as we have previously suggested, imply that the ‘family of Jacob’ (the Jews) are involved. For the believers who are alive at this time, these events will mean that their redemption is close at hand. It would appear that we are dealing with a sequence of end-time events the beginning of which will be Israel accepting their once rejected Messiah. The events of the fifth and sixth woe trumpets and the work of the two witnesses will have brought the Jews to the point at which they will be able to say without hypocrisy, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’ (Matt. 23:39). Jesus as their King will then respond to their cry for deliverance from the invaders from the bottomless pit. And from this starting point, Jesus will take his great power and will begin to reign as King of the Jews, a rule which will then be extended over time to the wider world. These events are hinted at in the following verses of the seventh trumpet and expounded in greater detail later in Revelation.

The impact of the reign of Christ

After the elders thank God for the initiation of the reign of Christ as King of the Jews, they go on to say:

“The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.” (Rev. 11:18)

The elders thus provide a brief agenda for the events which will follow the installation of Christ as king of the Jews. They are:

- The nations will rage, presumably against the new power in the earth.
- God’s wrath will be unleashed because of the nations’ opposition.
- The time for the judgement of the dead and for rewarding God’s servants will have come.
- The destroyers of the earth (or land) will be destroyed.

It would probably be unwise to attempt to construct from this agenda a sequential programme of events determining the establishment of the Kingdom age, since each item in the list is simply linked the previous one by the word ‘and’ (Gk: *kaí*); some of these events could certainly run concurrently with others. But it seems unlikely that John would have recorded this statement by the elders if the events themselves were not of significance. Let us now consider in a little more detail what the elders are telling us.

The raging nations

The phrase ‘the nations raged’ with which the elders statement opens, comes from Psalm 2:

“Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, ‘As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.’ I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you. 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 them in pieces like a potter's vessel. Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth.” (Psa. 2:5-10)

According to this Psalm, when God establishes his King, the nations will rage, and they will take counsel together against him and against his anointed (Psa. 2:1-2). Peter and John saw in these words the antagonism of the Jews and Romans against Jesus at his first coming (Acts. 4:25-26), but they will certainly have a more extensive fulfilment in the future when he returns. However, God will laugh at the nations' opposition. If they are wise, the Psalmist goes on to say, they (the nations) will serve him (the King) with fear; after all, he is the one to whom God has given all the nations as a heritage and who will rule them with a rod of iron. He is in fact, the child born to the woman envisioned later in Revelation, Jesus Christ, who is identified there as the one who would 'rule all the nations with a rod of iron' (Rev. 12:5). He is the one of whom the prophets spoke:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’” (Jer. 23:5-6)

This is the climax of the trumpet sequence. It is however, worth remembering that the seventh trumpet is also the third 'woe'. The enthronement of Jesus the Messiah (Christ) will ultimately bring the benefits of his reign to the whole earth, but apparently it will not bring instant peace and harmony. The nations' immediate reaction will be to 'rage' against such imposed rule, and Christ will have to deal with this antagonism. Which nations are involved is not made explicit. It seems likely however that the nations initially concerned would be those surrounding Israel, though in modern international affairs it is unlikely that a power struggle in the Middle East would not rapidly involve powers in the rest of the world. Later in this commentary we shall be considering the outpouring of God's wrath in a sequence of seven

bowls (Rev. 16). It is not entirely clear whether the wrath of God mentioned as part of the seventh trumpet (item 2 above) is in any sense equivalent to, or perhaps a part of, the seven bowls of wrath, but it seems clear that the wrath of the seventh trumpet is a divine response to the nations reaction to the installation of the new King. We shall consider the bowls of wrath more fully later.

Judgement of the dead

The enthronement of Christ will also mean that at some point in his kingly programme, the time will come for the dead to be judged – an event which we assume will involve both resurrection as well as judgement. The first point to note about this ‘resurrection and judgement’ is that it is not the first item on the new King of Israel’s agenda – dealing with the nations and the outpouring of God’s wrath comes first (remember, your redemption *‘is drawing near’*, rather than *‘about to happen’*). This order is consistent with the conclusion we came to in connection with the seventh seal in which we observed that the process of sealing continues whilst the dramatic events described by the sixth seal are being played out. The mortal ‘saints’ who are alive at the time, will live through the sixth seal end-time events, and they will also live through the opposition of the nations to the rule of Christ as predicted by the seventh trumpet. Later, we shall also discover that the saints will live through the results of the outpouring of at least some of the bowls of wrath (Rev. 15-16). As the seventh trumpet vision implies, the time for judging the dead will come when God wills it.

The exact form to be taken by the ‘judgement’ referred to in the seventh trumpet is unclear. In the phrase ‘the time of the dead that they should be judged’, the word ‘judged’ is *krinō*, a Greek term which implies making some form of decision (compare John 7:24). But it is unclear whether this seventh trumpet judgement, relates to a general resurrection of both the ‘good’ and the ‘evil’ as spoken of by Jesus (John 5:28-29), or whether it refers to a resurrection intended solely for the stated purpose of ‘rewarding your servants, the saints and prophets and those that fear your name both small and great’. In other

words, it is unclear whether this seventh trumpet 'resurrection and judgement' is a judgement of the 'worthiness' of those involved to enter Christ's Kingdom, or whether it is simply for the purpose of assigning rewards. After all, Jesus, as well as speaking of a resurrection of the 'good' and the 'evil' also said that those that hear his word and believed him who sent him 'do not come into judgement but have passed from death to life' (John 5: 24).

In fact, Revelation rarely speaks of the process of judgement. It generally speaks of individuals as falling into one of two categories: the redeemed or the unredeemed, those who have overcome by the blood of Christ or those who have not, those who have been sealed of God or those who have not, those who have received the mark of the beast or those who have not been so marked. In fact, the only mention of what might be considered a conventional process of judgement is found in Revelation 20 where a judgement before one seated on a great white throne is described. It is a judgement which apparently takes place at the end of the Millennium, and it is a judgement at which those who are resurrected are judged according to what they had done (Rev. 20:11-15). We shall have more to say about this at the appropriate place in this commentary.

Without doubt however, whatever the process involved, the judgement referred to in this seventh trumpet vision includes the rewarding of the people of God. John refers to those rewarded as 'servants, prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great' – all in fact, whose salvation depends on the work of Christ, both Old and New Testament believers who are destined to become 'a kingdom of priests' in the new age. Since however we are thinking about a kingdom with Christ as king, the specific promise he made to his disciples is worth recalling at this point:

"Jesus said to them, 'Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging (krinō) the twelve tribes of Israel.'" (Matt. 19:28)

This sounds like a very literal promise. From our modern perspective it's difficult to know whether the twelve tribes, having been dispersed first by Assyria (the 'lost' ten tribes) and later Babylon, can be identified or not. However, the lists of names in Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah do illustrate how important physical descent was to the Jews of Old Testament times as a means of identifying who really belonged to Israel. It is of course entirely possible that God will be able to assign the returnees from the diaspora to their tribes so as to literally fulfil this promise to the twelve, though it is equally possible that Jesus was using the concept of twelve tribes as a descriptor of 'all Israel'.

Destroying the destroyers

The final item on the seventh trumpet agenda is that of destroying the destroyers of the earth (Gk: *gē*). The word used for earth here (*gē*) means a region, or a country, or a land (in contrast to the broader term *kosmos* (world)). It is possible therefore that the destroyers referred to in this verse refer specifically to the fifth trumpet destroyers of the land of Israel; it cannot be coincidental that the name of the aggressor in the fifth trumpet given by John in both Hebrew and Greek (Abaddon, Apollyon) means 'destroyer'. It seems likely therefore that these fifth trumpet destroyers who invaded Israel before the coming of Christ, and who were responsible for the death of the two witnesses, will be dealt with by the King when he is in the earth once more. When we later consider the outpouring of the bowls of wrath (Rev. 16), it may well turn out that the promise (or threat) that God's king will 'destroy the destroyers of the earth' may take on a much broader application in the kingdom age.

Israel's Ark

Finally, the seventh trumpet concludes with a significant event:

"Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail." (Rev. 11:19)

This statement is particularly striking. It would seem natural to assume that the Temple of God is already open – after all, John has been taken through an open door into the heavenly Temple (Rev. 4:1). He has also seen the sealed multitude from all nations standing before the throne and before the lamb (Rev. 7:9). But here at the culmination of the trumpet sequence, we are told that heaven is again opened – opened no doubt for a specific purpose. And that purpose would appear to be to show John and his readers the fact that the Ark of the Covenant is now in the heavenly temple. And at the risk of getting ahead of ourselves, it's worth noting that it's not only the ark that now appears to be in heaven. When we consider the angels with the bowls of wrath we shall find that they emerge from the 'sanctuary of the tent of witness'. The 'tent' (Gk: *skene*) is the Old Testament Tabernacle containing the ark within which was the 'witness' (Gk: *marturion*) or 'testimony' – the tablets of the law written in Moses' time by the finger of God.

It would appear that the Ark within this Tabernacle is particularly relevant to the seventh trumpet because it was a representation of the throne of God in Israel. Its presence in the heavenly Temple at this point must surely mean that the Old Testament people of God (the Jews) have now been received into 'heaven' (into God's sphere of operation) and are now a people with a renewed relationship to God. This is a key event to which the trumpet sequence has been leading up to. At the present time, we see the kingdom of Israel restored from the nations, but restored in unbelief. When the trumpets have done their work and the seventh trumpet has sounded we will see the worldly nation ready to accept Jesus as their rightful king and so transferred into 'heaven'. This represents a fundamental change of heart for Israel – but it is a change which is an essential forerunner of Christ's return and his enthronement as king (recall Matt. 23:39).

There is however an important point to make about such a change of Israel's status before God. In our discussion of Revelation 11 (the two witnesses) we suggested that John's commission to measure the temple could mean that Jewish temple worship may re-commence at some point, possibly as part of the re-establishment of the kingdom

under Christ. If this were to be the case, it seems likely that some form of Temple worship functioning in a similar way to that in Old Testament times would be resumed (Eze. 40-44). However, the point to bear in mind is that recognition of Christ as Messiah by Israel and any subsequent Temple worship, is not the same thing as saying that the Jews will be converted to Christianity. In the age to come when Israel has been reconciled to God, the resurrection will have taken place and those raised (including the twelve Apostles) will have become immortal agents in a new governing order (Rev. 5:10); they will be serving as divinely appointed administrators in a world of mortal people and nations. One of these nations will be the newly redeemed Israel.

Christian salvation as a commitment to an absent Lord as we know it now, will no longer be a part of that order (Zec. 14:16-21). It's probably not useful or indeed meaningful to speculate on such issues any further. However, as far as the future kingdom age is concerned, it seems reasonable to think of the Jewish race living in a new relationship to God – a relationship which may well include a system of worship which closely reflects the Mosaic one, but which in a key respect is different from it. God through Jeremiah makes the following prediction about Israel's worship in that future age:

“And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. And when you have multiplied and been fruitful in the land, in those days, declares the LORD, they shall no more say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the LORD.’ It shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed; it shall not be made again. At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart.” (Jer. 3:15-17)

The ark of the covenant which in Old Testament times represented the throne of God in Israel will no longer literally be needed in the new Israel, because the Lord himself will be king, and his throne will be in Jerusalem.

Unfinished kingdom work

Whether the first Century believers would see the trumpet sequence as a call to natural Israel is of course a matter of conjecture. In John's day the Christian church had not long separated from the Synagogue and certainly non-Christian Jews in Asia Minor were antagonistic to the church, so much so in fact, that in the messages to the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia they are called 'the Synagogue of Satan'. However, the members of the churches must surely have remembered Paul's exposition of the position of the Christians in relation to the Jews in Romans 9-11 using the figure of the olive tree. It is an argument which culminates in the following statement:

*"I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. **And so all Israel will be saved**, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.'" (Romans 11:25-27)*

Clearly the elevation of the ark of the covenant to heaven was not the end of the story. In many ways it is the beginning of the account to be revealed in the second part of Revelation. John concludes part one with the words: 'There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail' (Rev. 11:19). And as we have come to recognise, such expressions mean that even after the establishment of Christ as king in Israel, there are significant events to follow before the rule of Christ becomes the universal reign promised by the prophet:

"It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come, and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in

his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Mic. 4:1-3)

Excursus

Joel and the three Woe trumpets

Joel's prophecy

Earlier in this commentary (chapter 7 - the woe trumpets sound) the correspondence between the locust invasion described as part of the fifth trumpet and the locust invasion referred to in the prophecy of Joel was noted (Joel 1:4). It is worth drawing further attention however to the relationship which exists between the message of Joel as a whole and that of the final three trumpet visions (the three woes). In his prophecy Joel makes reference to the means God has used in the past to bring Israel back to himself, and by so doing he reveals strategies that God may well use again as the final Day of the Lord approaches.

The prophecy of Joel is unique among the written prophets in that little is known about either the prophet, or about the occasion which called forth his message. Its main theme however is the Day of the Lord (Joel 1:15, 2:1, 2:11, 2:31, 3:14, 3:18). Joel makes it clear that the purpose of these divine visitations are to be seen as appeals to Israel to return to him in true repentance (Joel 1:13-14, 2:12-14). The phrase 'Day of the Lord' is one which is used in the prophets in a variety of ways (Isa. 13:6, Jer. 46:10, Eze. 30:3, Amo. 5:18, Oba. 1:15, Zep. 1:7,14, Zec. 14:1,9, Mal. 4:1,5). It is a Day when God will act in judgement against Israel's enemies and in both judgement and deliverance for Israel itself. The great and final 'Day of the Lord' will be the day when God redeems his people, though the process will not be without pain and suffering for Israel.

A Locust Invasion

In the first chapter of Joel the prophet looks back to an invasion of Israel which he represents as a plague of locusts – though they are rather unusual locusts in that they have teeth like lions:

“For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number; its teeth are lions’ teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness.” (Joel 1:6)

The result is that the land is totally devastated, even the animals groan for lack of food and water (Joel 1:18). Joel does not mention where the locusts come from or who their leader is, but just as is the case in the fifth trumpet, the land is certainly destroyed:

“What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten.” (Joel 1:4)

It seems likely that the prophet is looking back to the conquest of Israel by the Assyrians or Judah by the Babylonians. The prophet implies that the invasion should be seen as a visitation from God, the purpose of which is to make the people realise their need for him and to bring them to repentance:

“Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.” (Joel 1:13-14)

Joel calls for a solemn assembly – an occasion when priests and leaders could together approach God asking for deliverance.

In our interpretation of the trumpets we have argued that under the fifth and sixth trumpets the nation of Israel are being afflicted for precisely the same divine purpose – to turn the people back to their God. We don’t know what the response was in Joel’s day but we observed in the case of the fifth trumpet, that John gives no indication that such a response was likely to be forthcoming.

A Second Invasion

Joel chapter 2 portrays another invasion, which sounds very much like the locust invasion of the first but with more powerful aggressors:

“Fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns. The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them. Their appearance is like the appearance of horses, and like war horses they run.” (Joel 2:3-4)

Joel chapters 1 and 2 thus provide a pattern of repeated invasions similar to that of the fifth and sixth trumpets inasmuch as the locust invasion of the fifth trumpet is followed by a much more powerful invasion of the sixth. The attack of the horde from the bottomless pit under the leadership of ‘the Destroyer’ is followed by the army of 200,000,000 mounted troops from beyond the river Euphrates. Once again Joel makes it clear that the invasions he speaks of are acts of God:

“The LORD utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it?” (Joel 2:11)

He also makes it clear that the point of these painful events is Israel’s repentance:

“ ‘Yet even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.’ ” (Joel 2:12-13)

Again, Joel calls for a solemn assembly – an opportunity for the people and their priests to appeal to God to ‘spare them, so that the nation

might not be a reproach among the nations' (Joel 2:15-17). We cannot be sure whether the Jewish people responded to Joel's call or not. There was of course a restoration after the Babylonian captivity, but it hardly matched the triumphal terms of God's promise through Joel:

"The LORD answered and said to his people, 'Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations. ... I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you.' " (Joel 2:19, 25)

It becomes clear that the restoration Joel is predicting is more than simply a reinstatement of material prosperity – it is a spiritual rebirth (like Ezekiel's resurrection of the dry bones):

"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." (Joel 2:28)

The New Testament apostles experienced a pre-echo of this blessing at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21). God through Joel is predicting a greater outpouring of his spirit on Israel at the time of their restoration (we take 'all flesh' in the context of Joel to refer to all Israel). Notice however the word 'afterward'. At Pentecost the spirit could not be poured out until after Christ had ascended to his Father's throne. So the outpouring of the spirit on Israel of which Joel speaks will probably take place after the King has taken his throne as described in the seventh trumpet.

Referring to the events of the sixth trumpet, John is explicit in reporting that the more powerful second invasion did not result in the repentance of the people affected (Rev. 9:21). But we have suggested that the work of the two witnesses will achieve what the invasions fail to achieve. Exactly how this will be brought about is not entirely clear,

though the events involved will be both dramatic and miraculous. Joel's words seem highly appropriate:

“And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.” (Joel 2:30-32)

The Kingdom comes

When the final trumpet sounds, the 'kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever' (Rev. 11:15). Earlier, we pointed out that the establishment of the Kingdom of Christ in the earth seems on the face of it to be inconsistent with the fact that the seventh trumpet is labelled as the third Woe. We noted however that the rather brief description of the events following the sounding of the seventh trumpet concludes with an indication that a great deal of activity which is not fully elaborated will follow; John's final statement that 'there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail' implies that there was more divine activity to come. In fact, Joel's third chapter spells out in some detail what God through Christ will do 'when he restores the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem'. Much of it has to do with God repaying the nations back for their unacceptable treatment of his people:

“I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. And I will enter into judgment with them there, on behalf of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations and have divided up my land, and have cast lots for my people, and have traded a boy for a prostitute, and have sold a girl for wine and have drunk it.” (Joel 3:2-3)

Moreover, God's judgements will be extended beyond the specific latter day opponents of Israel, to all nations. The effect of this will be that Israel will take the lead among the nations of the world for the worship of the God of Israel:

"The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth quake. But the LORD is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel. 'So you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who dwells in Zion, my holy mountain. And Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall never again pass through it.'" (Joel 3:16-17)

We shall certainly see these judgements elaborated in the description John give us of the outpouring of the bowls of God's wrath in the second part of Revelation.

PART 2: God redeems the world

Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from the ESV Bible (the Holy Bible, English Standard Version) copyright 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, used by permission. All rights reserved.

Introduction

In chapter 1 of this commentary, we suggested that the book of Revelation consists of two parts. The first part (Chapters 1 to 11) are visions which reveal God's dealings with his people: the church (lampstands), the redeemed of God (the seals), and the Jews (the trumpets). The structure of the first part of the book is straightforward since it largely falls into the corresponding three sets of seven (lampstands, seals and trumpets). The second part (Chapters 12-22) reveal the processes which are involved in God's redemption of the world. It starts with the victory of Christ over the forces of evil in the world (represented by the dragon), and ends in the future when all things will be made new. In the introduction, we presented the structure of Part 2 as shown in the table below.

Part 2: God redeems the world		
	Revelation	
Christ and the beasts	12 13 14	The woman, the child and the great red dragon is described. The beasts exercise their power on earth whilst 144,000 are seen on Mt. Zion. Warnings. Christ returns; reward and judgement follow.
Bowls of Wrath	15 – 16 17:1 - 19:10	Divine wrath is poured out on the nations. Excursus 1: Judgement on Babylon.
Millennium	19:11 - 20:15	The millennium is described. It is followed by the great white throne judgement.
The Bride	21:1 - 22:9	New heavens and earth. Excursus 2: The bride, the new Jerusalem, the holy city is revealed.

The first of the above sections (Revelation 12) looks back to the birth of Christ and to his victory over evil (the dragon). The following two sections (Revelation 13 and 14) cover in essence the following 2000

years of human history; in this period the powers of this world (the beasts) exercise their dominion until Christ returns. He will then reap the harvest of the faithful and will execute judgement on evil in the winepress of the wrath of God. The execution of the divine judgement is elaborated in Revelation 15 and 16 which describe seven bowls of wrath being poured out. John is told explicitly, that after the outpouring of these bowls there will be no more divine punishment, for 'with them the wrath of God is finished' (Rev. 15:1).

Revelation 17-18 describes one of the seven bowl angels inviting John to witness and record the judgement of the great prostitute and the fall of Babylon. The section ends with the praises of heaven for the defeat of human power, and includes the announcement of the marriage of the Lamb (Rev. 19:1-9). In response to these praises, John feels constrained to worship the angel who has shown him these things; however, John is immediately told that worshipping the messenger is inappropriate. Thus, the invitation of the bowl angel (Rev. 17:1) and John's worshipping the angel (Rev. 19:10) form 'book-ends' for a lengthy section relating to the destruction of Babylon; in the above summary we have labelled this as Excursus 1. Later in Revelation, John gives us a parallel account of the Bride the Lamb's wife using identical 'book-ends' (Rev. 21:9 – 22:9). In this account one of the seven bowl angels shows John the Bride, and after describing the Bride as the new Jerusalem, the account concludes with John again attempting to worship the angel; we label this Excursus 2.

Between these two excursuses, John sees visions which relate to the establishment of the millennial age and the new order which will follow (Rev. 19:11 to 21:8). The opening vision reveals Christ with the armies of heaven overthrowing the powers of evil in the world (the beasts). This victory is followed by the suppression of the worldly principle of deception (the dragon) for 1000 years, during which period those taking part in the first resurrection will live and reign with Christ. After the millennium, the dragon influence will be given an opportunity to deceive the nations once more before it is finally destroyed (Rev. 20:10). There follows a judgement scene (Rev. 20:11-15), and a description of the era in which God declares all things to have been

made new (Rev. 21:1-8). This climax to the prophecy is followed by Excursus 2 relating to the Bride, the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:9 – 22:9). Christ's final instructions and exhortations conclude the book (Rev. 22:10-20).

Chapter 10. War and victory

John's vision (Revelation 12)

The second part of Revelation opens with a vision in which John sees in heaven a woman clothed with the sun, who has the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She is pregnant and about to give birth. John also sees a great red dragon who stands in front of the woman poised to devour the child when it is born. The woman gives birth to a male child of whom it is said that he will 'rule the nations with a rod of iron'. The child is caught up to God and his throne, and the woman flees into the wilderness.

John then sees war arise in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting with the Dragon and his angels. The Dragon, who is identified as the ancient serpent called the Devil or Satan, is defeated, and he and his angels are expelled from heaven and thrown down to earth. On earth, the dragon pursues the woman and her offspring.

The battle of good versus evil

One of the most striking New Testament metaphors of the Christian life is that which describes followers of Christ as soldiers. Disciples are engaged in an on-going battle between good and evil, between the things of God and the things of the world. Paul puts it like this:

"Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Eph. 6:11-12)

When discussing the 144,000 seen by John and recorded in Revelation 7 and 14 (chapter 5), we argued that this group represents the army of God; they are an army on active service and they are a victorious army because they follow the Lamb. Revelation 12 provides the basis for such a view of the redeemed; it describes the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ over the powers of evil, and it is a victory which by the grace of God can be shared by the 'army' of those that follow him.

In fact, the battle between the people of God and the powers of evil in the world is a recurring theme in the book of Revelation. Every message of Christ to the churches ends with the promise that there would be special blessings for 'the one who conquers' (Rev. 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26, 3:5, 3:12). 'Conquers' (Gk: '*nikao*') means to achieve the victory, and 'achieving the victory' over the powers of evil in the world is what Christ looks for in his disciples. In the seal sequence (chapter 4) the first seal involves a rider on a white horse riding forth 'conquering and to conquer' – it's the same Greek verb ('*nikao*'). We suggested that in the context of the seals, the conquering rider represented the power of the Gospel calling men and women to be victorious over the world 'in Christ'. Furthermore, the 144,000 army of God mentioned earlier, are described as having conquered (Gk. *nikao* again) and we shall shortly meet them again standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion (Rev. 14:1-5). And when the Lord Jesus rides forth as the one designated 'Faithful and True' to deal with the evil forces in the world, the armies of heaven ride with him (Rev. 19:14). But how are disciples of Christ expected to conquer? There's only one way, and that is by appropriating to themselves the victory achieved by the Lord Jesus on the cross. On the cross, Jesus conquered the power of evil, and by God's grace his followers are able to 'conquer' also by sharing his victory.

The manner in which Christ conquered the power of evil in this world is revealed in the visions of Revelation 12. John sees a pregnant woman on the point of giving birth (Rev. 12:1-2). He also sees a great red dragon who is standing by to devour the woman's child as soon as it is born (Rev. 12:3-4). But apparently, the dragon does not have the

chance to devour the child, because it is caught (snatched) up to God's throne in heaven (Rev. 12:5). Later in the chapter, the process by which the child faces the dragon and escapes its power is pictured as a war, or a battle (Rev. 12:7-9). The archangel Michael and his supporting angels are the defending force; they defeat the dragon and the dragon is thrown out of heaven. To interpret these visions we first need to identify the characters involved, specifically, the woman, the child and the dragon. We should then be able to suggest how the interpretation of this vision unfolds, and in particular how the war in heaven in which the archangel Michael takes part can be understood.

The characters in the vision

Who is the child?

The child to be born to the woman is described as follows:

“She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne” (Rev 12:5).

The churches to whom Revelation was sent were largely Greek speaking gentiles, although they would certainly have members who were familiar with the Old Testament. It is unlikely therefore, that any Old Testament allusions made by John would go unnoticed. When the first recipients of Revelation heard (or read) John refer to a 'male child who will rule all the nations with a rod of iron', they would immediately understand that this child was the one spoken of by the Psalmist:

“I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you. 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 them in pieces like a potter's vessel’” (Psalm 2:7-9).

There have been many autocratic rulers throughout history whose governing method could well be described as 'breaking their subjects with a rod of iron', but it is clear that the one referred in Psalm 2 is God's anointed King, Jesus Christ the Messiah. The identification of the child as Christ, the future world ruler, is confirmed later in Revelation where the rider on the white horse is described as follows:

"From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" (Rev 19:15).

Who is the woman?

If the male child who will rule the nations with a rod of iron is Jesus Christ, it follows that the woman in the vision must be his mother – or at least a female progenitor of the kingly line of David. The virgin Mary would be the obvious candidate, were it not for the other features that John mentions in his account. John sees the woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. The reference to Joseph's dream is too obvious to be missed (Gen. 37:9). It suggests a connection between the woman and the family of Isaac. Isaac was the father (the sun) renamed Israel by God (Gen. 32:28), Rebekah was the mother (the moon), and the twelve stars were the sons of Isaac after whom the twelve tribes were named. So perhaps the woman should be interpreted as the nation of Israel with Mary as the nation's representative at the time of Christ's birth.

But John goes further. He refers to the dragon as 'that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world' (Rev. 12: 9). And that description takes us back to the fall of Adam and Eve as recorded in Genesis. John appears to be linking the triumph of Christ over the dragon to the fulfillment of the curse on the serpent:

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15).

Here too, as in John’s vision there are three ‘players’ involved – the serpent, the woman and her offspring (the child). The woman therefore in some fundamental sense is Eve! She is also every mother in Israel who longed to give birth to the Messiah! Throughout the history of God’s dealings with mankind, God had promised that he would send them a saviour who would put right what had gone wrong in Eden. To Eve (Gen. 3:15), to Abraham (Gen. 22:17-18), to Moses (Deut. 18:18), to David (2Sam. 7:12) and to Israel through the prophets (Isa. 9:6, Dan. 7:13, Zech. 9:9). These promises speak of a Messiah who would deal the serpent (the Dragon, Satan or the Devil) a fatal blow and would thereby fulfil God’s curse on the serpent (Gen. 3:15).

What is the great red dragon?

We have already observed that John tells us that the great red dragon was in some sense the serpent in Eden:

“And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world ... “ (Rev. 12:9).

But John extends the sphere of influence of this dragon-deceiver from Adam and Eve in Eden to ‘the whole world’. Whatever view is taken of the serpent, its function in Eden is clear – it was to deceive! God had told Adam and Eve that the consequences of sin would be death, and by saying to them ‘you shall not surely die’, the serpent persuaded them that God did not really mean what he had said (Gen. 3:4). But more than that! The serpent persuaded them to believe that if they ate of the tree of good and evil they would become ‘like God knowing good and evil’; they would have God-like qualities and be justified in ignoring or usurping God’s authority. And ever since Eden, human individuals and organisations have, one way or another, repeated the serpent’s deception and have sought to ‘be like God’ in a world of domination.

How then is it best to think of the great red dragon? The dragon had 7 heads and 10 horns, and the heads wear 'crowns' which in English Bibles sounds like the 'crown' worn by the woman clothed with the sun. However the Greek words for 'crowns' in the two cases are different. The woman wears a '*stephanos*', a wreath of victory, a crown in the sense of an acknowledgment of an accomplishment, whereas the dragon wears '*diademata*' – ruler's crowns. Moreover, the crowns are not on the dragon itself but on its heads. The dragon itself does not represent a ruling institution, it represents the abstract principle of the desire to deceive. Prophetic representations of actual governments are wild 'beasts', usually portrayed as real animals – and we shall meet such beasts in Revelation 13. The dragon however, is not a real animal, it's a mythical one; it represents the desire and willingness of the 'beasts' to usurp divine authority in order to pursue their own objectives. This is of course, precisely the serpent's deceptive view that human rulers should regard themselves as being 'like God' and free to replace God's authority with their own.

However, although there is only one dragon, it does have seven heads, and the heads, wearing crowns of rulership represent ruling powers. Bearing in mind John's numerical scheme, the dragon's seven crowned heads represent the totality of ruling power wherever and in whatever form such power is manifested. The dragon is also equipped with ten horns – though the symbolic character of the image does not require us to concern ourselves about where the horns are located. Horns in scripture represents power, so that the ten horns represent the totality of that secular power which is under the control of the heads. The heads are dragon heads, and as such they are ruling powers who possess the 'dragon spirit'. It is a spirit which has been exhibited by all powerful rulers throughout history, and which, for example, has been evident in the sequence of 'beasts' that have controlled the people of God (Israel) over its history: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. At the time of the vision of Revelation 12, the specific 'dragon spirit' which set itself to oppose Christ was vested in a combination of the Jewish leaders and the current Roman authorities.

In Revelation 12:4 the dragon is said to have swept a third of the stars of heaven to earth with its tail. Stars in the Old Testament can refer to secular leaders (e.g. Isa. 14:12-14), but it seems more appropriate here to take the stars as corresponding to the stars in the woman's crown – the tribes of Israel. It is certainly a historical fact that the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel in particular, were notorious in their failure to live up to their divine calling; they were eventually swept away by the power of the Assyrian Empire and so ceased to be a part of God's sovereign 'heaven'. The southern kingdom of Judah did rather better, but fell to the Babylonians 135 years later.

Interpreting the vision (Rev. 12:1-6)

Having identified the key characters involved, it is now possible to review the vision's message. At the point at which Revelation 12 begins – the time of the birth of the child – Israel (the woman clothed with the sun) is a nation which, despite being subservient to Rome, are still God's people. She is therefore still in the visionary 'heaven'. But so is the dragon. At the time of Christ the spirit of the dragon is vested in the Jewish leaders backed somewhat unwillingly by the authority of Rome. The Jewish nation was deceived by its leaders into bringing the work of Christ to nothing – to 'devouring the child'. And to achieve this objective they manipulated the ruling Roman power into becoming accessories.

John's vision tells us however, that this state of affairs was not to last very long. The child of the woman (Christ) instead of being destroyed by the 'powers that be', is caught up to God and his throne. It might seem odd that there is no explicit mention in this vision of either the ministry of Christ or his crucifixion and resurrection. It needs to be remembered however, that this vision is a 'heavenly' (God's) view of the life and death of Christ not a literal account of actual events on earth. The phrase 'caught up' has an element of immediacy, even force, associated with it – 'snatched away' some versions translate the phrase – as though this was the almost violent outcome of Christ's encounter with the dragon. The practical effect of this 'snatching away' was not the physical ascension of Christ, but the spiritual fact that as a

result of his victory God elevates him to his own throne, to the place of divine authority (Rev. 5:6). It's the point Jesus makes after his resurrection, when he tells his disciples, 'all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (Matt. 28:18). The dragon was the symbol of the spirit of human organisations willing to usurp God's authority; this authority God had now given to Jesus, and the role of the dragon's deceptive influence is now over. He is expelled from heaven.

Christus Victor (Rev. 12:7-11)

John then goes on to tell us that war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon and his angels. This part of the vision is a rather more dramatic way of presenting to his readers (and us) what Christ achieved in his confrontation with the dragon. Though there can be little doubt that Christ in his life did 'battle' against the forces of evil in this world and in his sinlessness defeated them, John in this account, is telling us something much more fundamental about the victory of Christ.

In Old Testament times, thinking Israelites thought of God's governance of the world as involving a heavenly council (Psalm 89:5-7). Moreover, this council could include representatives of powers opposed to God. For example, in the prologue of the book of Job, Satan (the adversary) is a member of the council (Job 1:1). Micaiah's prophetic account before Ahab tells of a similar council (1 Kings 22:19-22). The Psalmist sees some of the elders of Israel involved in God's decision making processes (Psalm 82) and they are criticized for their waywardness. The most dramatic, and the one most helpful in understanding Revelation's 'war in heaven' is the picture we are given in one of Zechariah's night visions. This is what Zechariah saw;

"Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan, 'The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?'" (Zech. 3:1-2)

Although the commentators are not too convinced of the connection, the phrase ‘the Lord rebuke you’ seems to link this vision with Jude’s comment in the New Testament:

“But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgement, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you.’” (Jude 1:9)

In Zechariah’s vision a court session is in progress. The participants though not very precisely identified seem to have been: ‘the LORD’ (Yahweh) as the judge, Joshua Israel’s high priest in the dock, Satan (or the Devil) as the council for the prosecution, and the archangel Michael (taking Jude’s hint) as the council for the defense. Jude tells us that in Zechariah’s case the dispute was about ‘the body of Moses’ which just as Christian believers can be thought of as the body of Christ, we take to be the people of Israel. Joshua, clothed in filthy rags, represents Israel’s spiritual state after their return from Babylonian captivity. Satan’s role was to accuse him (Joshua/Israel) on the grounds that further punishment was justified by his spiritual state, despite the fact that Israel had just returned from a 70 year exile as a punishment for their waywardness. But before Satan could say a word, the LORD (Yahweh) rebukes him – effectively denying the prosecution the opportunity to put his case and handing the judgement over to the defense team. Joshua/Israel was not to be punished any more, but reinstated. The angel ordered the filthy garments to be removed and replaced by clean ones. As far as the people of Zechariah’s day were concerned, that was the point of Zechariah’s prophecy. God’s grace and forgiveness was to be extended to the returnees from Babylon who were then involved in rebuilding the Temple; they were to be given a new start!

Michael also features in Daniel’s prophecy (Dan. 10:13,21, 12:1). He is described as the prince who has the charge of, or who stands up for, or is the defendant of Daniel’s people. Exactly how the guardian angels of the nations spoken of by Daniel in this section of his prophecy function is less than clear. However, the archangel Michael

was traditionally regarded as the protector of the Jewish people. It would appear therefore that John makes use of this tradition to describe a visionary battle scene in which the forces on Christ's side (Michael and his angels) achieve a victory over the forces of the world (the dragon and his angels). The cameo role for Michael in Zechariah's vision is helpful in our understanding of Revelation 12 because it suggests that the 'war in heaven' in John's vision was not intended to be thought of as a fighting war or even a moral conflict – it was a legal confrontation. The dragon/Satan prosecutor in Christ's case were the Jewish leaders who hearing Jesus apply Daniel's prophecy to himself, accused Christ of blasphemy and condemned him to death (Matt. 26:64-65). But the LORD rebuked them (to use Zechariah's phrase) and vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead, thereby showing that he was indeed the Messiah.

The message is clear. John is telling his Christian readers that since the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, the heavenly realities of God's dealings with men and women have undergone a dramatic change. Before Christ's victory over the dragon, the people of God did not have a permanent defender in the divine court of justice (using the law-court analogy); there was however, always a prosecutor, an accuser, a Satan. But the work of Christ changed all that! Christ's victory not only defeated the accuser but ejected him from the courtroom once and for all. The dragon was thrown out of heaven to become the motive force behind the beasts. But Christ's victory over the dragon-serpent, was not just a victory won for himself. It was a victory also for all those who would become a part of 'the body of Christ' – the believers. For them, there would never again be a Satan (adversary) or a Devil (accuser) in heaven! Christ's victory could be theirs as well. That is clear from the heavenly pronouncement which follows:

“And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, ‘Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by

the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.” (Revelation 12:10-11)

The triumph of Christ was to be the means by which his followers would ‘overcome’ (conquer). In writing to the Colossians, Paul puts it this way:

“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.” (Colossians 2:13-15)

Without doubt, John’s war imagery in Revelation is intended to highlight the profound difference that the sacrifice of Christ achieved for those who are the subjects of God’s kingdom. Jesus himself foresaw the effect of his death when he sent the 70 out to preach; they returned rejoicing that even the demons submitted to them. Jesus’ response was, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy ...’ (Luke 10:18). Jesus was anticipating the time when he would trample the snake of Sin and defeat the power of the enemy; as a result, Satan would be displaced permanently from heaven. So Paul could write of the confidence we may have ‘in Christ’:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:1-2).

This is the only way that those in the churches, and those in the seal sequence, can hope to conquer. Not by winning battles with the dragon using their own powers, but by becoming a member of the family of God in Christ, and sharing the victory that Christ has won for all who belong to him.

After the victory

After John's account of the victory of the Christ-child, he tells us that the woman flees to the wilderness for the symbolic period of 1260 days where she is 'nourished' by God (Rev. 12:6). Later in the same chapter he expands this brief statement by saying:

"But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time." (Rev 12:14)

The word 'nourished' is the Greek verb 'trepho'; it's the word used by Jesus to refer to God's caring provision shown in 'feeding' the birds (Mat. 6:26, Luke 12:24). Several translators offer an alternative translation which has the woman being 'taken care of' in the 'wilderness' implying that she receives God's care and protection. If the woman, as we have argued above represents Israel or the Jewish people, then the flight into the wilderness would most appropriately represent the dispersion of the Jewish people among the nations of the world. The eagle represents the power and care of God which lies behind this dispersion. In his song Moses likens God's care with that of an eagle looking after its young (Deut. 32:11), and God's deliverance of his people from the Egyptians is likened to being carried on eagles wings (Exo. 19:4). The wilderness is the wilderness of the nations. Because the diaspora has been a part of Jewish experience for 2000 years or so, it seems natural to assume that the time periods mentioned, both the 1260 days and the 'time, times and half a time' (3½ years), are not to be taken literally but are representative periods of trial or suffering as suggested in the discussion of numbers in the introduction.

John goes on to tell us that the serpent (dragon) attempts to sweep the woman away by means of a river of water, but the earth swallows the river and thus protects the woman. When discussing the second trumpet vision we observed that Jesus' saying about a mountain being thrown into the sea was an oblique reference to the dispersion of the

Jewish people after AD 70; it represented God's punishment of the people because they had turned away from him. In the vision of Revelation 12, we suggest that the dragon's attempt to destroy the woman and the earth's protection of her also represents the dispersion of the Jews, but it focuses on preservation rather than punishment. There would appear to be little point in attempting to specify exactly what the river of water pouring from the dragon's mouth represents or indeed, how the earth absorbs this flood. But it is certainly a fact as we have seen in the trumpet sequence, that the Jews will have to suffer among the nations, the dragon's influence no doubt playing its part, but they will be preserved by God as an identifiable people ready to be recalled to him when Christ returns (Jer. 30:11).

The dragon's future role

Revelation 12 concludes by introducing us to the role the dragon will play in the following vision:

"Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea." (Rev 12:17)

Having been defeated by the child who will rule the nations with a rod of iron, and having been expelled from heaven, the dragon turns his attention to the Christian community (the rest of her offspring). And he does so in the guise of the beasts we meet in the next chapter.

Chapter 11. The battle lines are drawn

John's vision (Revelation 13 and 14)

John has seen the birth of the child and his victory over the dragon, and he has seen the dragon cast out of heaven. Now from an earthly viewpoint, he sees two beasts emerge onto the scene (Rev. 13). The first is from the sea; it has ten horns and seven heads and a mouth which speaks blasphemies. Then a second beast arises out of the earth (or land); this beast has two horns like lamb but speaks like a dragon. It deceives the inhabitants of the earth by making them worship the first beast.

Following his view of the beasts, John's attention is drawn to a heavenly scene (Rev. 14). There he sees the Lamb standing on Mount Zion with a group of 144,000 who have the Lamb's name and his Father's name written on their foreheads, and he hears the occupants of heaven singing a new song. This scene is followed by three angelic messages, after which John sees one like a son of man seated on a cloud coming to reap the harvest of the earth. The reaping of the harvest is followed by the treading of the winepress of the wrath of God.

Two millennia of human history in a nutshell

The vision of the woman and child which we considered in the previous chapter took us back to the time of Christ's ministry, death and resurrection when he defeated the power of the dragon for himself and for his followers. The account of this victory ended when the dragon was expelled from heaven to make war with those on earth who held the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 12:17). Revelation 13-14 presents a picture of the continuing struggle between the dragon as the authority behind two beasts who exercise their power on earth and the 144,000 John sees in heaven who represent the sealed army of God.

We shall attempt to show that these visions record a conflict which will continue throughout human history until it is replaced by the benevolent reign of Christ in the Millennial age. To establish this view, we need to show that the end point of the sequence of visions in Revelation 13-14 is the return of Christ to the earth. Therefore, at the risk of getting out of chronological step we shall consider Revelation 14:14-16 now, returning later to the section about the beasts. John describes the end point of this sequence of visions as follows:

“Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, ‘Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe’. So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.” (Rev. 14:14-16)

When the original recipients of the letter read of ‘one like a son of man’ they would surely have made the connection with the ‘son of man’ John had seen walking among the lampstands and who is identified as the risen Christ (chapter 2). They would also have noted that the ‘son of man’ was seated on a cloud and was coming to reap the earth, and this would have brought to their minds the prophecy in Daniel:

“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13-14)

This passage from Daniel was generally recognised as a Messianic prophecy. It was quoted by Jesus in his Mount Olivet prophecy (Mat. 24:30); when the high priest at his trial ordered him to say whether or

not he was the Messiah, it was the Daniel passage he quoted to confirm this claim (Mat. 26:64).

Reaping the harvest of the earth

Consider now some further details. The 'son of man' had the crown (Gk: *stephanos*) of a victor on his head signifying that he was one who had conquered. In his hand he carried a sharp sickle with which to reap the harvest of the earth – a fact which recalls Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares. In that parable both wheat and tares are allowed to grow together until the harvest when the tares are burned and the wheat put into the barn; Jesus explains that the harvest is the end of the age and the reapers are the angels (Mat. 13:39). Jesus also uses a harvest figure in the Mount Olivet prophecy when he says that when the 'son of man' comes on the clouds of heaven he will send out his angels to gather his elect from the four winds (Mat. 24:30-31). It might seem somewhat inconsistent that in John's vision, reaping is something the 'son of man' (Christ) himself undertakes whereas in the words of Jesus the reaping is carried out by angels. However, such a distinction is hardly significant, since Jesus makes the point that '**he** (the 'son of man') will send out **his** angels' to gather the elect (Mat. 24:31), making it clear that the angels are operating as Christ's agents.

More significant is the fact that the 'son of man' does not start reaping until he is given the go ahead by an angel messenger from the Temple throne room. We remember that in regard to the timing of his second coming Jesus said that 'concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only' (Mat. 24:36). It would appear therefore that at the point we have reached in the visions of Revelation, the day and the hour has arrived, and the command is given from the throne, 'put in your sickle and reap, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe' (Rev. 14:15). It is worth however noting, that neither the parables of Jesus nor this brief mention of the harvest in Revelation 14 should be interpreted as providing a detailed programme of harvest-time activities. They are simply figures covering those events which must occur following the coming of the Lord,

events which will certainly involve at some point the ingathering and resurrection of the faithful.

Thus, considering Revelation 12-14 as a whole, John is giving his readers a highly condensed picture of the two millennia or so of human history which are to pass between Christ's first coming and his second (Rev. 12:5, 14:14). Of course, first Century readers would have no way of knowing that this period would last 2000 years or so, but we 21st Century readers have no precise knowledge of the actual period involved either – its termination is still known only by the Father. Moreover, the function of this condensed period of history in the book of Revelation is not to give the readers detailed information about future historical events or timescales, but to draw their attention to the consequences of the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ for the people of God living in an evil world. John's (Christ's) purpose is to bring into focus the battleground upon which the war between good and evil, between Christ and Satan, between the true Church and the world, will take place. The beasts of Revelation 13 represent national forces modelled on the historical realities of John's day, and they are intended to represent the forces which will oppose the people of God in widely dispersed geographic areas in the years which will follow. We turn now to a consideration of the beasts John sees emerging from sea and land.

The imagery of the sea beast

At the end of Revelation 12, the dragon, having been thrown out of heaven, stands on the sea shore (Rev. 12:17). From this seashore viewpoint John sees a beast emerge:

“And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority.” (Rev 13:1-2)

The term beast (Gk: *therion*) implies a wild beast. We are familiar with the way in which the national powers of this world are represented as wild beasts from the visions of Daniel. In Daniel's prophecy, the progress of future history is represented as a sequence of four such beasts: a lion with eagle's wings, a bear, a leopard with the wings of a bird and a terrible fourth beast. These beasts are usually believed to represent Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon, the Medo-Persian empire which followed the Babylonian, the Grecian empire established by Alexander the great, and the Roman empire which followed the Grecian. In John's vision the sea beast shares some of the characteristics of the first three of Daniel's beasts in that it is described as a leopard, with bear's feet and a lion's mouth (Rev. 13:2).

The sea beast has seven heads and ten horns and in this respect it mirrors the physical characteristics of the dragon; moreover, the sea beast is said to receive its authority from the dragon (Rev. 13:2). It is clear therefore that the sea beast is some kind of dragon clone. In the previous chapter we argued that the dragon is not itself a national or imperial authority – it is not a wild 'beast' in the sense of Daniel's prophecy (or Revelation 13). Instead, we argued that dragon-ness is an abstract characteristic – it is a willingness to usurp divine authority to achieve selfish objectives; it is the 'spirit' of any national or imperial organisation which usurps the authority of God for its own purposes. To identify the deceitful nature of dragon-ness, John in Revelation 12 has taken us back to the serpent in Eden who said to Eve, 'you will be like God knowing good and evil' (Gen. 3:5, Rev. 12:9). Thus in Revelation 13, the authority which the dragon gives to the beasts is the serpent's deceptive view that human rulers should regard themselves as being 'like God' and be free to replace God's authority with their own. We suggested moreover in the previous chapter, that the heads of the dragon may well be representing past historic powers such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome in which this quality of dragon-ness had been manifested in earlier times.

The sea beast as the Roman Empire

It seems therefore that we are to take John's sea beast as the dragon transformed into a real empire which existed in John's time, specifically, the Roman Empire. If the sea beast is the Roman Empire, what do we make of the fact that it has seven heads. In the broader historical context, a many-headed beast is certainly an appropriate Biblical symbol for an oppressor of the people of God, because as we have already indicated, throughout history, control over Jews or 'saints' has been in the hands of successive human powers. Indeed, the fact mentioned by John that the sea beast incorporates some of the characteristics of Daniel's beasts suggests that this is an appropriate way of regarding the seven headed beast from the sea. But why seven heads? It would seem that the seven (heads) should be regarded simply as part of John's symbology. In John's numerical scheme we are not necessarily expected to apply the number literally, but to regard it as representing completeness or totality. It seems reasonable therefore, not only to take the seven heads of the dragon to represent the broad spread of oppressive powers from the long past (Egypt) through to the far future (the return of Christ), but at the same time to regard the sea beast as a symbol of the Roman empire existing at the time of Revelation, with its seven heads as representing the totality of its ruling dynasties stretching forward into the Christian era.

This is not the place for an extensive review of the history of the Roman Empire, but a brief outline will prove helpful in understanding some of the features of the Roman beast. The following is a summary of the rule of the Roman Emperors from the time of Christ to the end of the first Century (taken from the [history.com](http://www.history.com) website):

Augustus' rule (BC 27 – AD 14) restored morale in Rome after a century of discord and corruption and ushered in the famous *pax Romana* – two full centuries of peace and prosperity. He instituted various social reforms, won numerous military victories and allowed Roman literature, art, architecture and religion to flourish. Augustus ruled as Emperor for 40 years, supported by his great army and by a growing cult of devotion.

When he died, the Senate elevated Augustus to the status of a god, beginning a long-running tradition of deification for popular emperors. Augustus' dynasty included the unpopular Tiberius (14-37 A.D.), the bloodthirsty and unstable [Caligula](#) (37-41) and Claudius (41-54), who was best remembered for his army's conquest of Britain. The line ended with [Nero](#) (54-68), whose excesses drained the Roman treasury and led to his downfall and eventual suicide. Four emperors took the throne in the tumultuous year after Nero's death; the fourth, Vespasian (69-79), and his successors, Titus and Domitian, were known as the Flavians; they attempted to temper the excesses of the Roman court, restore Senate authority and promote public welfare.

The features of this history which will be of particular significance to us will be the deification of the Emperors beginning with Augustus, and the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty with the death (suicide) of Nero. Nero's death was followed by the year of four emperors, a period of civil war which ended with the rise of the Flavian dynasty (Vespasian and his sons). It is also worth bearing in mind that when Vespasian became emperor in AD69, he was in the process of dealing with a Jewish revolt. It was a revolt which resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple (AD70) which effectively brought to an end what was left of the Jewish state and of Temple Judaism.

More about the sea beast

“And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads....One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marvelled as they followed the beast. And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, ‘Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?’” (Rev. 13:1, 3-4)

John's description of the sea beast is a snap-shot of the power of imperial Rome when Revelation was written. When reviewing Christ's

messages to the churches (chapter 2) we observed that Jesus was not averse to including in his messages items of local or topical information which would be readily recognised by the original readers. In the case of the sea-beast with seven heads, John tells us that one of its heads seemed to have suffered a mortal wound, but that this wound had been healed (Rev. 13:3). This piece of information is likely to have been reflecting a recent historical event and was included to help readers to associate the prophecy with an awareness of their own recent history.

In fact, when Revelation was written it would have been well-known that Nero, the last emperor of the first 'phase' of the Roman Empire (the Empire under the Julio-Claudian dynasty) had committed suicide following rejection by the Roman senate. It was an event that would certainly have been regarded by many as a mortal wound to Rome – but it was a wound which, according to John's prophecy, had been healed. Superficially therefore, the prophecy seems to be telling us that a head (a 'phase' of the Roman Empire) had been wounded fatally, but that this wound had been healed. It is reported that there was a rumour circulating at the time, that Nero had not actually died but that he had fled to Parthia from which he was planning to return with an invading army (Nero redivivus). Some interpreters find in this rumour an explanation of the wounded and healed head. We however, have found it more satisfactory to take the view that the heads of the beast are not individual emperors but dynasties of emperors; the death of Nero would therefore be in effect, the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and the end of the phase of the Roman beast associated with that dynasty.

The empire, slain and healed

For the moment we will assume that the heads of the sea beast which existed as John wrote Revelation symbolised phases (or dynasties) of Roman imperial power; John has been told that one of these heads has been fatally wounded and has subsequently been healed. What does this mean? In the case of first century Rome, the death of Nero, the last emperor in the Julio-Claudian dynasty, would certainly have

been regarded as a fatal wound to the empire – or at least to the particular phase of the Roman empire which then existed. Admittedly, the Roman empire is normally thought of as continuing in time despite changes in the emperors. However, the death of one head and the rise of a new one (healing) seems to be a detail contemporary to John which requires the end of one phase of the Roman beast and the beginning of a new one. What then did the healing of the empire consist of? As a result of the brief civil war which followed Nero's death, Vespasian, a soldier totally unconnected with the Julio-Claudian family, arose as the first emperor of a new dynasty (the Flavian dynasty). Thus, the Roman beast revived under the Flavians, and the empire's fatal wound could be said to have been 'healed'.

The point that this account seems to be making, is that a 'beast' which is a national or political organisation led by a human rulers, could if the leader is removed, be capable of regenerating itself (being healed) so that the beast can live again. And to a considerable extent, history confirms that this is certainly a realistic picture of the Roman Empire; one dynasty of Emperors follows another for the next several hundred years enabling the beast (or a sequence of 'mini-beasts') to continue until terminal decline sets in. Indeed, this is the pattern not just of the Roman empire of John's day but of all the ruling dynasties in the centuries following the Roman empire and in the widely separated parts of the world in which human organisations flourish. Rulers and governments will rise and fall as beasts are 'slain' only to be 'healed' by their replacement by others. And this will continue until the stone in Nebuchadnezzar's image strikes the image of human rule (on the feet), grinds the whole image to pieces and God's rule is established (Dan. 2:44).

Sea beastly characteristics

The other details highlighted by John's visions are not so much historical as matters of theological comment. They are as follows:

- *A blasphemous dragon power.* We have already observed that the ten horns and seven heads numerically show that the

beast's power and authority is derived from the dragon's. Unlike the dragon however, the sea-beast's crowns are on its horns rather than on its heads suggesting that Rome's standing in the world is primarily based on its secular (military) power (Rev. 13:1). On the heads are written names; we are not told what the names are, only that they are blasphemous. The blasphemous names on the sea-beast's head contrasts sharply with the group of 144,000 we will shortly meet in 'heaven' who have the names of God and the Lamb written on their foreheads (Rev. 14:1). In both cases, the names are in effect 'labels' indicating to whom the owner of the head is spiritually and intellectually committed. In the case of the sea-beast, commitment to Empire meant acknowledgement of the authority of the Emperors and the objectives of their governmental policy. At this time the Roman Emperors saw themselves as divine, and were proclaimed as such by the Roman Senate. It was not that Rome was opposed to incorporating the Christian god into their pantheon; what they objected to was the Christian concept of an exclusive God, because that meant that the gods of Rome, including the divine Emperor, were devoid of any real authority. And it is this substitution of the gods of Rome for the true God that is the essence of the blasphemous names on the beast's heads.

- *A big talker.* The beast was also a 'loud mouthed' blasphemer, opening its mouth to utter blasphemies against God (Rev. 13:5). This characteristic would seem to be one which is shared with other anti-Christian systems in prophecy including Daniel's little horn and the man of sin in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians (Dan. 7:8, 2Thes. 2:4). It was not enough for the ruling authorities to claim divinity and to honour the traditional Roman pantheon, the ordinary people had to recognise and accept this claim as well. The Roman Empire was an expanding empire – its goal was that all the habitable world should come under its control. Hence temples were built to the divine Emperor, coins were struck with the Emperor's head on them, and in many aspects of Roman everyday life it was expected that the gods

(including the Emperor) would be acknowledged by all. For Christians living in Rome this was 'everyday' blasphemy against God whose authority was being usurped by the dragon-power of the State. John tells us that this blasphemy extends to his 'name and his dwelling' (Rev. 13:6). God's name represents all that he is and all that he stands for, specifically his saving purpose in Christ. His dwelling is his Temple, but the reference is not primarily to any physical structure but as the passage goes on to explain, to his people, 'those who dwell in heaven' – i.e. the saints represented by the 144,000 on Mt. Zion. God had promised that his plan for the world was that 'all the earth shall be filled with his glory' (Hab. 2:14). The sea-beast had replaced this objective with one which promised that the whole earth would be filled with the glory of the Empire.

- *A Persecutor of the church.* The sea-beast was to be a persecutor of God's people. And even though the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire was localized and sporadic, persecution of one sort or another was a feature of the reigns of some Emperors, including Nero and Domitian. We have already noted that Christ's message to Smyrna implied that martyrdom in the early church was the exception rather than the rule. Nevertheless, John tells us that the sea-beast was allowed to 'make war on the saints and conquer them' (Rev. 13:7). This is an extension of the earlier statement that the beast was 'allowed to exercise authority' (Gk: *exousia*) for the 42 month period of persecution (Rev. 13:5). In the context of the beasts, the word '*exousia*' sometimes refers to authority delegated by the dragon to the beasts (Rev.13:2, 13:4) and sometimes to authority given to the beasts without specifying whose authority is involved (Rev. 13:5, 13:7, 13:12). In other passages in Revelation however, the word refers to authority delegated by God in various ways (Rev. 2:26, 11:6, 14:18, 16:9, 22:14). Paul writes that 'there is no authority (*exousia*) but of God' (Rom.13:1), which if applied in the Revelation context indicates that even the dragon could only delegate it's authority because it was 'allowed' to do so by God. And this fact throws

into relief the truth that the authority exercised by the beasts was in reality God's authority being usurped by human rulers for their own ends. Strikingly, the beast was allowed (by God) to 'conquer' the saints. The word conquer (Gk: *nikao*) is the same word as that used of those who have 'conquered' by the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 12:11). By using this word John is reminding the recipients of his prophecy that those who have turned to Christ have 'conquered' the beast by the blood of the Lamb, but those who have not turned to him have in fact been 'conquered' by the beast. And there are eternal consequences. Whereas the identities of the worshippers of the beast are not recorded in the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 13:8), those who have conquered in Christ have had their names inscribed in that book from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8).

It is no surprise therefore that 'the whole earth followed the beast' or that they worshipped it as indestructible. Moses in his song recalling the deliverance of Israel from the Egypt had said: 'Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?' (Exo. 15:11). Imperial Rome had convinced its people that the Empire and its rulers were like God and that it wielded the authority of God; accordingly they worshipped the beast, saying, 'who is like the beast, who can fight against it?' (Rev. 13:4). It needed courageous Christian insight to recognise the usurpation of divine authority by the State and to respond acceptably to it. Well might John write:

"If anyone has an ear, let him hear: If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints." (Rev 13:9-10)

Before we go on to take a closer look at the other beast John sees in his vision, it is important to remember that imperial governmental power (beastliness) is only one aspect of Roman rule and culture which features in the visions of Revelation. In later visions we will find that the social, moral and economic aspects of Roman life are

represented as a prostitute who is identified as 'Babylon the great' (Rev. 17-18). We shall explore this aspect of John's description in due course.

The beast of the land (earth)

Following John's outline of the character of the sea beast (Rev. 13:3-10) he sees another beast arise out of the earth:

"Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed." (Rev 13:11-12)

It is important to recognise that although Rome itself would be the central point of reference for policy and power, there would be secondary centres distributed throughout the Empire in the various provinces; their role was to bring Roman rule and the Roman way of life to the local populations. In the context of Revelation 13, we suggest that the sea-beast represents imperial power of Rome emanating from the centre (Italy), whereas the beast arising from the earth represents the power of Rome moulded to fit in with the local conditions found in the province of Asia where the seven churches were located. The Greek word for 'earth' here is *gē* which can mean a region or country or land. It seems appropriate therefore to refer to John's second beast as the beast from the land or the land beast in contrast with the sea beast. Asia was a Roman province at the western end of the peninsular often referred to as Asia Minor (the Turkey of today). We have already recognised such a local focus of power when considering Christ's message to the church at Pergamum in which the phrase 'where Satan's throne is' is likely to be a reference to a centre of Roman authority located there (Rev. 2:13). Moreover, the book of Acts reminds us of Rome's influence in Asia, where the Roman officials in Ephesus, called 'Asiarchs', were said to be friends of Paul and were apparently concerned for his welfare as a Roman citizen (Acts 19:31). From the point of view of the recipients of

Revelation living in the province of Asia, 'sea-beast' would seem to be an appropriate label for the Imperial power being exercised from Rome across the Mediterranean, and 'land-beast' would be an appropriate label for local Roman rule operating in Asia.

Of course, the Roman Empire included many provinces at the time Revelation was written. Why then should one of them (Asia) be singled out as a key element within the prophecy? Asia was certainly a well-established Roman province having been incorporated into the Empire over 100 years before the time of Christ. It was also a province in which the spread of the Gospel among the Gentiles had been extensive due to work of Paul and others at Ephesus. But the main reason Asia is Revelation's focus as the 'beast of the land' is because it was the location of the seven churches to whom the letter was addressed and in which John lived before his exile. The question why select Asia in particular, is of course, directly linked to the reason why Jesus addressed his revelation to seven churches in Asia when there were other churches in existence at the time, situated in other locations. The answer must be that Jesus regarded the churches in Asia to be appropriate as representatives of churches of all times, and in all locations. It follows that focusing the geographic scope of the prophecy onto a single Roman province in this way means that that Christians living in areas beyond the boundaries of Asia and in a time later than the first century, would need to regard the Asian churches as being in some way 'representative' of the churches in the regions in which they were living.

The character of the land beast

We are suggesting therefore that the land-beast represents Roman rule in Asia, the province of the Roman Empire in which the seven churches were situated. This beast is presented by John as a lamb with two horns, suggesting that compared with the sea beast, the land-beast is relatively benign (a lamb) with limited power (two horns rather than seven). No crowns are visible either on the head or on the horns of this beast because it represents a subject province rather than one with independent ruling authority. But it does speak like a dragon. And

that means that the dragon-like behaviour we have observed in the sea-beast is mirrored both by the rulers and the people in Asia. Asia was of course a province nominally controlled by the Roman senate and governed by a Roman governor (proconsul) probably located at Pergamum. Later in Revelation the land-beast will be called the False Prophet (Rev. 16:13); it is a title which suggests that Asia was to act as the sea-beast's publicity agent with the function of demonstrating to the world the benefits of Roman rule.

So John lists the following features of the land-beast:

- *Authority.* It exercises the authority of the sea-beast in its (Rome's) presence. Rome had officials resident in Asia whose role was to enforce the worship of the sea-beast – the one whose wound was healed, i.e. Rome under the Flavians and later rulers (Rev. 13:12).
- *It is a false prophet.* Prophets, whether false or true, are expected to authenticate their ministry with signs and wonders (Deut. 13:1, Mark 13:22, 2Thes.2:9). The signs referred in John's vision are not necessarily literal ones, though magic and pseudo-miracles were not unheard of at the time, as Paul's experience demonstrates (Acts 13:6-8, Acts 16:16). It is more likely that the false prophet's means of deception was to provide spectacular public works of various kinds – temples to the Emperor and the local gods, an amphitheater (like the one in Ephesus) with games and public entertainments of various kinds – all to impress and to persuade the people of Rome's god-like status in the world. John's vision describes these evidences as 'great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of the people'. John is drawing his imagery from the occasion when Elijah as a true prophet, faced the false prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1Kings 18:38); Rome's manifestations of 'power' in Asia were a kind of parody of Elijah's demonstration of the power of the true God (Rev.13:13).
- *It is a deceiver.* The subject people of Asia are to be persuaded to conform willingly to the prototype community in Rome –

figuratively speaking making an image of the beast that was wounded. And it brings this sea-beastly image to life by re-enacting the oppressive practices of the Roman Emperors (Rev. 13:14-15).

- *Its followers are sealed by the beast.* Everyone, whether free or slave, rich or poor, was to demonstrate their loyalty to the State by conforming to Roman law and Roman ways, both in their minds (marked on the forehead) and in their actions (on the right hand) (Rev. 13:16). In effect, the land beast is an evangelizing agent for the Roman way of life and practice. John is deliberately misapplying the imagery of the seal sequence in which the elect were sealed on their foreheads to the beast (Rev. 7:3). John is also offering a parody of Jewish piety recalling the way that the law of God was to be enshrined in thought and deed (Deut. 6:8) – a practice leading to the use of phylacteries bound to head and hand (Mat. 23:5).
- *There are everyday consequences.* There is even a suggestion that in order to conduct everyday business, outward evidences of loyalty to the State might be required (the mark of the beast). And bearing in mind Paul's experience with the silversmiths in Ephesus (Acts 19:24-27), it is easy to see how such difficulties could arise for Christians living in a Roman province (Rev. 13:17).

The number of the beast

“This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.” (Rev 13:18)

In the final verse of this prophecy (Rev. 13:18) John tells us that the number of the beast is six-hundred and sixty six (not 666). He tells us that it is the number of a man, or possibly, that it is a human number. John thus presents us with a numerical puzzle which he says calls for wisdom. The first question we should probably ask is, which beast is John referring to? It is reasonable to assume, as most commentators do, that the beast referred to is the Roman beast – making no

distinction between sea-beast or land-beast. What solutions then have been offered? It is fair to say that most solutions are unsatisfactory in that they add little to the message of John's letter and quite often detract from it. It is usually taken to be an example of 'gematria'. Since neither Hebrew or Greek have a separate number system (like our Arabic numerals), in order to specify numbers in writing, the letters of the respective alphabets were given values so that letters could be used in place of numbers. This meant of course, that the value of a word or sentence could be calculated simply by adding up the value of the letters it contained. The earliest solution of John's puzzle using this technique was the Greek word '*lateinos*' which was suggested by Irenaeus (AD 130-202). *Lateinos* refers to the race (or individual) whose language was Latin. It's a term which originally applied to the Roman people but was later extended to refer to the Roman Catholic Church. As far as this commentary is concerned, six-hundred and sixty six as a number representing the population of the Roman empire of John's day (*lateinos*) would certainly provide a reasonable solution to John's puzzle. The idea however, popular in some Protestant circles, that six-hundred and sixty six represents the Roman Catholic Church does not seem appropriate, since Revelation's visions have nothing to say about Papal matters. After all, the Roman Catholic church hardly existed at the time John wrote Revelation, and in any case issues of a doctrinal or moral nature in the church are dealt with in Revelation by Christ's messages to the churches (Rev. 2-3).

The most popular modern solution to John's numerical challenge is that six-hundred and sixty six is a sum obtained by adding the value of the letters in the title 'Nero Caesar', though to make this work the title has to be written in Hebrew in a slightly unusual form (Richard Bauckham explains this eloquently in his book "The Climax of Prophecy"). This solution however, has some superficial credibility in that Nero was a well-known figure at the time Revelation was written and was certainly notorious for his involvement in the early history of Christianity. However, we took the view earlier that the head of the Roman beast that was slain was not Nero personally, but the Julio-Claudian dynasty of which Nero was merely the last in the line. The

undue emphasis that this unique numerical feature of John's account places on a notorious emperor is thus reduced.

There is in fact, another way of looking at the number six-hundred and sixty six which is suggested by John's use of numbers elsewhere in the prophecy. We have observed that the number seven signifies completeness, probably arising from the 7-day creation account. Although the number six does not feature symbolically elsewhere in Revelation, it would be entirely consistent with John's use of numbers for him to see six as the number of man. Man was created on the sixth day; although the first created man was proclaimed 'very good' (Gen. 1:31), he turned out to be rather less than the perfection suggested by seven. Six might then signify human fallibility. But why repeat the number three times? John of course did not write 666 as we might do using Arabic numerals, he actually wrote the number in full: 'hexakosioi hexekonta hex' – sixhundred sixty six. The three sixes (*the hex syllables*) would certainly stand out suggesting that the number incorporated a threefold emphasis on the six of human imperfection. More significantly though, the resulting number would be a large number and therefore appropriate to represent the size and strength of the Roman beast. It is a number which John will implicitly contrast with the far greater number (144,000) of the army of God in the next chapter. It is to this vision we must now turn.

The 144,000 on Mt. Zion

At the beginning of Revelation 14 the scene dramatically changes:

“Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps ...” (Rev 14:1-2)

John is no longer observing beasts portraying the antagonism of Rome to Christians, he is now seeing a vision of Mount Zion where the Lamb

stands with 144,000 who have his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. Mount Zion is a name for a hill in Jerusalem from which the city of David was named (2Sam. 5:7); Zion later became the name of the site of the first Temple in Jerusalem. In the Psalms and the prophets, Zion continues to refer to Jerusalem but it takes on a spiritual significance which expresses Israel's future deliverance and security (e.g. Psa. 2:6, Psa. 14:7, Is. 2:3, Is. 37:32, Joel 2:32). Many commentators suggest that the heavenly vision in Revelation 14 refers to a future age, and is intended to give reassurance to his readers about the final outcome of their struggle with the beasts. But it seems more likely that John is now being shown a 'heavenly' view (i.e. God's view) of the same beastly battleground he has just been describing (Rev. 13). The experience of Elisha's servant explains the situation exactly (2Kings 6:15-17). Elisha's servant was in Dothan and an invading army around the city was threatening his safety – it was an aggressive beast, you might say, about to pounce. The young man appealed to Elisha for reassurance, and in response, Elisha asked God to open the young man's eyes. When his eyes were opened he could see that the mountains around the city was full of horses and chariots of fire – the army of the Lord. Elisha is able to tell his servant, 'those who are with us are more than those who are with them'. Hezekiah facing the might of Assyria makes the same point (2Chron. 32:7). Without divine eyesight a Christian living in the Roman Empire would only see the aggressive forces of the beasts threatening them (Revelation 13); when his eyes were divinely opened however, he would see 144,000 redeemed by the blood of Christ standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion within the spiritual security of the New Jerusalem – and he would be one of them. John is telling his readers that the beasts might look threatening, but the forces on their side vastly outnumber the forces on the side of the beasts.

We have, of course, already considered the 144,000 when we discussed Revelation 7:4-8 in an earlier chapter. There, we argued that John listed the 144,000 following a pattern similar to that in Numbers where a census of all in Israel who were able to go to war is recorded (Num. 1:2-16). We also pointed out that 144,000 in Revelation is a rather special number. The new Jerusalem is 12,000

stadia in each direction and its walls are 144 cubits thick (Rev 21:16-17); it is the Bride, made up of both Old and New Testament followers of Christ. The 144,000 therefore, is the army of the Lamb, Jews and Gentiles, elect from all nations having the name of the Lamb and the name of Father on their foreheads. The description of the 144,000 in Revelation 14 reinforces the view that they are the army of the Lamb because not only are they described as 'those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes' but also as 'those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure' (Rev. 14:4-5). We pointed out in the earlier chapter that this defines them as those who have prepared themselves to meet God (Exodus 19:15) and as the army of God in the field (Deut. 23:9-10, 1 Samuel 21:5). As John attempts to comprehend the vision of the 144,000, he hears a remarkable endorsement of them from the occupants of the heavenly throne-room:

“And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth.”
(Rev 14:2-3)

John take us back to the vision of the throne room when the slain lamb (the Lion of Judah) was declared worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals (Rev. 5). In this vision the four living creatures and the twenty four elders with harps in their hands fell down before the Lamb, and they sing a new song; it was a song thanking God that the Lamb was worthy to break the seals and to ransom people for God. The passage quoted above is one of the few in the second half of the Revelation in which the elders and the living creatures feature. In the seal sequence we regarded them as the agents by which elect individuals were sealed for God. Here in Revelation 14 it is not the elders who sing but the 144,000. And they sing a new song before the throne and before the elders and the living creatures – moreover, it is a song that only the 144,000 could learn. In the vision of Revelation 5 the elders hold their

harps; in this vision a voice is heard from heaven which sounds as though harps are being played. And yet at the same time, John hears what must surely be divine voices sounding like 'many waters' and 'loud thunder' (Eze. 1:24, Eze. 43:2, Rev. 1:15, Rev. 19:6, Exe. 19:19, Job 40:2). Earlier, the song was celebrating the triumphant Christ, here it appears to be an endorsement of the victorious army of the Lamb. The 144,000 are blameless, having been redeemed from sin by the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 14:5). They wait as souls under the altar for their cry 'How Long O Lord' to be answered, for the arrival of the time when they will be called from their graves (Rev. 6:10). And just as the commitment of the Lamb himself led him to the cross, so too the Lord's spiritual army will fight the Lord's spiritual battles to the death if required.

The 144,000 are referred to as 'firstfruits' implying a numerically larger main crop to come (Rev. 14:4b). In some respects it would seem natural to link the idea of firstfruits to the harvest which will take place when the son of man comes on a cloud (Rev. 14:14). Since however the 144,000 itself represents the fulness of those redeemed in this age, it would seem more appropriate to take the term 'firstfruits' as applied to the 144,000 as seeing them as the firstfruits of a future unnumbered community of people which will result from God's ultimate redemption of the world.

Three messages

We have argued above that Revelation 12-14 spans two millennia of human history from the birth of Christ to his return. These are the years in which the army of the Lamb faces the powers of this world (the beasts). Jesus through John now gives three warning messages which are crucial to this time of spiritual warfare (Rev. 14:6-13). To a world obsessed with the worship of the beasts, they offer final warnings to the effect that the judgements of the Lord are imminent: 'for the hour of his judgement is come' (Rev. 14:7). The messages are:

- *The eternal gospel proclaimed.* John sees an angel flying

overhead proclaiming the eternal gospel to all mankind. The phrase 'flying overhead' is used several times in Revelation (Rev. 8:13, 14:6,19:17), and simply indicates that the angel's message will be worldwide. John declares the worldwide scope of this proclamation only in connection with the first angel's message, but we are probably intended to see this applying to the messages of all three angels. What is proclaimed is the eternal (everlasting) gospel, and it is to be proclaimed to the world's population – 'nations and tribes and languages and people'. But although this 'gospel' will of course include salvation by grace in Christ (the Gospel), its scope is to be much broader. It specifically addresses the dragon and the beast's misapprehension of the true source of authority. Rather than usurping the authority of God to themselves, they should 'fear God and give him glory ... and worship him as the creator of heaven, earth, sea and springs of water' (Rev. 14:7). The message is clear and urgent: the time has come to choose between true and false worship before the Lord returns and it is too late.

- *Babylon will surely fall.* The second angel states as a divinely ordained certainty that Babylon and all it represents will end, and so will the influence she exerts on the nations. John's readers would have known Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon as the oppressor of God's people and the destroyer of Israel's Temple. They would also know what the prophets said about the judgements of God against her. It's very likely that the Christians of John's era would already have made the connection between Rome and ancient Babylon (1Pet. 5:13). This angel's message was that Rome and all it stood for would just as surely fall as had ancient Babylon. More details will be offered in John's later visions.
- *Consequences.* The third angel makes it abundantly clear what the consequences would be of ignoring the first angel's message and continuing to worship the beast. Those that do so will retain the mark of the beast on their foreheads and hands, a mark which identifies them as those who will drink the wine of God's wrath. The message is a warning of the grape harvest to

come (Rev. 14:18-20). To conclude the angel's message there follows a dramatic account of punishment (Rev. 14:10b-11). This passage is one of Revelation's hard sayings. It stands alongside the various mentions of the lake of fire later in the prophecy (Rev. 19:20, 20:14-15, 21:8). It is unclear whether we should take these statements literally, or whether they are intended to speak to us in dramatic terms of sinners' permanent separation from God. Either way, the consequences are severe in the extreme.

Appropriately, the section ends with a call for the endurance of the saints (Rev. 14:12) and a blessing on those who have fought the battle to the end and who may now rest from the conflict:

"And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: 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).

Events associated with the return of Christ

We have already spoken of events associated with the return of Christ to the earth earlier in this commentary. We saw that events resulting from the opening of the of the sixth seal were associated with the time of the end – an earthquake, darkening of the sun and the moon turned to blood, the fig tree (Israel) being shaken, the day of God's wrath coming (Rev. 6:12-17). Then the seventh trumpet blast revealed the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel when the worldly kingdom becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. We explored the events which the elders said would follow the installation of Christ as king – the nations raging against Christ's rule and God's wrathful response, the resurrection and the rewarding of the dead in the Lord and the destruction of the destroyers.

Now in Revelation 14 we are presented with another view of these events, this time in the form of two harvests. We have considered the first of these, the grain harvest, earlier in this chapter. The son of man

comes on a cloud with a sharp sickle in his hand; he waits to receive the command to reap from an angel who brings the word from the temple throne room (Rev. 14:14-16). The word is spoken, 'put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe' (Rev. 14:15). The second harvest is a grape harvest, the 'vintage' of the earth.

"Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, 'Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.'" (Rev. 14:17-18)

In this case, 'another' angel emerges from the heavenly temple with a sharp sickle. It is worth noting that whereas the grain harvest is described as having been reaped by Christ in person, the grape harvest will be reaped by an unidentified angel – a reflection presumably of the fact that the grape harvest involves the outpouring of the wrath of God. This angel too waits for the command to act. This time however the command comes from the altar within the temple and is transmitted through the agency of the angel who has authority over fire – fire is a common Biblical figure for judgement (Mat. 18:8, Luke 9:54, 2 Thess. 1:7). This combination of altar and fire suggests that the altar involved was the altar of burnt offering, the altar at the base of which the blood of the sacrifices were poured. We shall see the significance of this when we consider the bowls of God's wrath in the next chapter. The angel gathers the grapes and throws them into the winepress of the wrath of God. Again, the winepress is a familiar Biblical figure for the execution of God's judgements (Isa. 63:3, Lam. 1:15, Joel 3:12-14) – the Joel reference includes both a harvest and a vintage.

The winepress was trodden outside the city (Rev. 14:20). Cities in Revelation represent communities of people, either like the population of Babylon, people in opposition to God, or like the residents of the new Jerusalem, those redeemed by God. In this Revelation passage

Jesus probably has the latter in mind. It is tempting to link the statement that the winepress was trodden outside the city with the fact that Jesus was crucified outside the city of Jerusalem (John 19:20, Heb. 13:12), but there is probably a more appropriate Biblical link. Later in Revelation, the future Jerusalem is referred to as the 'camp of the saints' and the 'beloved city' (Rev. 20:9). This suggests that the statement that the winepress is to be trodden 'outside the camp' is a reflection of the law's frequent demand that anything that would pollute the camp of Israel should be dealt with 'outside the camp' (Lev. 6:11, 13:46, Num. 5:3, Deut. 23:12-14). Those destroyed in the winepress of the wrath of God would have no place in the camp of the saints or in the holy city.

The blood flow resulting from the action of the winepress was both deep and extensive (Rev. 14:20). Pressing the details further is hardly helpful. There is little doubt however that the judgements encapsulated in this figure of the winepress, following as it does the grain harvest, will be a major topic in the remainder of John's visions. In fact, the remainder of the visions of Revelation will be concerned with the events that will follow the return of Christ to the earth – in particular, the redemption and purification of the nations and the establishment of God's worldwide kingdom.

Chapter 12. The first four bowls of God's wrath

John's vision (Revelation 15-16:1-9)

John has seen the son of man (Christ) reaping the harvest of the earth; it is an event which is immediately followed by another angel who gathers the grapes of the earth and throws them into the winepress of God's wrath. Now he sees another amazing sign in heaven: seven angels appear with seven plagues representing the final outpouring of God's wrath. Inside the heavenly throne-room he sees those who have conquered the beast singing the song of Moses and the Lamb. Also inside the throne room he sees the sanctuary of the tent of witness opened to allow the seven angels with seven plagues to emerge. These plague angels are each given a golden bowl of God's wrath.

The seven plague angels are then commanded to pour out their bowls of wrath on the earth (Gk: gē). The first four bowls are poured out on different parts of the created order: land (Gk: gē), sea, rivers and springs of water, and the sun. In each case, the consequences of the outpouring of the wrath of God is described.

Note: As we have observed earlier, the Greek word *gē* can mean earth or country or land (including land as distinct from sea). It would seem that when the term is used to distinguish the four parts of the created order, the translation 'land' is appropriate.

Plagues of wrath

After the visions of the harvests (grain and grape) John tells us that he sees another great and amazing sign in heaven:

"Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished." (Rev 15:1)

The word translated plague (Gk: *plēgē*) in this verse does not refer to the kind of infectious viral infections we know of from our contemporary experience of disease. It's a word which refers to a blow or a non-fatal wound such as was received by the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30) or by the Apostle Paul (2Cor. 6:5); it's also the word used to describe the wound received by the beast in Revelation – though in this case the wound was fatal (Rev. 13:12). So these seven angels were authorised to inflict wounds or blows on mankind.

More importantly we are told that these plagues (blows) are a manifestation of the wrath of God, and that when the seven plagues are over, the wrath of God is finished. There are several graphic visions in the book of Revelation which convey the horrific consequences of the outpouring of God's wrath – notably the great supper of God in Revelation 19. Because such horrors seem completely at variance with a loving God, it is important that we try to understand the divine motive behind the outpouring of wrath. Both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New have several words which are translated into English as anger or wrath. In the New Testament, the most frequently used Greek words are *orgē* and *thumos*. According to the lexicons the first of these (*orgē*) is anger which has arisen gradually to the point where it is a settled state of mind, whereas *thumos* is an outburst of passionate anger quickly boiling up and as quickly dissipating. In many Biblical contexts these differences of meaning are not always clearly distinguished. However, the above definition of *orgē* certainly fits Paul's use of the word in Romans in which 'standing under the wrath (*orgē*) of God' is a description of the status of those who are not in covenant relation with him (Rom.1:18, 9:22, see also John 3:36). And because they are standing under God's wrath, unless they change their status by true repentance, they will reap the negative consequences of wrath in the last day, (Luke 3:7, 21:23, Rom 2:5, 12:19, 13:5, 1Thess. 1:10, 2:16).

Wrath in John's visions

In Revelation both the above words for anger are used, and since John is careful about his use of language, paying attention to his choice of

words ought to be helpful to our understanding. Anger (*orgē*) is used in the first half of Revelation (Chs. 1-11) in a similar way to that in which the New Testament quotations cited above use the word; they refer largely to God's last day judgements – as for example in the sixth seal (Rev. 6:16, 6:17) and the seventh trumpet (Rev. 11:18). In the second part of Revelation (Chs. 12-22) John more often uses the stronger term *thumos* in place of *orgē* when describing God's 'outbursts of wrath' – as for example when he describes the wrath of God inflicted on the worshippers of the beast (Rev. 14:10, 14:19), or on those subjected to the bowls of wrath (Rev. 15:1, 15:7, 16:1), or on those involved in the fall of Babylon (Rev. 16:19), or on the recipients of Christ's judgements (Rev. 19:15). In fact, in the final two of these references, John uses both words together, and most modern English translators translate *thumos* as fierceness or fury and *orgē* as wrath:

“From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury (thumos) of the wrath (orgē) of God the Almighty.” (Rev 19:15)

One gets the sense from John's use of these terms that the anger (*orgē*) of God is an ever present state of the divine mind about the evil that exists in creation, but that the time will come when this incipient anger will boil over into an outburst of judgemental wrath (*thumos*). There is a further etymological twist to this story. The lexicons point out that the word *thumos* has at its root the verb *thuō*, and *thuō* is generally translated 'sacrificed' or 'killed by sacrifice'; the same root is found in the noun sacrifice (*thusia*). The lexicons do not suggest any connection between the meanings of wrath (*thumos*) and sacrifice (*thuō*), but as we shall see shortly, this somewhat puzzling etymological connection certainly seems relevant to the fact that the plagues of wrath are poured out from bowls.

Bowls of wrath

The seven plague angels emerge from the heavenly sanctuary to be given golden bowls full of the wrath of God. The Greek word for this

particular vessel is *phialē*, a term which is mostly translated ‘bowls’ in modern versions. But they were rather special bowls. In Revelation the word is used on one occasion for bowls of incense (Rev. 5:8) but in the majority of occasions they are bowls of wrath. In the Greek Old Testament *phialē* is the word overwhelmingly applied to the bowls used for handling the blood of the sacrifices in the Tabernacle or Temple services. The Old Testament sacrificial system, was based on the principle that the life was in the blood, and that the blood of the sacrificial animal stood for the life of the one offering the sacrifice. In the sacrifice, this ‘life’ was returned to God (in practice destroyed), when the blood was poured out at the base of the altar. It was a principle which applied to both an individual sinner and to the nation of Israel through the sacrificial ritual of the Day of Atonement. But of course, there were two sides to the law’s sacrificial system; for those in the covenant, the shedding of blood was not only a means of symbolically destroying the sinner’s sin-tainted ‘life’ it was at the same time the means of redeeming the sinner – the souls under the altar in the fifth seal were awaiting their redemption at the very place where the sacrificial blood was poured out. For those outside the covenant however, judgement might well involve the shedding of blood but there was no corresponding redemption.

When Israel was required to exterminate the pagan nations as part of the process of entering the promised land and cleansing it of pagan worship, the Old Testament writers wrote that these nations were ‘devoted to destruction’ (ESV) – ‘utterly destroyed’ (AV) (e.g. Exo. 22:20, Deut. 7:2, 20:17-18, Jos. 6:17, 1Sam. 15:3, 15:18-19 and many others). The Hebrew term used in these passages is *charam* which carries the sense of removing something which should not continue in common use but should be dedicated to God (often by destruction). [John Walton and J Harvey Walton have written an extensive analysis of this concept in “The lost world of the Israelite Conquest”.] Thus, in the context of both the purging of the land by Israel in the time of Joshua and the annihilation of the forces of evil in the world according to John’s visions, life initially given by God, (the Canaanites in Joshua’s day or the aggressors in John’s) will be devoted by him to destruction because it stands in the way of the fulfillment of the divine

purpose. If this is indeed the function of the bowls of wrath it seems more positive to think of the outpouring of God's wrath not as punishment (although it might well involve that) but as the means by which God will remove impurity in the world in order to restore it to the state for which it was created.

The interpretation offered in this commentary has placed considerable interpretive weight on the Biblical meanings of the key symbols: lampstands, seals and trumpets. The symbol of the poured out bowls of God's wrath is no less powerful in its implications. The bowl (*phialē*) was the means by which the process of disposing of sin was effected in the sacrificial ritual. In Revelation, the bowl becomes the symbol of God's way of 'devoting to destruction' all that stands in opposition to his purposes. The outpoured bowl judgements are not therefore arbitrary punishments but have the sacrificial purpose of cleansing and redeeming the earth.

When are the bowls poured out?

In the previous chapter we noted that towards the end of Revelation 14 John records the vision of the son of man reaping the harvest of the earth. It is a harvest which brings human history as we know it to an end and establishes Christ's rule on earth. In Revelation 15 and 16 John tells us about the pouring out of the bowls of God's wrath, so that if Revelation 14, 15 and 16 are in chronological order we might infer that the bowls of wrath (chs. 15 and 16) will be poured out after Christ has returned (ch. 14); it is an inference however which needs confirmation. When reviewing the seventh trumpet in which Christ is clearly in the earth again ('the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ' (Rev. 11:15)), we observed that the divine title, 'God Almighty, who is and who was' had been truncated by the omission of the phrase 'who is to come' because it is clear that the Lord has already 'come' (Rev. 11:17). It is significant therefore that we find the truncated divine title used again in connection with the outpouring of the third bowl of wrath: 'Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgements' (Rev. 16:5). The omission of the phrase 'who is to come' from the divine title would

appear therefore to confirm that the bowls of wrath are poured out when the Lord is in the earth once more.

The Song of Moses and the Lamb

As though to counterbalance the alarming statement that God's wrath is about to be poured out, before hearing the details, John is reassured by another representation of the redeemed:

“And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire —and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, “Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!” (Rev. 15:2-3)

In the previous chapter (Rev. 14) John had been shown the 144,000 army of God facing the beasts. Now he sees what might well be the same group of people, but this time they are not warriors but conquerors. We have spoken of the sea of glass earlier in this commentary (Chapter 3) where we concluded that it represents the essential cleansing function needed before sinful humanity could enter God's Temple. In the vision we are currently considering, the redeemed were standing beside the sea as though they had just emerged from it; the water in the sea was mingled with fire, showing that the cleansing process was not without the fire of adversity. But the redeemed had conquered the beast and all it stood for (number and name) by the blood of the Lamb. They hold in their hands the harps of God and sing a song of deliverance – the song of Moses and the Lamb. Once again there are similarities between John's description of the 144,000 in Revelation 15 and 14, but also significant differences. In the vision of Revelation 14 the 144,000 were singing a 'new song' which was an extension of an earlier 'new song' (Rev. 5:9); it was a song giving thanks for the deliverance 'in Christ' which qualified them to face the beasts as the army of God. The redeemed

of Revelation 15 were singing the song of Moses and the Lamb. This was a song not of imputed victory 'in Christ', but of victory attained.

“And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, ‘Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.’” (Rev 15:3-4)

The song of Moses celebrated the escape of Israel from Egyptian bondage and the triumph of God over the oppressor (Exo. 15:1-18). It concludes with a statement of the practical reality of what Moses' deliverance would mean for Israel:

“You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established. The LORD will reign forever and ever.” (Exo 15:17-18)

At the time of the Exodus, God was Israel's king and Moses was his servant. In New Testament times the Lamb (Christ) was not only 'the king of the Jews' but the designated 'king of the nations' (Psalm 2); moreover, he was more than a servant, he was the Son (Heb. 3:5-6). And the deliverance wrought by the Son was not a passing historical phase as was Israel's tenure of the promised land in Old Testament times, but an eternal and universal new age – 'all nations will come and worship you for your righteous acts have been revealed' (Rev. 15:4b). God's righteous acts (Gk: *dikaïomata* – righteousnesses) 'have been revealed', an aorist tense indicating a completed past action, in all probability the redemption wrought in Christ. It was a divine act which will find its completion when 'all nations will come' to worship (in the future).

The plague angels emerge

After John has heard the joyous song of the redeemed and the promise of future fulfillment, he is recalled to the reality of the outpouring of the wrath of God on a sinful earth:

“After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever” (Rev 15:5-7)

John, still in the heavenly Temple where he had seen the conquerors standing beside the sea of glass, now sees something totally unexpected; he sees the sanctuary of the tent of witness opened to allow the seven plague angels to emerge. When reviewing the seventh trumpet vision (chapter 9) we commented on how surprising it was that John should see the ark of the covenant located in the heavenly Temple. It was surprising because to the Jews the ark represented God’s throne in Israel, and we suggested that the fact that John saw the ark in heaven showed that at this point in time the Jews had finally accepted Jesus as their Messiah, and were now fully integrated into God’s heavenly operations. In the vision we are currently considering John sees not the ark alone, but the whole ‘tent of witness’ which in Old Testament times was the Tabernacle in which the ark was housed. The ‘witness’ referred to was God’s law written on the tablets of stone which were kept in the ark.

The original Tabernacle was of course, the portable dwelling place of God in Israel which moved with the people as they journeyed from Egypt to the promised land. John now sees seven angels with seven plagues emerging not from the heavenly Temple directly, but from the sanctuary (the Holy of Holies) of the tent of witness which was in the heavenly Temple. What could this mean? We have demonstrated earlier that the plagues are to be poured out when Christ the king is ruling in Israel and the Jewish nation is restored to its place in the

purpose of God. Moreover, when evaluating the angel's commission to John to measure the Temple as part of the trumpet sequence (Rev. 11:1), we suggested that such a commission may well imply a reinstatement of a specifically Jewish form of worship. And it does not seem inappropriate that with the Lord in control in the earth once more, that the plagues of wrath should emanate from such a focus of the divine presence (Isa. 2:3). Even so, why in the vision should the plague angels emerge from a re-established 'tent of meeting' rather than from the heavenly Temple itself?

Bowls and Trumpets

The seven bowls of wrath and the seven trumpets both fall into two groups, a set of four followed by a set of three. In the case of the trumpets it seemed fairly clear that the first four were not necessarily sequential or precisely located geographically, but occurred throughout the whole Christian era and wherever the diaspora had taken the Jewish people. The final three however, were specifically 'woe' trumpets and appeared to be moving events forward to the crucial event announced by the seventh trumpet. A similar pattern would seem to apply to the bowls of wrath, though the text itself does not indicate a clear division between the first four and the final three. The first four bowls are poured out on areas 'labelled' by John's fourfold division of the created order – land, sea, rivers and springs of water, and heavenly bodies (Rev. 16:2-9). The areas affected by the final three bowls are however rather different; they are poured out on the seat of the beast, on the river Euphrates and into the air (Rev. 16:10,12,17). We shall suggest that like the trumpets, the first four bowls are not geographically specific, nor are they necessarily sequential. The final three however are broader in scope and move us towards the completion of the outpouring of God's wrath.

In the case of the first set of four, the areas who hear the first four trumpet blasts are virtually the same as those upon which the bowls of wrath are poured out. The first three trumpets affect the land, the sea (salt water) and the rivers and springs of water (fresh water), and these are the same divisions of the 'created order' over which the first three

bowls are poured out. The fourth trumpet affects the sun, moon and stars and the fourth bowl is poured out on the sun. There are also parallels of a slightly different kind between the three woe trumpets and the final three bowls of wrath which we shall consider later. We will shortly be evaluating the nature of the events represented by these bowls of wrath but for the moment, we need to consider further this apparent parallelism between trumpets and bowls? Is there any significance in the fact that both trumpets and bowls use almost the same four divisions of creation as the areas to be affected? It may be that these divisions, both in the case of the trumpets and the bowls, are simply intended to reflect the widespread nature of the effects involved. It seems possible however, that there is more to it than this. In dealing with the trumpets we have argued earlier that the first four trumpet blasts were sufferings brought by God on scattered Israel to persuade them to return to him. The sufferings thus represented have often occurred as a result of aggressive attitudes towards the Jews by the nations in whose midst they have been obliged to live. These aggressive attitudes would appear to be something that God cannot ignore. The Jews, though widely dispersed, are still God's people and there is plenty of Old Testament evidence to show that God is not slow to execute retribution on the enemies of his people or on aggression directed towards the land of Israel.

The work of the plague angels

In Old Testament times when God chastised Israel by allowing them to suffer at the hand of their neighbours, God still punished the aggressors for their aggression. Both Assyria and Babylon were agents of God in his dealings with wayward Israel (Isa. 8:6-8, Jer. 21:7,10), but these nations were nevertheless punished by God for their treatment of the Jews (Isa. 10:12, Jer. 50:18, Jer. 25:12). Similarly the nations surrounding Israel were strongly condemned by God for their attitude to the people of Israel or towards their land and we are clearly told that as a result they would incur divine retribution (Psa. 83:2-18, Eze. 28:26, 35: 5-15, 36:1-15, Oba. 1:10-16, Zep. 2:10-13). God speaking through Jeremiah is outspoken about his intention

to restore his Old Testament people despite their backsliding, and to punish those nations who have been Israel's aggressors:

“Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured, and all your foes, every one of them, shall go into captivity; those who plunder you shall be plundered, and all who prey on you I will make a prey.” (Jer. 30:16)

Of course, most of these references are pre-Christian, but they are nevertheless indicative of God's concern for his people and his land. It may well be therefore, that the reason the bowls of wrath parallel the trumpet blasts as they do, is because they involve some kind of divine response to the nations' attitude to God's people or his land over the centuries. But the retribution of God is to be poured out on the nations not only because of their aggressive treatment of Jews. In Christian times, God's people includes not only the historic people of God (the Jews), but also all those who have come to God through Christ and who have also suffered persecution at the hands of those opposed to their Christianity. This would seem to be the reason for the surprising fact that the golden bowls full of the wrath of God are given to the seven plague angels by one of the living creatures; after all, the living creatures were the very agents in the seal sequence whose role it was to bring people to God through Christ (Rev. 15:7). John does not tell us which of the four living creatures was involved and it really doesn't matter, but it is tempting to associate this activity with the first living creature, for he it was who called forth the white horse who came out 'conquering and to conquer', thus offering the gospel of salvation to all who would hear.

The idea that the bowls of wrath might be divine reprisals against the enemies of the people of God is confirmed by the fact that in response to the outpouring of the third bowl, there follows the angelic comment, 'for they (those on whom the plague has been inflicted) have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you (God) have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve' (Rev. 16:6). It is a comment which indicates that retribution is certainly a factor in the outpouring of the bowls of wrath. And it is retribution which originates from the only

authority justified in exacting such retribution – the one who said ‘Vengeance is mine I will repay, says the Lord’ (Rom. 12:19, Deut. 32:43). It is worth noticing also, that the plague angels are clothed in pure bright (white) linen with golden sashes around their chests (Rev. 15:6). The pure bright linen identifies the high moral purity of the messengers and their mission, and the golden sashes correspond to the sash worn by the risen Lord in John’s opening vision. In discussing that vision, we associated Christ’s robe and sash with his priestly role, and it may well be, as we suggested earlier, that the outpouring of the wrath of God was a priestly task – a sacrificial cleansing process.

The glory of God fills the Temple

Linked to this in John’s account is the rather puzzling fact that the sanctuary from which the plague angels emerged was filled with smoke from the glory of God and no one could enter the sanctuary until the plagues were ended (Rev. 15:8). This manifestation of the divine glory is a repeat of similar theophanies which occurred following both the initial erection of the tent of witness (Exo. 40:34) and the dedication of Solomon’s Temple (1Kings 8:10-12). On both of those occasions, the presence of God made it impossible for anyone to enter the sanctuary; in the case of the tent of witness it was Moses who couldn’t enter, and in the case of Solomon’s Temple it was the priests. The effect of God’s presence in the sanctuary was that entry to the Tabernacle/Temple by human intermediaries was temporarily suspended just as it was whilst the action of the plague angels was in progress (Rev. 15:8). However, what is significant about this event is not that human beings are excluded but that God is visibly present.

The concept of a visible presence of God makes it natural to wonder whether the sanctuary being referred to in connection with the plagues is a literal sanctuary (Rev. 15:8). We suggested earlier that the commission to John to measure the Temple (Rev. 11:1) may have been implying the reinstatement of a Jewish form of Temple worship; such a reinstatement, was after all, promised through Jeremiah (Jer. 33:17-18). And it would be entirely appropriate that a future theophany

as we have seen associated with the outpouring of the plagues should occur at such a revived Jewish sanctuary – a Temple perhaps such as Ezekiel's. The manifestation of divine power would then signal the beginning of a new era of Jewish worship just as the Old Testament precedents cited above had done. Is this perhaps the ultimate fulfillment of Haggai's prophecy?:

“And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.” (Hag 2:7-9)

Haggai was encouraging the Jews returning from exile to build the second Temple. But the second Temple even as extended by Herod (and destroyed by the Romans) had, as far as we know, never experience a manifestation of the glory of God such as that predicted by Haggai. And Zechariah extends Haggai's prophecy in a most dramatic way. He is told to take silver and gold brought back by some returning exiles and have these metals made into a crown (Zech. 6:10-11). He is then to place the crown, not on the head of someone from the kingly line, but on the head of Joshua the high priest. He then gives this king-priest the Messianic title, the Branch, and he is told that the Branch will build the Temple of the Lord and will sit an rule on his throne as both King and Priest (Zech. 6:12-13). There is of course, a sense that these prophecies were spiritually fulfilled when Christ came 2000 years ago to establish a temple not made with hands, but surely there is room for a more complete, and perhaps a more literal fulfillment, when the King returns.

The first four bowls of wrath

“Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.” (Rev 16:1)

We have already noted that the first four trumpets and bowls were poured out on the four elements of creation: land, sea, rivers and springs of water and the heavenly bodies. We have also suggested that this fact may either be intended to represent the extensive geographic coverage of both the trumpet and bowl events or possibly to indicate how God’s retribitional judgements will be brought on the nations because of their treatment of the people of God (Jews and Christians). John now hears a loud voice from the Temple – the voice of God presumably – instructing the bowl angels to pour out the seven bowls of God’s wrath. Since there appears to be some kind of link between trumpets and bowls (at least in terms of the regions involved) it seems reasonable to ask whether the trumpet and bowl events themselves are linked in any way. The Table below compares the first four trumpet events with the first four bowl events.

Comparing the first four trumpet and bowl events.

	Region	Trumpets (Rev: 8)	Bowls of wrath (Rev: 16)
1	Land	Hail and fire with blood thrown onto the land. One third burned up.	Painful sores inflicted on those bearing the mark of the beast.
2	Sea	Burning mountain thrown into the sea. One third of life destroyed.	Sea become blood – everything dies.
3	Rivers and springs	Star named Wormwood falls from heaven onto the water sources. Bitter water kills many.	Waters become blood. It’s what those affected deserve. It represents justice for the saints.
4	Heavenly bodies	One third of sun, moon and stars darkened.	Sun scorched people with fire. Those affected cursed God but did not repent.

When discussing the trumpets, we attempted to show that the symbology used for the trumpet events – a burning mountain, a star named wormwood, the sun moon and stars darkened – all had specific

significance for the Jews. There is nothing quite like this in the events associated with the outpouring of the first four bowls of bowls of wrath. There is the obvious difference between the two sets of events (trumpets and bowls) in that the trumpet events are partial, one third being affected in each case, whereas the bowls of wrath are potentially unlimited, but nothing more specific. It is also clear that the symbols used to represent the first three bowl events are related to the plagues God inflicted on Egypt.

The first bowl involves painful sores breaking out on those who bore the mark of the beast or who worshipped its image (Rev. 16:2). The Greek term used here for the sores is *helkos* meaning a festering wound or sore; it is the term used in the Greek Old Testament for the boils which affected the Egyptians in the sixth plague (Exo. 9:9-11). The description of the target group as 'those who bore the mark of the beast and who worshipped its image' clearly identify this group as the followers of the beast from the land (Rev. 13:12-16). However, the point of identifying the recipients of this wrath as the 'beastly' inhabitants of Asia is not clear unless it is to indicate that this judgement would be limited in its scale.

Both the second and the third bowls resulted in water being turned to blood (the sea and the rivers and springs respectively), rather like the first Egyptian plague and with similar fatal consequences (Exo. 7:20-21, Rev. 16:3-4). But since the bowls of wrath are also 'plagues' (blows) this connection with the plagues of Egypt is not perhaps surprising or particularly significant. After all, both sets of events are manifestations of the wrath of God against the persecutors of his people.

In the case of the third plague, John hears a response from the angel in charge of the waters (Rev. 16:5-7). We have previously had reason to notice the way that in Revelation certain natural phenomena are associated with angelic control. Here appropriately enough, it is the angel in charge of the waters who comments on God's justice in turning water into blood; how appropriate says the angel, that the people who have 'shed the blood of the saints and prophets are now

given blood to drink, it's what they deserve'. The angel's acknowledgement of God's righteous judgement is endorsed by the altar (Rev. 16:7). John does not say which altar he is referring to, but it seems likely that it was the brazen altar of sacrifice which stood in the Temple courtyard; it was after all, from the base of this altar that the souls of the martyrs in the fifth seal uttered their own call for divine retribution while waiting for God to 'avenge their blood on those who dwell on the earth' (Rev. 6:9-10).

The effect of the fourth bowl is however noticeably different from the first three both in its relationship to the trumpets and in its effect. In the case of the fourth trumpet, the effect was a darkening of sun, moon and stars, and we associated sun, moon and star with Israel through Joseph's dream; the darkening then represented Israel's loss of power and prestige after AD 70. In the bowls of wrath, only the sun is featured and the effect of the bowl was not to darken the sun but to intensify its power:

"The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory."
(Rev. 16:8-9)

It is not easy to interpret such an effect. However, we have argued that these plagues are taking place when Christ is back in the earth as King and it is possible that a scorching sun (the father in Joseph's dream) may well be an appropriate symbol for the divine leadership of a restored Israel. There is after all, evidence from the prophets that the Jews under Christ will be expected to have a part to play at some point in the events of the last days (Oba.1:18, Mal. 4:1-3). Isaiah is explicit about the contribution the restored Israel will make to these end-time events:

"Moreover, the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven

days, in the day when the LORD binds up the brokenness of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.” (Isa 30:26)

Significantly, the purpose of this final outpouring of wrath was not solely to punish but also to persuade those affected to repent and give glory to God. Sadly, it did not achieve this result; instead, those affected responded by cursing the God who had brought this plague upon them.

Implementing the plagues

It might be thought desirable to suggest just how these plagues might be practically implemented, though such speculation is likely to go well beyond what has been revealed. We normally accept that the plagues in Egypt were largely literal – real boils afflicting men, water turned into actual blood (or its equivalent), darkness that could be really felt, literal hail and so on. In the case of the bowls of wrath it seems much more likely that the effects are described largely in symbolic terms. The ‘sores’ of the first bowl could well be some kind of disease directed specifically to those who worshipped the beast, though it hardly seems possible to be more specific.

The effect of turning water into blood represents a consequence which is hardly possible to identify in practical terms. All that one can say is that unlike the first plague it would appear to be an effect which is not specifically targeted. The scorching sun is unique in that it is stated to have the purpose of inducing repentance, though once again exactly how this scorching effect is to be brought about is not revealed. We shall have to be satisfied that these four plagues are a manifestation of the wrath of God directed against those that have opposed his people and his purposes, without knowing the details. We note however, that although judgement must be the primary function of these outpoured bowls, they do not totally exclude a response of repentance from those afflicted. In the next chapter we turn to the outpouring of the final three plagues; and with these, the wrath of God will be ended.

Chapter 13. The final three bowls

John's vision (Revelation 16:10-21)

John has seen the sanctuary of the tent of witness opened to allow the seven angels with seven plagues to emerge. These plague angels have each been given a golden bowl of God's wrath. The first four bowls are poured out on different parts of the created order: land (Gk: gē), sea, rivers and springs of water, and the sun.

The fifth bowl was poured out on the throne of the beast with the result that its kingdom was plunged into darkness. The sixth bowl was poured out on the great river Euphrates and its waters were dried up to prepare the way for kings from the east. Jesus then reminds the recipients of the prophecy that he is coming like a thief, and that they should stay awake. The seventh bowl is poured out into the air and a voice from the Temple says "It is done". The effect of this final bowl is revealed as a series of dramatic events, including a great earthquake, the fall of Babylon, and a severe plague of hail.

Bowls of wrath and the woe trumpets

In the previous chapter we have considered the outpouring of the first four bowls of God's wrath. We have also noted that these events take place after Jesus has returned to this earth and has been established as King in Israel. Moreover, we suggested that there was some kind of a link between the trumpet visions and the outpouring of God's wrath in the bowl visions which is concerned with God's retributive judgements against the oppressors of God's people. In this respect, it is worth bearing in mind that in historical time, all seven trumpets are assumed to occur before Christ becomes King in Jerusalem (since this is the key seventh trumpet event), whereas the bowls of wrath occur after the enthronement of the King.

The final three bowls of God's wrath will intensify the judgements described by the first four bowls, and again there are some very broad correspondences between the bowl events and the trumpet events which had occurred earlier in historic time. Just as the final three trumpets were different in kind from the first four, so the final three bowls are different in kind from the first four. In the case of the trumpets, we were told in John's account that the final three were different and that they were labelled 'woes'; their effects were directed against aggressive peoples (the beast from the bottomless pit, the army from beyond the Euphrates, and those nations who opposed the rule of Christ). The same is true of the final three bowls which are poured out on specified target groups of people.

Whilst there appears therefore to be some kind of parallel between the trumpets and the bowls of wrath, it would not appear to be a very close one, at least in terms of the actual events – a conclusion we have already noted in the previous chapter in the case of the first four bowls. The same seems to be true of a comparison between the fifth and sixth trumpets and bowls. In the case of the trumpets, the fifth trumpet involved the invasion of the people of God by the beast from the bottomless pit, and the sixth trumpet an invasion from beyond the Euphrates. In the case of the bowls, the fifth bowl was targeted on the throne of the beast and the sixth on the water of the river Euphrates. The correspondences between the involvement of the beast in the fifth and the Euphrates in the sixth certainly stands out, but these 'parallels' are by no means precise ones. We should however, probably not entirely lose sight of the possibility that the bowls of God's wrath are in some way a divine response to the adverse treatment of his people. Moreover, if there is a parallel between trumpets and bowls, one might expect there to be one between the seventh bowl and the seventh trumpet. And there is certainly a parallel. The seventh trumpet results in the redemption of the nation of Israel and the seventh bowl in the redemption of the world. But once again, the processes involved in these two outcomes is very different – but then, it could hardly be otherwise.

In considering the bowls of wrath we must always bear in mind that these judgements bring the outpouring of God's wrath to an end (Rev. 15:1). This certainly means that the bowls described in Revelation 16 – the final three especially – will encompass all the judgements of God from the time that Christ takes over as King in Jerusalem, up to the time that Christ's rule is extended to the rest of the world. For this reason, we will assume that the two 'excursuses' given to John by the plague angels (Rev. 17:1 - 19:10 and Rev. 21:9 – 22:9) are explanatory extensions to events which have already been announced during the bowls of wrath. We will now consider the final three bowls of wrath in greater detail.

The fifth bowl

“The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.” (Rev 16:10-11)

When discussing the beasts (Revelation 11) we argued that the beasts' authority, originating with the dragon, was in reality God's authority usurped by human agencies for their own purposes. The target of the fifth bowl is the 'throne of the beast' which presumably represents the controlling authority behind whichever of the beastly powers is involved. But which beast is it? We have encountered three beasts in Revelation – the beast from the bottomless pit (fifth trumpet, Revelation 9), the beast from the sea and the beast from the land (Revelation 13). We noted in the previous chapter that the first bowl was targeted at followers of the 'beast from the land' – those who bore the mark of the beast and who exhibited the spirit of Rome in Asia where the land beast operated. Moreover, we shall find that God's judgements on the beast from the sea forms a major part of the later outpouring of wrath leading up to the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 19:19). So that leaves us with the possibility that the fifth bowl beast is the fifth trumpet beast, the beast from the bottomless pit. In the case of the fifth trumpet, we argued that the beast from the bottomless pit

represented an aggressor of Israel in the last days (Rev. 9:11) – it was the same beast in fact which killed the two witnesses (Rev. 11:7). It is not clear whether this beast was terminally dealt with in the climax of the witnesses' ministry or not (Rev. 11:13), and it is certainly possible that the beast simply withdrew to await another opportunity. It seems then, that the fifth bowl could be describing God's punishment of 'the throne of the beast from the bottomless pit' and Apollyon its king for their opposition to Israel and the establishment of Christ's kingdom (Rev. 9:11). It may in fact be the execution of the 'promise' in the seventh trumpet that the destroyer (Apollyon) would be destroyed (Rev. 11:18).

The effect of the fifth bowl was to plunge the throne of the beast into darkness – similar to the ninth plague of Egypt (Exo. 10:21). It may not necessarily be a darkness which can be 'felt' in the sensory way the Egyptian plague was felt, but in these modern times 'darkness' could imply a number of possibilities including the interruption of vital information flows which could dramatically impair the ability of a nation to function (Rev. 16:10-11). This plague too, would be accompanied by sores as did the first bowl, and once again, the inflicted pain would be an opportunity for repentance. Apparently however, it is an opportunity which will not be taken up (Rev. 16:11).

The sixth bowl

“The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east.” (Rev 16:12)

Just as the judgement of the fifth bowl may be divine retribution for the fifth trumpet invasion, so the sixth bowl can be seen as a divine response to the sixth trumpet. The sixth trumpet we suggested, was an invasion of Israel by a large army (two hundred million troops) from the nations to the east of the river Euphrates. The sixth bowl will be God's judgement on the sixth trumpet aggressors.

At the time the sixth bowl is poured out the Jews will have accepted Christ as King, and the Kingdom of Israel under their new King will be a power to be reckoned with in the Middle East. The effect of the outpoured sixth bowl is that the river Euphrates will be dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the east (Rev. 16:12). We are familiar with historical precedents for God drying up rivers in order to allow people to cross them – the Red sea and the river Jordan are well known examples. In those cases however, the crossings were being prepared for God's people, either to escape bondage or to enter the promised land. In the case of the sixth bowl, the kings from the East are definitely not the people of God – in fact, they are opponents of Christ's rule and they are being assembled to a conflict at Armageddon.

It will be appropriate at this point if we remind ourselves of the geographic and scriptural relevance of the river Euphrates. The river Euphrates was the northern boundary of the land promised by God to Abraham (Gen. 15:18, Deut. 11:24) and the northern boundary of Israel's actual Kingdom in Solomon's time (1 Kings 4:21). At the time John wrote Revelation the river Euphrates (or at least part of it) was the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire, and to the east of the river was the powerful Parthian empire. In scriptural terms the river Euphrates was a key boundary marker since the main aggressors of Israel (Assyria and Babylon) came from beyond the Euphrates. In Isaiah's time the principle aggressor was Assyria and the prophet warned the people in these terms:

"... therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks ..." (Isa 8:7)

The 'river' was the river Euphrates which stood for the aggressor whose territory was to the east of the river. A little later in his prophecy Isaiah speaks of God's judgements on Egypt. Once again, it is the river of Egypt (the Nile) which represents Egypt, and this time the judgements are likened to drying up the Nile:

“And the waters of the sea will be dried up, and the river will be dry and parched, and its canals will become foul, and the branches of Egypt’s Nile will diminish and dry up, reeds and rushes will rot away. There will be bare places by the Nile, on the brink of the Nile, and all that is sown by the Nile will be parched, will be driven away, and will be no more.” (Isa 19:5-7)

It seems likely therefore, that the drying up of the Euphrates represents God disempowering the nation or nations to the east of the Euphrates. And it is surely not without significance that whereas the sixth trumpet speaks of a large force from beyond the Euphrates attacking Israel, the sixth bowl speaks of the judgements of God on these same aggressors.

Kings from the east

The purpose of this ‘drying up’ is to ‘prepare the way for kings from the east’ (Rev. 16:12). There is no reason for not taking the phrase ‘prepare the way’ at face value; the ‘way’ (Gk: *hodos*) is a road, or figuratively, a mode of travel, and being prepared (Gk: *hetoimazō*) simply means being made ready. Moreover, the phrase ‘kings from the east’ should also be taken at face value. Any attempt at the identification of these ‘kings from the east’ must of course, be speculative. To us in the 21st Century the contenders are obviously China, India, Japan, and the many other countries of southeast Asia. But we have been arguing that Revelation was a letter to the churches in the Roman province of Asia. What would the Kings of the East mean to them?

The first readers of John’s letter, would surely have had some awareness of the existence of powers to the east of Roman Asia where the seven churches were located. Even in the centuries before the ascent of Rome, the territories of both the Persian and the Greek empires had extended eastward as far as India; indeed, it was the eastern part of these empires which had become the Parthian empire. Moreover, for many centuries an effective commercial and cultural

'highway' had existed between east and west – the so-called 'silk road' which passed through what is now Iranian territory. The first recipients of John's letter would surely have known about these eastern countries and the connections between them. In fact, at the time Revelation was written, Rome was concerned about aggression from Parthia to the east, so that to them, 'preparing the way for kings from the East' would naturally have suggested some kind of aggressive Parthian insurgence from beyond the Euphrates

In the 21st Century, Iran (the modern location of ancient Parthia) is a strong Islamic country with aspirations to become a nuclear power. They are in a geographically key position between the Caspian sea to the north and the Persian gulf to the south, to control movements between South East Asia and the west. The drying up of this power would certainly remove a significant obstruction to the movement of peoples from the east in preparedness for the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 16:16).

Unclean spirits let loose

The consequence of the drying up of the Euphrates is described in cryptic terms:

“And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.” (Rev. 16:13-14)

It would appear that the drying up of the river Euphrates, will intensify the conflict between the newly established King in Jerusalem and the more remote parts of the inhabited world. This is not perhaps surprising since many of these countries have religions which have had little or no affinity with Christianity. Christ the King reigning in Jerusalem will mean nothing to them. John sees three unclean spirits in the form of frogs emerging from the mouths of the dragon, the beast

(from the sea) and from the false prophet. This is the first time the title 'false prophet' has been used. It is almost certainly an alternative title for the beast from the land, whose role was to act as the sea beast's propaganda agent and whose function was to deceive its population into following the sea beast (Rev. 16:13). From our previous explorations of these anti-Christian forces at work in the world, we have already considered the nature of the three unclean (demonic) spirits (Chapters 10 and 11). Together they represent the motivation behind all human organisations, in their willingness to use usurped divine authority for their own purposes. They are keen to propagate their views (the spirits come 'out of their mouths') and they are able to perform signs which impress their hearers; but they are demonic – that is, they are agents of deceit like the false gods of the Old Testament pagan gods (1Cor. 10:20-21, 1Tim. 4:1).

John does not actually say where these unclean spirit come from, but the implication is that they represent the 'spirit of the age', they 'go abroad to the kings of the whole world' (Rev. 16:14) – not just the kings from the east, but all nations. Why John describes these influences as frogs is unclear. It seems unlikely to have any connection with the Egyptian plague of frogs – although the magicians of Egypt certainly did seem to be able to make frogs appear using their secret arts (Exo. 8:7). It may simply be a saying familiar in John's day based on the fact that frogs can hide in unwholesome places, and emerge from them as it were 'by magic'. But the objective of this display of frog-like guile is to gather the people of the world together to the battle of the great day of God Almighty.

The great day of God Almighty

The day of the Lord is featured in quite a number of Old Testament prophecies (Isa. 13: 6,9; Jer. 46:10; Eze. 13:5, 30:3; Joel 1:15, 2:1, 2:11, 2:31, 3:14; Amo. 5:18, 5:20; Oba. 1:15; Zep. 1:7, 8,14; Mal 4:5) and it also is known to New Testament writers (Acts 2:20; 1Cor. 5:5; 1Thes. 5:2; 2Thes. 2:2; 2Pet. 3:10). From these references it is clear that the term 'day of the Lord' represents, not necessarily a literal day, but a period of national conflict, involving distress and suffering for the

nations concerned, brought about by God for a purpose. In Old Testament times there have been 'days of the Lord' which have looked back to occasions of divine judgment on the enemies of Israel. But the label 'day of the Lord' often looks forward to some future end time conflict. The five mentions of the day of the Lord in Joel are noteworthy. We have already had reason to comment on the relevance of Joel's prophecies in discussing the trumpet visions in Revelation (Chapter 6). Joel's prophecies, mentioned in Peter's Pentecost speech (Acts. 2:20), speak of a time when the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem have been restored (Joel 3:1). It will be a time when God will gather the nations and bring them into the valley of Jehoshaphat for the purpose of punishing them for their treatment of his people (Joel 3:2-6):

"Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth quake. But the LORD is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel." (Joel 3:14-16)

The darkened sun and moon suggests that Joel is referring to a final confrontation between a weakened Israel and an invasion of aggressors. The confrontation takes place in the valley of Jehoshaphat. There is some uncertainty where the valley of Jehoshaphat is located, but the name of king Jehoshaphat is associated with a dramatic deliverance of Israel by means of an intervention in which God destroys the opposing force without Israel having to lift a finger (2Chron. 20:17). John's account of the sixth bowl seems in some respects to mirror Joel's prophecy:

"And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon." (Rev 16:16)

A great deal of academic effort has gone into determining the exact place of both Joel's 'valley of Jehoshaphat' and Revelation's

'Armageddon'. The findings however, do not provide much locational clarity. The valley of Jehoshaphat is said to be near Jerusalem, the place where Jehoshaphat faced the united powers of Moab, Ammon and the Meunites (2Chron. 20). It seems quite likely the name of the location is more a reflection of the characteristics of the divine defending power than a place on a map; Jehoshaphat's name means 'Jehovah has judged' and Joel refers to the site as the 'valley of decision' (Joel 3:14). Armageddon is said to mean the mountain (or hill) of Megiddo. There is no obvious mount Megiddo but there is a plain of this name in the north of Israel where Deborah and Barak destroyed Sisera and his host (Judges 5:19). It was also the place where Josiah, one of the most Godfearing kings of Israel was killed by Pharaoh-Necho of Egypt (2 Kings 23:29-30). And it is certainly possible that the name Megiddo may well have become associated with that great sadness (compare for example Zechariah 12:11). It may well be that we are not intended to identify a precise geographic location but simply to recognise that the peoples responding to the drying up of the river Euphrates – the kings from the east – will be drawn to a confrontation in Israel. In fact, Zechariah's prophecies suggest that the focus of the latter day aggressors will be Jerusalem where the King will be enthroned (Zec. 12:9, Zec. 14:2)

A warning from Christ

At the climax to John's account of the sixth bowl and just before he tells us of Armageddon, he passes on to his readers a word of warning from Christ:

"Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!" (Rev 16:15)

Such a warning coming at this point in the outpouring of the bowls of the wrath of God is striking. Rejecting the possibility that this verse has been inserted at this point in error (as some have suggested), its presence implies that there are Christians who are living through the events of the sixth bowl. This also surely means that although Christ is

controlling the outpouring of wrath (as the divine title in Revelation 16:5 seems to require), the resurrection and judgement of the saints has not yet taken place. This is a finding which would not be regarded as acceptable by many interpreters but it is consistent with the fact that the sixth seal through which the sealing process continues, specifically includes (among other things) the arrival of the great day of the wrath of God (Rev. 6:12-17). It is also consistent with the sequence of events briefly set out in the seventh trumpet vision in which following the enthronement of Christ as king, the nations' anger is aroused and God responds in wrath; then comes the time for the dead in Christ to be rewarded and for the destroyers of the earth to be destroyed (Rev. 11: 15-19). These events could well overlap one another in time, but it is nevertheless remarkable that the rewarding of the dead (the resurrection) comes in the middle of what seems to be a sequence involving the outpouring of wrath or judgement; and this sequence is not inconsistent with the way in which Christ's blessing/warning occurs in John's account of the sixth bowl.

There are seven blessings in Revelation; all except the first (Rev. 1:3) occur in the second part of the prophecy (Christ redeems the world) – the part in which believers are represented as being in conflict with the beasts (Rev. 14:3, 16:15, 19:9, 20:6, 22:7, 22:14). The blessing we are currently considering (Rev. 16:15) is one of two spoken by the Lord himself (the other being Rev. 22:7). In it, he uses a sequence of familiar expressions in order to impress on believers the importance of their continuing faithfulness; he reminds them that he is coming as a thief, that they should stay awake, and that they should keep their garments on so that their nakedness should not be exposed. The uncertain timing of Christ's return and the need to stay awake is reminiscent of the parable of the virgins (Mat. 25:1-13), and the need to stay awake features in all three gospel accounts of the Olivet prophecy (Mat. 24:42-43, Mark 13:33-37, Luke 21:36). Christ has already issued virtually the same warning to the church in Sardis (Rev. 3:3-4), and to the church in Laodicea he has spoken of avoiding nakedness by acquiring the garments of salvation (Rev. 3:18). Without doubt, the garments involved are the wedding garments, the coverings for sin provided by the sacrifice of Christ (compare Mat. 22:11-13,

2Cor. 5:1-4).

But why should this particular warning be issued by Christ at this particular juncture in the sequence of visions in Revelation. As we have already observed the warning itself implies that the resurrection and judgement of believers, including those who are still alive at the time of the manifestation of wrath, is yet in the future. However, coming as this warning does just before the battle of Armageddon and the seventh bowl, suggests that their deliverance will not be much longer delayed. They are not only to stay awake, but they are advised not undress to go to bed, lest the Lord comes in the meantime and they are caught out naked (Rev. 16:15). It seems likely that their service in the battle of Armageddon and in the post-Armageddon world will soon be needed (Rev. 2:26-27, 5:10).

Jesus speaks of his coming 'like a thief'. Paul in writing to the Thessalonians give us a somewhat different slant on this figure (1Thess. 5:2-8). He says that the coming of Christ for those who are 'children of the light' will not be quite so 'thief-like' as for those who are 'children of the night'. In general, for the people of the world, the coming of Christ will be more than unexpected, it will be a shock and a reason for anger (the nations will rage). But Jesus wants his faithful believers to know, that although the outpouring of the bowls of wrath is something they will have to live through, such events will not only mean the end of human opposition to the divine purpose but that the very same events will hold a promise of the imminent fulfilment of that purpose.

The seventh bowl poured out

"The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, 'It is done!'" (Rev. 16:17)

In considering the earlier bowls of wrath we have observed the symbolic nature of John's predictions and the difficulty we have had in suggesting what these events might be in real-life. The seventh bowl is no exception. In fact, the events of the seventh plague are

described almost totally in symbolic terms. This final bowl is poured out into the air and the voice which comes from the heavenly Temple – presumably God’s voice – confirms John’s earlier statement that with this plague the wrath of God is finished (Rev. 15:1, 16:17). The significance of the seventh bowl being poured out into the air is unclear. The air is of course a life-supporting medium which abounds everywhere. Paul describes the ‘course of this world’ as ‘following the prince of the power of the air’ (Eph. 2:2) although exactly what Paul understood by ‘the air’ in this expression is not clear. However, Paul will later describe the forces of evil in this world as the power (authority) of this present darkness (Eph. 6:12), and it seems entirely plausible that it is upon such an all pervasive sense of usurped authority in the world that the seventh bowl of wrath should be directed.

The actual events foretold by the seventh bowl are dramatic:

“And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake. The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath.” (Rev 16:18-19)

It is worth recalling at this point how natural phenomena such as lightning, thunder and rumblings (or voices), have been used previously in Revelation to signal the activity of God; specifically, in the heavenly throne room (Rev. 4:5), or in preparing to sound the trumpets (Rev. 8:5), or in concluding the seventh trumpet action (Rev. 11:19). And here in the seventh bowl, these natural phenomena are once more invoked to show God at work (Rev. 16:18). Hail too has also featured in descriptions of God’s actions, for example in the first or seventh trumpet (Rev. 8:7, 11:19). And in the seventh bowl, there is an extremely severe hailstorm (Rev. 16:21). Although one has to assume this particular hailstorm achieves its divine wrathful objective, the only effect of the hailstorm mentioned by John is to make those affected curse God. It is extremely difficult when considering the role of these

natural phenomena in the prophecy, to determine whether they are to be treated as pure symbol, or whether there will be a literal component in the outworking of these plagues. Perhaps only the events themselves will tell.

Whilst it is difficult to know whether we should be interpreting the symbols involving meteorological events literally or not, the problem is even more challenging in the case of events involving physical ground movements. Five of the descriptions of divine action in Revelation involve earthquakes. They are: the sixth seal (Rev. 6:12), the introduction to the trumpets (Rev. 8:5), the resurrection of the witnesses (Rev. 11:13), the seventh trumpet (Rev. 11:19), and the seventh plague (Rev. 16:18). Moreover on two occasions islands and mountains are said to move or disappear – one in the sixth seal (Rev. 6:14) and the other in the seventh bowl (Rev. 16:20). It is noticeable however, that most of these dramatic descriptions of God at work, occur in those sections of the prophecy which this interpretation regards as related to the time of the end – specifically, the sixth seal, the seventh trumpet and the seventh bowl of wrath. The sixth seal represent a tumultuous period immediately prior to the breaking of the seventh seal, and it is this action which enables the sealed scroll to be opened and the identities of those whose names are inscribed therein to be revealed – an event we take to be the moment of resurrection and judgement. We have already had reason to argue that believers will have to continue their witness through this sixth seal period until the sealing process is brought to its completion by God. The seventh trumpet portrays the establishment of Christ as king in a redeemed Israel, and although there is the briefest mention of the various events which will take place after the beginning of Christ's reign, the establishment of his kingdom will be an extensive operation expressed cryptically in symbolic terms:

“Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.” (Rev 11:19)

The seventh bowl takes us to the end of this process, again largely in symbolic form. John's account of the sixth bowl does however tell us explicitly:

"The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath." (Rev 16:19)

The identity of the great city is uncertain. Jerusalem is called 'the great city' earlier in the prophecy (Rev. 11:8). However, since the 'great city' Jerusalem in which Christ was crucified bears in that reference the labels 'Sodom' and 'Egypt', the allusion there must be to the worldly Jerusalem, and that Jerusalem is to experience the wrath of God as predicted in this bowl; it is a city which is to be replaced by a redeemed Jerusalem, the city of the great King. The alternative is to see the 'great city' as Babylon of old, representing the Roman whore's selfish exploitation of the world's resources; it is after all, Babylon which is referred to as the great city in the subsequent chapters (Rev. 17:8, 18:10,16,18,19,21). It is however rather odd that John should refer to 'the great city' and explicitly to Babylon in the same sentence. It may be significant that the 'great city' is linked with the 'cities of the nations' (Rev. 16:19). John may be telling us that in the seventh bowl, God's wrath would be poured out on worldly Jerusalem just as it will be poured out on Babylon and the cities of the nations. The significance of the great city being split into three is unclear unless it has to do with the fact that the present Jerusalem is a 'holy city' to three religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam; at some point the followers of all three religions will have to come to terms with the fact that there is now a new religious authority in Jerusalem.

If it is correct that the events represented by storm symbols and earthquakes in Revelation (seals, trumpets, bowls), all occur during the end times, it is tempting to conclude that the symbols might all refer to the same actual events. But the language of the seventh bowl suggests that this is not the case. Of the seventh bowl earthquake it is said that

'there had never been so great an earthquake since man was on the earth' (Rev. 16:18); this implies that this earthquake will be unique. We have already had reason to link the dramatic earthquake described by Zechariah with the seventh trumpet earthquake and the establishment of the kingdom of Israel under Christ. Zechariah's prophecy seems to fit so well the context of the Jewish acceptance of Christ as Messiah and the work of the two witnesses (Zech. 14:3-4). Moreover we have shown, the outpouring of the plagues of wrath including Armageddon and the seventh bowl come after the king is enthroned over a redeemed Israel. This means therefore that the 'great earthquake' as a feature of the seventh bowl, comes after that described by Zechariah and represents the climax of the outpouring of God's wrath on mankind. This 'great earthquake' could well be the earthquake of which the prophet speaks when God in his 'blazing wrath' deals with the Gogian invasion (Eze. 38:18-23) – a confrontation we will consider further in connection with Revelation 20.

It is virtually impossible – and probably not wise – to be more precise about the chronology of these events. Suffice it to say that when they are over, as the voice from the heavenly Temple has told us: 'it will be finished'. God's redemption of the world will be complete. John does however, go on to give us further detail. In particular, he will tell us about the fall of great Babylon, and how those anti-Christian qualities which this system exhibits will be eliminated, giving way to the establishment of a new heaven and earth. This topic must be one for the next chapter.

Chapter 14. Babylon

John's vision (Revelation 17)

John has seen the seven angels pour out the bowls of the wrath of God on the earth. He has witnessed the dramatic consequences, culminating in the final judgements of God as the seventh bowl is poured out.

Now John is addressed by one of the bowl angels who will give him further details about the judgements of God. He is carried away into the wilderness and shown a woman riding a scarlet beast. The woman is magnificently arrayed; she holds a golden cup in her hand and she is drunk with the blood of the martyrs. John is told that her name is Babylon the great, and that she represents the city that has dominion over the kings of the earth. John is also given further details about the beast on which the woman is seated.

The Excursuses

In the introduction to Part 2 of Revelation, we suggested that this section of the prophecy includes two excursuses – the first is Revelation 17:1 to 19:10, and the second is Revelation 21:9 to 22:9. An explanation of this feature seems appropriate at this point. An excursus is a literary device used to give further exposition of something which has already been touched upon. The excursuses we are referring to here are identified by the fact that both are introduced by a bowl angel, and both end with John being tempted to respond to the message he hears by worshipping the angel messenger. They form a pair of complementary visions – the first speaks of the destruction of the worldly city Babylon, and the second of its replacement by the bride, the new Jerusalem. The first comes immediately after the account of the outpouring of the bowls of wrath on the earth and expands the description of the fall of Babylon, and the

second is inserted towards the end of the prophecy as part of an exposition of God's new heavens and earth.

At the end of both these excursuses, John falls down to worship the angel who has delivered the message, just as Cornelius did when he met Peter (Acts: 10:25). And like Cornelius John is rebuked. What is surprising about this behaviour of John's, is that it happens twice, and on both occasions, John considers it necessary to report it (Rev. 19:10, 22:8-9):

"Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, 'You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.' For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." (Rev. 19:10)

The fact that John records such behaviour must be deliberate. But why would he want to do so? Some have suggested that John is so impressed by the revelations he has received that he is awed into feeling the need to worship. That explanation seems rather unlikely since John has seen many impressive visions earlier without apparently feeling the need to respond in this way. It seems much more likely that John wants to warn others not to make the same mistake of offering inappropriate worship. On both occasions John's response seems to come, as did that of Cornelius, by associating the messenger with the message he carried – in the case of Cornelius it was the gospel of redemption vested in Peter, and for John it was the message of the future bride, the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:9-27). That association was strong enough to make John feel that worshipping the messenger was an appropriate response. But the angel describes himself as 'a fellow servant' with John and his brothers. This probably does not mean that the angel was a human being, but simply that he regarded himself as a divine messenger – a ministering spirit sent out (by God) to serve (Heb. 1:14). It is of course true that believers, whether angelic or human, carry a unique message, described by the angel as 'the testimony of Jesus' (Rev. 19:10); this is the testimony that Jesus gave to the loving purpose of God in his sacrifice, which is the

true spirit of prophecy (1Pet. 1:10-12). But however significant is the message the messenger carries, they themselves are but messengers and not therefore to be worshipped. Perhaps John wants make sure that those who will receive a copy of Revelation do not put him, the 'well known Apostle John', on some kind of pedestal as the originator of this prophecy. They are not to make the mistake of thinking that John himself is worthy of worship but that he is a simply messenger. They need to recognise that the message he carries is from the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is God only who should be worshipped.

More about the symbols

So far in Part 2 of the prophecy, the forces opposed to the Christian message have been symbolised by a red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and beasts – the beast of the sea which also has seven heads and ten horns and the lamb-like beast of the land (earth). They are symbols which are associated with the national powers of the Roman world of John's day manifested in various forms. The prophecy now brings us more symbolic complexity. John is shown a scarlet beast who also has seven heads and ten horns whose heads are described as mountains, and whose horns are described as kings who have not yet received royal power (Rev. 17:9,12). John also sees a magnificently dressed woman who is described as a prostitute, and as the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth (Rev. 17:1, 3, 18). Later in the prophecy John is shown a bride adorned for her husband – a bride which turns out to be a city, the new Jerusalem (Rev. 19:7-8, 21:2). This symbolism can seem rather bewildering at first, but it is not unique to John's Revelation, and it may be helpful to recall the way in which Paul uses similar imagery in his allegory about the reception of the gospel. In Galatians he writes:

“Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.” (Galatians 4:24-26)

Paul here presents two sets of parallels each involving a mother and a city. He parallels Hagar and the earthly Jerusalem with Sarah and the Jerusalem from above. The women, Hagar and Sarah were mothers and therefore appropriate representatives of families (communities); the distinction between the two being that Hagar's children were born into slavery whereas Sarah's were freeborn children of promise. Cities are also communities of people; the earthly Jerusalem corresponds to natural Israel whose symbolic mother Paul takes to be Hagar, and the heavenly Jerusalem corresponds to spiritual Israel whose mother he takes to be Sarah. Similarly in Revelation, the Bride (of Christ) who is also the city of the new Jerusalem, is the 'woman' (community) who remains true to her commitment to her husband (Christ), whereas the 'woman' who deserts her true husband and commits adultery is the prostitute, and she represents the earthly city, Jerusalem, Rome or Babylon.

Paul also introduces the symbol of a mountain representing one of these communities. Mount Sinai he takes to represent natural Israel who lived under the covenant ratified at Mount Sinai. Sinai, we argued, was the burning mountain of the second trumpet (Rev. 8:8); and in connection with this mountain we observed that mountains sometimes represent national powers – and we illustrated the point using Jeremiah's reference to Babylon as a burnt mountain (Jer. 51:25).

The woman Babylon

At a critical point in the outpouring of the seventh bowl of the wrath of God, John has heard it announced that Babylon was to receive her just deserts (Rev. 16:19). Now in Revelation 17 one of the bowl angels comes to tell John more about Babylon as a malign influence in the world, and the beastly powers that support her. This will be followed in Revelation 18 by a statement from an authoritative angel giving specific reasons for the fall of Babylon. There is much in this section of the prophecy which presents interpretive difficulties, but the general import of the message is absolutely clear – Babylon and what she stands for is to be utterly destroyed. John sees this outcome

graphically depicted by a mighty angel who takes a great millstone and throws it into the sea saying, 'So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence and will be found no more' (Rev. 18:21). In a sense therefore, what matters, is not whether we have successfully negotiated the interpretive difficulties, but that we can appreciate the ungodly characteristics for which Babylon is to be destroyed, and can recognise them as characteristics which will not exist in God's new world.

John is transported by the wrath angel into a wilderness where he is shown a 'great prostitute' who is seated on many waters – a symbol interpreted for us as 'peoples and multitudes and nations and languages' (Rev. 17:15). In the wilderness he sees a woman gorgeously clothed and expensively adorned; in her hand she holds a golden cup full of abominations and impurities (Rev. 17:4). The golden cup is clearly a symbol for the attractiveness of the contents of the cup as of a vintage wine, and the ease by which those contents can be shared. It is a figure drawn from Jeremiah's prophecy of the attractiveness of the power and luxury of ancient Babylon (Jer. 51:7). Significantly In Jeremiah's prophecy, the golden cup is in the Lord's hand. Not of course, that God was the originator of the contents, that came from the nature of the Babylonian beast, but rather, that the nations should understand that to drink of Babylon's cup, would mean accepting the evil of Babylon's lifestyle, and would inevitably result in divine punishment. And so it is, in the case of Revelation's golden cup. The contents originate with the scarlet beast, they are attractive to the nations, but they represent a way of life that if adopted, will end in divine judgement.

The woman has on her forehead a name of mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations' (Rev. 17:5). She has committed sexual immorality with the kings of the earth who have become drunk with the wine of her immorality; she is also drunk with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus (Rev. 17:2, 6). John marvels greatly at the sight, but the angel seems surprised at John's reaction and asks: 'why do you marvel?'; he promises to tell John about the woman and about the beast that carries her. However, apart from

telling John that the woman is ‘the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth’ (Rev. 17:18), the angel says little more at this stage about the nature of her prostitution or about her punishment.

In scriptural symbology adultery and prostitution is normally associated with the apostasy of those in covenant relation with God. It was a figure used frequently about Israel because God was their ‘husband’ (Jer. 31:32); the prophets were outspoken in their condemnation of Israel’s departure from God (Isa. 1:21, Jer. 13:27, Eze. 16:15, Hos. 2:5). Babylon, the great city, also represents a community of people, but it soon becomes clear that they are not people in covenant relationship with God. In fact, in John’s day, the great city would almost certainly have been identified with pagan Rome, so that adultery or prostitution as a figure of apostasy would not have been appropriate. However, prostitution is a figure which is also applied by the prophets to non-covenant peoples – for example Nahum of Nineveh (Nah. 3:4), or Isaiah of Tyre (Isa. 23:16-17). In these cases the figure does not represent a departure from a formal covenant with God, but expresses an adherence to a philosophy of life in which the higher moral qualities are subverted in the interests of power and luxury; it was an attitude which was certainly manifested in both Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon and the Rome of the Caesars.

The qualities for which the ‘Babylon’ of Revelation will be destroyed will be spelled out in detail by the angel in Revelation 18. In Revelation 17 however, the wrath angel does not give us further detail about Babylon’s prostitution, but he does give John some rather puzzling facts about the beast upon which the woman rides (Rev. 17:7-17).

The scarlet beast

One of the wrath angels carries John into the a wilderness to see a scarlet beast who carries an elaborately adorned woman. The beast has seven heads and ten horns corresponding to the sea beast of Revelation 13; it also shares the blasphemous identity of the sea-beast (Rev. 17:3). We identified the sea beast of John’s day as the ruling

power of the Roman Empire in the form of the first 'phase' of the Empire under the direction of the Julio-Claudian dynasty of Emperors – from Augustus to Nero; the land beast was its publicity agent in Asia. In the present vision John makes no reference to the land beast, but the anti-Christian characteristics of both of these beasts clearly carries over to the scarlet beast; we may also safely assume that the scarlet beast draws its authority from the great red dragon which represents the 'spirit' of these national or international institutions to usurp the authority of God for their own purposes. Although there is no clear verbal connection between the redness of the dragon and scarlet colour of the beast, it must surely be of practical significance that scarlet is an intensified version of red; scarlet is also, a Biblical symbol for sinful humanity and its willingness to follow its own desires (Isa. 1:18, Jer. 4:30). It would seem therefore, that we are to understand the scarlet beast of Revelation 17 as a political power in which the redness of the dragon is intensified, but which also exhibits some of the characteristic colour of the woman it carries (Rev. 17:4, 18:16).

Further details

The wrath angel now goes on to give John further details about the scarlet beast:

“The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. (Rev. 17:8)

The angel begins by telling John that the scarlet beast 'was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction'. What these descriptors of the scarlet beast confirm is that although the beast is a single power (the Roman Empire), it has so far, been manifested in two 'phases', one past another yet to come – these 'phases' we take to be successive dynasties of the Roman emperors. The angel then adds the comment that the dwellers of earth will marvel at the beast (Rev. 17:8). The 'dwellers on earth' are those 'whose

names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world' – i.e. those not 'in Christ'. And they are surely the very same people who marveled at the healing of the sea beast's wound recorded in Revelation 13 –they also are described as 'everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life' (Rev. 13:8).

We would seem therefore to be on reasonably safe ground in concluding that the phases of the scarlet beast who 'was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit' correspond to the wounded and healed sea beast of Revelation 13 (Rev. 13:3). There we determined that the wounded ('was and is not') phase referred to the Julio-Claudian dynasty (BC 27 – AD 68), which following the death of Nero (in AD 69) and had passed into history. The healed phase (corresponding to the beast that was 'about to rise from the bottomless pit'), we suggested referred to the rise of Vespasian and the Flavian dynasty which followed the year of four emperors (AD69). The bottomless pit (Gk: *abussos* – the abyss, 'from nowhere') is an appropriate descriptor of Vespasian the first Flavian emperor, in the sense that he rose to become emperor from relative obscurity.

A claim to divinity?

Before moving on, it is worth noticing that the angel also refers to the scarlet beast as the 'one who was, and is not, and is to come' (Rev. 17:8b). This is so close to the divine title 'who is, and who was, and who is to come' (Rev. 1:4) that it's hard to avoid the conclusion that this descriptor is a satirical reference to the claim of the Roman emperors to divinity. In the divine title, 'the one to come' pointed forward to the coming of Christ to redeem his people. In the Roman context, the 'one to come' would be seen as a coming emperor who would save Rome.

Undoubtedly the death of Nero was a cause of concern, both to the Roman authorities and the population alike, and this concern was manifested in a well-documented contemporary rumour that Nero had not in fact died but had fled to Parthia from where he would return to 'save' Rome. The angel's use of this title at this juncture would seem

therefore to be an oblique reference to the wishful thinking of those people who had marveled at the beast (those not written in the book of life) who were hoping for a new emperor (or even the old one returned) who would save Rome by filling the gap left by Nero. But such a popular hope would not, of course, alter the fact that any replacement emperor was doomed by the prophecy to go to destruction.

A dating diversion

If the scarlet beast's title as 'the one who was, and is not, and is to come', reflects the events we have identified, the structure of the title implies something about the date Revelation was written. We have argued above that the 'is not' phase of the scarlet beast would be after the death of Nero and before the accession of Vespasian – to be precise, AD 69, the year of four emperors. If Revelation was written in the time of Domitian (AD 81-96) the prophecy would have to have been looking back to this critical year as a past event. Some commentators however, consider the prophecy to have been written during the reign of Nero (AD54-68), in which case, of course, the 'is not' phase would still be in the future. But there is really no reason why the prophecy should not have been written during AD69 which was certainly a very significant year. It was not only the year after the death of Nero and the year that Vespasian became emperor, but it was a year of internal unrest for the Roman empire and a time when Vespasian and his son Titus was involved in quelling the Jewish revolt which resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. There is of course, no way of confirming such a speculative view about the date of writing, but it makes one wonder whether there is any connection between Roman unrest and the exiling of John to Patmos.

A broader historic setting

Consider now the additional information John gives us about the scarlet beast in history:

“This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven

mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction.” (Rev. 17:9-11)

The opening call for a mind with wisdom, suggests that the angel is now about to present us with an intellectual challenge. In the previous section we have identified the Julio-Claudian phase of the Roman Empire as the scarlet beast (or its ‘head’) that ‘was, and is not’ – a descriptor which certainly implies that this head (the Julio-Claudian one) does not exist at the time Revelation was revealed. Now we are told that the five heads (of the beast?) are five kings, five of which have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. How can the scarlet beast (or its ‘head’) be both the past Julio-Claudian empire (which ‘is not’), and at the same time be the head/mountain/king which still exists (the one which ‘is’) after the five other heads/kings have fallen? The most likely solution is that from this verse onwards the angel is adopting a much broader historical timescale than that which was used earlier in connection with the Roman Empire; it is in fact, a timescale which has been extended into both the far past and the far future, well beyond the immediate context of Rome.

In Revelation 17:12-14 we are told that that the beast with its affiliated national ‘horns’ will make war on the lamb and will be conquered by him. This fact reveals that the prophecy is here employing a historical canvas which will extend far beyond the Rome of John’s day and beyond also the Roman empire of history. The wrath angel is seemingly here fusing together elements relevant to a first Century audience, with a forward looking kingdom view. This is a similar approach to the one used by Christ in the Olivet prophecy in which events relevant to those who would live through the rigors of AD 70 are mentioned, but that this ‘contemporary’ element is set within a broader framework reaching forward to his second coming (Mat. 24:15-20, 29-31).

In discussing the seven heads of the dragon earlier (chapter 10), we suggested that the seven heads could well reflect the powers that

throughout history have been persecutors of the people of God (the Jews in Old Testament times, Christians in the New). Such a view is not inconsistent with the description of the seven heads given in the above passage. They are 'mountains', which as we have suggested earlier would naturally refer to significant national powers; they are also referred to as kings – a term which simply corresponds to the fact that the dragon's heads were crowned with ruling crowns (diadems) (Rev. 12:3).

But what does it mean that the woman is seated on the seven heads (mountains/kings)? The obvious meaning would be that the woman draws support for her activities from the mountainous heads of the dragon-inspired beasts just as others had done before her. Moreover, the bowl angel's imagery in describing the woman as Babylon surely tells us that those influences will include Babylon of the past and its associated empire, which formed a key part of the pattern set by the heads of the dragon; it is a pattern which will end with imperial Rome as the current dragon head. Moreover, the known fact that Rome was built on seven 'mountains' (hills) would hardly be missed by contemporary readers.

Five have fallen

The angel then explains that of these seven 'heads/kings', five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only for little while. The number seven, conveying the idea of completeness, was of course, a part of John's application of symbolic numbers. In this passage however, it appears as though the angel is using the numbers literally. Attempts by commentators to match this sequence to Roman emperors have not been particularly successful, the main problem being knowing where to start the sequence, and how, when going forward in time, to deal with the year of four emperors (AD69). However, taking the heads to be the past persecutors of the people of God, the starting point is clear and the sequence largely familiar from Daniel's prophecy: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. At the time of Revelation, the first five of these powers had fallen, and the one 'that remains', is

Rome.

Historical note on the powers in Daniel's image:

Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon was the 'head of gold' which exercised control of the Jewish nation from the fall of Jerusalem in 586BC to the conquest of Babylon by the Medes and Persians in 539BC. The Persian empire fell to Alexander the Great in 334BC, though the subsequent Greek empire under Alexander was short-lived (Alexander died in 323BC). The period from the death of Alexander to the beginning of the Roman Empire under Augustus (27BC) is referred to as the Hellenistic age; it was an era in which the Romans successively conquered the Greek city states and during which the Maccabean revolt against Greek rule took place. We shall assume that the whole of this period is represented by the Greek element in the sequence portrayed in Daniel's prophecy. Thus, the Julio-Claudian dynasty of Roman Emperors is the first 'phase' of an Empire which lasted under the direction of successive Roman dynasties into at least the fourth century of the Christian era. In the terms of Daniel's image, the power following the Roman Empire was a power consisting of a mixture of strong and weak nations (the feet of the image) during which the stone (Christ) precipitates the end of human rule.

The king who has not yet come

So, we have suggested that the five kings (heads) who have fallen are Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece; the one that 'is' (the sixth power) is the Roman Empire. Now Revelation 17:10 tells us that after the sixth power (the Roman one) there will arise a further power that must remain for a little while. The phrase 'a little while' tells us that this power will last for only a short time before being annihilated. Can we identify this power? In terms of Daniel's prophecy, the power following Rome, would be that represented by the feet of his image – a power consisting of a mixture of both strong and weak nations.

We suggested earlier that in making reference to seven kings (Rev.

17:10) the wrath angel was using the numbers literally; it is striking therefore that in the sequence suggested above, the total number of oppressor powers is a very literal seven; it turns out therefore, to be seven in reality as well as seven in symbol, both representing the completeness (totality) of the powers opposing God's people. The seventh power (the feet), which will materialize in the days before the coming of Christ will be the final oppressor of God's people. This power is the 'beast' of Revelation 17:11-14, who will make war with the Lamb and will be destroyed by him. It would be consistent with other visions of Revelation if this final conflict was the battle of Armageddon, since it is in this encounter that the Lamb will be supported by his followers (Rev. 16:19, 17:14, 19:14).

An eighth beast

The angel however, now sets us a further puzzle (Rev.17:11): 'as for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction'. The 'beast that was and is not' we have taken to be the Julio-Claudian phase of the Roman empire, based on our exposition of Revelation 13. This was the first dynasty in the Roman Empire newly established by Augustus, a dynasty which ended with the death of Nero. But in what sense could this dynasty, which we have identified as the sixth 'beast', be described as an eighth (note, not *the* eighth)?

In terms of the symbology of numbers, the introduction of an eighth head (or beast, or mountain, or king) is striking. If seven represents totality, an eighth (in the same series) should not normally exist. Symbolically speaking, the eighth would represent a new beginning – just like the first day of a new week as it follows the previous seven. It certainly seems possible that the 'beast that was and is not' – the Julio-Claudian dynasty – could be thought of as a new beginning for Rome (an eighth head?) since it was the first imperial government following the Roman Republic and the Hellenistic age. But the very fact that this 'new start' had failed (it 'was' and now 'is not'), showed clearly that such humanly initiated 'new starts' cannot be permanent. It would seem that the angel's introduction of the concept of an eighth

beast at this point is intended to highlight this very fact. Although from a human point of view there may well be new starts to the Roman Empire as time passes, such starts will never last. Augustus' new start and any others which are to follow it, will not be the beginning of a new order of divinely approved empires, because they belong to the seven and will go to destruction with them. The true eighth power will not be another human kingdom, but will in fact be the kingdom of God under Christ; this kingdom and this kingdom alone will in reality be a new start for the world.

The ten horns

“And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.” (Rev 17:12-14)

The horn in scripture is a symbol of power, and following John's use of numbers we have interpreted the ten horns to be the totality of secular power associated with the dragon and the beasts. It is however, unclear whether these powers are military, economic, intellectual or simply national groupings. In the case of the empires represented by the heads of the dragon (including the Roman empire) these horns could be a combination of different forms of power within each empire. Indeed, we have already drawn attention to the fact that in the case of the sea beast, the ruling crowns were on the horns of the beast, suggesting a dominance of military influence in government (Rev. 13:1). But towards the end of Revelation 17 the horns take on a rather different and independent role:

At the time of the prophecy, we are told that these horns are not regal or national powers (Rev. 17:12), they are powers which will join forces in the future with the then existing beast (the feet of the image) in an attempt to overthrow the rule of the Lamb; they are perhaps the toes

of the feet! These events are foretold in the outpouring of the bowls of God's wrath – in particular, the battle of Armageddon. The role of the ten horns finds a clear parallel in the prophecies of Daniel. In the case of Nebuchadnezzar's image, following the Roman 'legs of iron' come the feet representing a mixture of strong and weak nations with their ten toes; and it is in the days of these kings that the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed (Dan. 2:40-44). The vision of Daniel 7 adds further details; the terrifying and dreadful fourth beast (normally regarded as the Roman empire) gives rise to ten horns, and as Daniel watches a further horn power arises which oppresses the people of God until judgement is given against it, and Christ's kingdom is established (Dan. 7:23-26).

But in Revelation, the ten horns (nations) have a further rather surprising role to play; and that role is to be a divine instrument in the destruction of the prostitute Babylon. The significance of this will perhaps become clearer when we have considered the authoritative angel's review of the nature of Babylon's prostitution in Revelation 18. For the moment, all we can say is that the angel tells John that in order to fulfil the purpose of God, the ten horn powers will join forces with the beast in order to destroy the prostitute:

“For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled”. (Rev 17:17)

There is in this, somewhat ironically, a reflection of the means which God had used to punish the behaviour of the prostitute Judah, and before her the northern kingdom of Israel, at the hands of the Assyrian and the Babylonian 'beasts' (Eze. 23). The angel is telling us that as a part of the final confrontation with Christ, the whoring behaviour of the woman Babylon, will be dealt with by the very 'kings' who had earlier taken part in her adulteries.

We must now consider what the authoritative angel can tell us about Babylon the prostitute and her downfall in Revelation 18.

Chapter 15. Babylon falls

John's vision (Revelation 18 to 19:10)

John has been shown a woman, described as the great prostitute, whose name is Babylon the Great and who is riding a scarlet beast. He is given some historic detail about the beast.

John now sees an angel with great authority who announces that Babylon the Great has fallen and that she has been consigned to become a haunt for all things unclean. The angel goes on to condemn those who have been involved in her wayward activities. The angel's announcement is followed by a voice from heaven which gives further detail about the characteristics which have brought about the prostitute's downfall and describes the reaction of kings, merchants and sailors. The angel then illustrates the finality of Babylon's end by throwing a great millstone into the sea.

There is rejoicing in heaven, followed by a preview of the Bride of Christ who joins in the rejoicing.

Revelation 18 in context

We have taken the wrath angel's excursus about the fall of Babylon to extend from Revelation 17:1 to 19:10. It may be helpful at this point to offer an observation on how Revelation 18 fits into this excursus. Recall from the previous chapter, that Babylon is described symbolically as a woman, a prostitute, and a great city – in fact for the first century recipients of the prophecy, the city would be the city of Rome which at the time had dominion over the kings of the earth (Rev. 17:18). As we observed earlier, since Rome was a pagan city, her prostitution does not consist of having rejected an explicit covenant relationship with God; she was a prostitute because she had subverted the noble qualities of her character in the interests of achieving

financial gain and luxurious living. In the prophecy, the spirit and attitude of the Roman community is distinguished from the exercise of power by the nation's rulers, in that the former is represented by the woman prostitute, and the latter by the beast (or the head of the beast).

Thus, the scarlet beast represents Rome as an imperial power, and the woman rides this beast in the sense that the imperial government provides practical support for the activities of Roman society. These two aspects of Babylonian Rome, need to be carefully distinguished. In the end both will fall, but as we noted in the previous chapter, the city-prostitute will fall at the hands of the ten horns (national powers of some kind) before the beastly empire itself falls. Revelation 18 reveals something about the lifestyle of the city-prostitute by giving us a glimpse of what her supporters lose when she is destroyed.

The authoritative angel's announcement

In Revelation 17 John has reported having been shown the prostitute Babylon and the scarlet beast she rides. He has also had outlined to him the historical development of the scarlet beast by reference to recent events in the Roman empire. However, John has been told relatively little about the character of the prostitute, or her punishment. It would appear that this task has been delegated to an authoritative angel, one manifested in glory and coming from the throne of God (Rev. 18:1). This angel's task is to announce with a mighty voice that Babylon has fallen, and to report that as a result, Babylon has become contaminated by everything that is unclean – an observation which indicates the impossibility of Babylon's ever rising again (Rev. 18:2). It is an outcome similar to that prophesied by Isaiah about ancient Babylon at a time when she had not yet reached the peak of her power (Isa. 13:19-22). The nations and kings who have been implicated in Roman Babylon's corrupting activities are included in the angel's condemnation, and the merchants receive special mention, because they have been significantly involved (Rev. 18:3).

A heavenly appeal

The authoritative angel's announcement of the fall of Babylon ends by suggesting that Rome's merchants had grown rich by exploiting the world's resources in order to maintain their own and their masters' luxurious lifestyle (Rev. 18:3). John then hears another heavenly voice addressing the people of God:

"Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.'" (Rev 18:4-5)

This appeal seems to suggest that in God's sight, Rome's luxurious lifestyle should be regarded as 'sins which are heaped high as heaven' – strong terms for what turns out to be excessive economic exploitation. There are clear echoes here of Jeremiah's prophecy of the destruction of ancient Babylon:

"Flee from the midst of Babylon; let everyone save his life! Be not cut off in her punishment, for this is the time of the LORD's vengeance, the repayment he is rendering her." (Jer. 51:6)

The sins of ancient Babylon like those of Rome had 'reached up to heaven' and had been 'lifted up even to the skies' (Jer. 51:9). The heavenly voice warns those prepared to remain in Roman Babylon and to take part in her 'sins', that they would surely 'share in her plagues' when the judgement of God is meted out. Moreover, this appeal seems to imply that such a lifestyle was inappropriate to followers of Christ, and should be rejected by them – a strong exhortation to those who first received Revelation as a pastoral letter. The timing of this appeal to the people of God, like the warning of Christ during the outpouring of the sixth bowl of wrath (Rev.16:15), suggests that the 'saints' are still 'in the world' when this element of the fall of Babylon takes place.

The heavenly voice then asks God to match the seriousness of her 'sins' by paying her back double. Such a severe penalty was justified because she glorified herself, lived in luxury and believed herself to be untouchable: 'I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see' (Rev. 18: 6-7). Isaiah paints an extensive picture of ancient Babylon's similarly dismissive attitude to divine judgement – an attitude which the spirit clearly sees as carrying over into Rome and probably also into those who would later follow in her footsteps:

“Come down and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon; sit on the ground without a throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans!” (Isa. 47:1).

“Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, ‘I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children’: These two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day; the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments.” (Isa. 47:8-9)

The deluded pride of both ancient and modern Babylon showed little self-awareness or humility, because of which, Roman Babylon's downfall was inevitable: 'For this reason her plagues will come in a single day, death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire'. These prophetic punishments are probably not intended to be taken literally, but to emphasise the inevitability of the outcome; inevitable, because of the one who pronounced the judgement: 'for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her' (Rev. 18:8).

The kings react

“And the kings of the earth, who committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning. They will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, ‘Alas! Alas! You great city, you

mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come.” (Rev. 18:9-10)

Revelation 17 and 18 (the main part of the wrath angel's first excursus) is an elaboration of the seventh bowl of wrath, and that would place the destruction of the city-prostitute, at the time of the establishment of Christ's worldwide kingdom. The 'kings of the earth' referred to in the above passage would then be those powers existing at that future time. In confirmation, the phrase 'kings of the earth', which occurs seven times in Revelation (Rev. 6:15, 17:2, 17:18, 18:3, 18:9, 19:19, 21:24), always refers to end-times events; the first of these is a part of the last day conflict of the sixth seal, the next five concern the fall of Babylon, the Revelation 19 reference describes an encounter with the rider on the white horse, and the final one relates to the future kingdom age. The phrase 'kings of the earth' is also the identical phrase used in Peter and John's quotation from Psalm 2 (Acts 4:26); and although to Peter and John the kings of the earth would have been Pilate and Herod, they would have known that in the context of the Psalm, the kings of the earth are the heads of the nations who rage at the newly established kingdom of Christ (Psalm 2:1-2). Although undoubtedly there are meaningful lessons to be learnt from John's account of the fall of Babylon for the 'kings of the earth' existing in John's day in their dealings with Rome – assuming of course, they were in any position to appreciate them – the prophecy's focus is clearly on the future destruction of the Babylonian whore that exists when Christ returns.

The 'kings of the earth' do not rush to defend Babylon – they stand far off mourning her loss: 'Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgement has come'. The suddenness of her downfall was literally demonstrated in the case of ancient Babylon when Daniel interpreted the writing on the wall (Dan. 5:26-28, 30). Exactly who these 'kings of the earth' are is unclear, although they are said to be 'under the dominion of the great city' (Rev. 17:18). Taking this also to be a statement concerning the future, it is clear that at that future time, these 'kings of the earth' will be in accord with the woman and partners in her crimes. Strikingly however, we have been told that it would be the ten horns (kings) who were to

destroy the prostitute and burn her with fire (Rev. 17:16). This rather suggests that the ten horn kings (who have not yet received royal power – i.e. yet future) either represents a different group of regal powers than those ‘kings of the earth’ who have been intimately involved in the activities of the city-prostitute, or they are kings who have changed their allegiance.

The fall of the city-prostitute is certainly a ‘kingdom age’ event. It mirrors the prophetic condemnation of the original Babylon (Jeremiah 50 and 51), though in making this comparison, the distinction between the city (the Roman people) and the beast (the empire) tends to disappear. However, whether city or empire, the end is the same. Prophetically speaking, ancient Babylon was to be thrown into the midst of the river Euphrates wrapped in the avowed judgements of God (Jer. 51:63-64). Similarly, the end-time version of Babylon as a city will be cast like a millstone into the sea (Rev. 18:21).

The merchants and the sailors

“And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls. ‘The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you, and all your delicacies and your splendours are lost to you, never to be found again!’ The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, ‘Alas, alas, for the great city that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! For in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste.’ And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, ‘What city was like the great city?’ And they threw dust on their heads as they

wept and mourned, crying out, 'Alas, alas, for the great city where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in a single hour she has been laid waste.'" (Rev 18:11-19)

It may seem strange that such a significant section of Revelation's view of the downfall of the city-prostitute Babylon (alias the people of Rome) is taken up with the reaction of merchants and sailors. And yet it must follow, that her 'sins which are heaped high as heaven' (Rev. 18:5), are the very things that the merchants and sailors have been involved in, and will sorely miss when they are gone. What exactly is it that is condemned so strongly in their activities? It must be the fact that the merchants and sailors have been making excessive riches out of an exploitative trade in luxury goods. Richard Bauckham, when offering an economic critique of Rome based on Revelation 18 (*The Climax of Prophecy*, 1993), gives an extensive assessment of each of the items in the merchant's cargo mentioned in the above passage (from gold, to jewels and pearls). He concludes that this list was representative of Rome's costly imports – costly, either because of the intrinsic value of an individual item (like gold), or because of the sheer volume of the lower value goods imported by the city (like oil and wheat). In fact, the passage quoted above makes it clear that these imports were exceptional: they are 'delicacies and splendours', they represent the 'fruit for which their soul longed for', and they added up to 'great wealth'.

There seems little doubt that the 'sins which were heaped high as heaven' and of which the Romans were guilty, was the extreme exploitation of the world's resources as a means of enabling the upper classes to live in great luxury, combined with the national attitude that such exploitation was justifiable. The divine view of exploitation by trade is demonstrated by God's condemnation of Tyre; it is a condemnation which has much in common with Revelation's condemnation of the city-prostitute Rome (Eze. 26-28). The prophet first pronounces God's judgements on Tyre meted out by the king of Babylon (Eze. 26). Then in a most remarkable lament he likens Tyre to a ship of some beauty (Eze. 27:3-7). Tyre had many accomplices, and many who did business with her (Eze. 27:8-25). And yet she was

'wrecked by the seas in the depths of the waters', and all her crew sunk with her, along with the merchandise she carried (Eze. 27:27-36). Like imperial Rome she had aspirations of divinity, and like the city-prostitute she thought herself to be impregnable; Tyre had the heart of a god, she thought herself wise, she had become rich by trade and was proud of the achievement. And because of this attitude she was judged worthy to suffer the ultimate judgements of God (Eze. 28:2-10).

The first century recipients of Revelation would no doubt be aware of the extravagance of Rome and its rulers – an extravagance which was on occasion indulged in at the expense of God's chosen people (Rev. 18:24). They would understand that luxuries of all kinds from many countries flowed into Rome to support the lifestyle of her upper classes. However, they would not perhaps be aware of how such exploitation was viewed by God. In this respect Revelation's condemnation of the city-prostitute would be an eye-opener to them, and an exhortation to avoid the 'sin' of excessive exploitation.

Finality of judgement

Assuming the heavenly commentator in Revelation 18 continues to speak throughout verses 4 to 20, the speaker now asks heaven and the redeemed to rejoice over the judgements given.:

"Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!"
(Rev 18:20)

It is an appeal asking the redeemed of all ages to appreciate the true 'sinfulness' of exploitative behaviour wherever and whenever it occurs. The appeal is backed up by a vision of a mighty angel taking up a great millstone and throwing it into the sea and saying 'Babylon will be found no more' (Rev. 18:21). Babylonian Rome, once the centre of cultural and pleasurable activities – music, crafts of various kinds, illuminations, weddings, buying and selling – will be made desolate; it's exploitation of the world's resources will end for good (Rev. 18:22-23). Such exploitation is however, a 'sin' which is practiced on a world-wide scale in the age in which we now live – the modern-day 'Babylon'.

Rejoicing in heaven

John now hears the appeal of the heavenly voice responded to:

“After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.” (Rev 19:1-2)

Remember, heaven in Revelation is not ‘up there’ it is the timeless realm of divine operations. The phrase ‘great multitude’ (Gk: *ochlos polus*) which occurs many times in the Gospels and Acts occurs only three times in Revelation (Rev. 7:9, 19:1, 19:6). It seems reasonable to infer from this that the voice of the ‘great multitude’ John hears in his vision comes from the same ‘great multitude’ revealed to him in the climax of the seal sequence – the multitude that no one could number, who had come out of great tribulation, and had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:9, 14). And it is this same ‘great multitude’ who, in the spirit, John now hears praising God for passing judgement on the prostitute. They recognise that the judgements of God are true and just, and they praise him in this judgement for avenging the blood of his servants. On the face of it, vengeance may seem to be an inappropriate quality to feature in the response of a loving God, but divine vengeance against the enemies of his people has always been a divine concern in Revelation. The souls under the altar in the fifth seal were asking God how long it would be before he avenged their blood (Rev. 6:10). And although vengeance is not an appropriate response to evil from individual followers of Christ, it is an essential response from a God who is just and true – as Moses clearly testifies (Deut. 32:43).

The identification of the ‘great multitude’ with those sealed (Rev. 7:9), also explains why the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures join the thanksgiving at this point by worshipping God (compare Rev. 7:11-12). We first encountered the elders and the living creatures in

the vision of the heavenly Temple (Revelation 4) and in the later seal visions. In that context, we suggested that these ‘heavenly figures’ represented the worshipping ‘church’ (24 elders) and the preaching ‘church’ (four living creatures). It is entirely appropriately therefore, that the elders and living creatures join in the great multitude’s praise and worship since that multitude actually represents the outcome of their task of calling men and women to Christ. And this worship was acknowledged from the throne with the words; ‘Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great (Rev. 19:5).

A marriage in prospect

John now hears the same multitude of the redeemed speak again:

“Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure’ — for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.” (Rev 19:6-8)

This time, the multitude speaks with the voice of the risen Lord (Rev. 1:15) and with the voice of God (Rev. 4:5), and it celebrates the prospect of the reign of Christ. The fact is, the elimination of the prostitute is not an end in itself, it is a step which must take place before the relationship of the redeemed of God to the Lamb is manifested to the world. In the ESV translation (as in many others) the redeemed are called the Bride, and the contrast with the prostitute is clear and deliberate; so the redeemed can ‘rejoice and exult’ because ‘the Bride has made herself ready!’ In fact however, the Greek word used here is not the same as that used for ‘bride’ in Revelation 21. In the present verse, the word used is ‘*gunē*’ meaning a wife or a woman; in Revelation 21 the word is ‘*numphē*’ meaning a young married woman, a bride. Perhaps the most appropriate translation in this passage should be ‘wife-to-be’, though clearly translators would be

reluctant to use such an expression. In John's time a Jewish marriage would involve a betrothal which was a commitment to the relationship which would then be followed by the actual wedding sometime later. Thus, in referring to the 'Bride (wife to be) having made herself ready', John would seem to be thinking of such a betrothal (commitment) which would be in anticipation of the future wedding. It is a statement which appropriately concludes this section on the fall of the Babylonian whore, in that it provides a positive contrast to the judgement of the world's exploitative evil. We shall learn more about this wedding in the wrath angel's second excursus (Rev. 21:9 – 22:9).

How has the Bride 'made herself ready'? By accepting the divine gift and by putting on the fine linen bright and pure that has been 'granted' her. John tells us that the fine linen represents the 'righteous deeds' of the saints – a translation which is easy to misunderstand. The term 'righteous deeds' is one word in the Greek – *dikaiomata* – a plural term translated in a variety of ways: judgements, ordinances, righteous acts. Paul's uses the term like this:

"Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one 'act of righteousness' (dikaioma) leads to justification and life for all men." (Rom 5:18)

Here the 'act of righteousness' (*dikaioma*) is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. It seems likely therefore that the fine linen John refers to does not represent a Christian's personal 'works of righteousness' which can never bring salvation (Eph.2:8-10), rather, it represents the acceptance of Christ's 'act of righteousness' by those who form the 'great multitude'. The angel can then reinforce the blessing that the Bride represents:

"And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, 'These are the true words of God.'" (Rev. 19:9).

There is more about the Bride later in Revelation. For the moment, the dramatic contrast between the fallen prostitute and the betrothed 'wife

to be' has been clearly made, and the wrath angel brings this this excursus to a close with a blessing on those invited to the wedding feast. Without a doubt, John is impressed with the prospect held out to those who are invited to the wedding, even to the extent that he feels an unacceptable need to worship the angel messenger; as we have already seen, he is rebuked however, and told to worship God from whom these blessings flow (Rev. 19:10).

Chapter 16. The Millennium and beyond

John's vision (Revelation 19:11 - 20:15)

John has witnessed the end of the city-prostitute Babylon, and there is rejoicing in heaven. Now heaven is opened, and John sees a rider who is called Faithful and True sitting on a white horse; on his head are many diadems and he is called 'the Word of God'. Following him on white horses are the armies of heaven clothed in fine linen. The rider comes to rule the nations with a rod of iron and to tread the winepress of the fury of God. The conflict which follows is described as a gruesome feast, as a result of which, the beast, together with the false prophet and their followers are destroyed.

The millennium follows. During the millennium, the dragon, representing opposition to God, is restrained and the martyrs who had given their lives for Christ are appointed as rulers of the new world order. They live and reign with Christ for a 1000 years. At the end of this millennial age, a rebellion of those unwilling to accept Christ's leadership arises and is dealt with. Following this, John sees a great white throne before which all those who had not been a part of the earlier (first) resurrection are raised and judged. As a result, death itself is thrown into the lake of fire.

The rider on the white horse

An angel has shown John the city-prostitute Babylon riding the Roman beast, and he announces her downfall at the hands of the ten horn powers (Rev. 17:16). John now sees heaven opened to receive a new series of revelations:

"Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and

on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself.” (Rev 19:11-12)

The vision begins with some detail about the rider on a white horse, which we will review under the following headings:

- The rider’s identity,
- His authority and rulership,
- His mission,
- His army.

This review of the characteristics of the rider and his forces, will be followed by a brief assessment of the battle the rider and his army fights, and its outcome.

The rider’s identity

The rider is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is called ‘Faithful and True’ – a title which was how the risen Lord identified himself in his message to the church of Laodicea (Rev. 3:14). Moreover, this identity is confirmed when John later tells us that ‘he will rule the nations with a rod of iron’ (Rev. 19:15) – a phrase which defines God’s appointed King in Psalm 2 (Psa. 2:9), and predicts the future role of the man-child spoken of Revelation 12 (Rev. 12:5).

The rider is called ‘the Word of God’ (Rev. 19:13). He is the Word made flesh spoken of by John in his Gospel; one whose creative power is well attested by the Psalmist (John 1:14, Psa. 33:6-9). And linked to this identification of Jesus as the Word, John associates the fact that his robe was dipped in blood (Rev. 19:13). The question of course, is whose blood? Many commentators would see in this feature a link with Isaiah’s prophecy of the divine conqueror whose garments were stained with the blood of the defeated enemy (Isa. 63:1-6). Isaiah’s prophecy corresponds in some respects with this feature of Revelation’s description of the rider, because Isaiah was also describing an outpouring of God’s wrath. However, there are features in Revelation which do not fit Isaiah’s prophecy. Isaiah’s conqueror

was returning from the victory, whereas the rider on the white horse had yet to engage the enemy. Isaiah's conqueror acts alone (Isa. 63: 5), whereas Revelation's rider was accompanied by the armies of heaven (Rev. 19:14). The blood on the garment of Isaiah's conqueror was 'spattered' or 'sprinkled' (Heb: *nâzâh* – compare Jezebel's blood in 2 Kings 9:33), whereas the rider's robe was 'dipped' (Gk: *baptō*) in blood, a much more deliberate and controlled action.

It seems likely therefore that the rider's robe was 'baptised' in blood because the rider was the slain lamb, now turned 'lion of the tribe of Judah' (Rev. 5:5-6). The blood represented his own blood shed to provide purification for the sins of the redeemed, and possibly also the blood of the martyrs of the fifth seal whose lives were dependent on his sacrifice; after all, the rider on the white horse was about to respond to the plea of the martyrs, 'how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth (Rev. 6:10). And the martyrs were given white robes matching the garments of the army following the rider (Rev. 6:11, 19:14); they were robes made white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:14), and they mirrored the clothing provided for the 'bride to be' (Rev. 19:8).

His authority and rulership

The rider comes to tread the winepress of the fury of 'God the Almighty' (Rev. 19:15). The term 'Almighty' here is the Greek term *pantocrator* used rarely the rest of the New Testament (only in 2Cor. 6:18) but nine times in Revelation. It's a word which means precisely what the English term implies – the one who is All Powerful. It is surely a term chosen deliberately to challenge the claims of the 'divine' Roman emperors. To confirm the rider's status, there is written on his robe and his thigh – probably the most visible part of a rider on horseback – the words, 'King of kings and Lord of Lords' (Rev. 19:16). The repeated terms in this title simply emphasizing the supremacy of Christ as both King and Lord (compare Rev. 17:14, 1Tim. 6:15 and Deut. 10:17). The rider's regal authority is confirmed by the fact that he wears many 'diadems' on his head ('crowns' in some translations). These 'diadems' are the symbols of ruling authority similar to the ones

John has previously described as seeing on the heads of the beast. In that case however, there were but seven (admittedly, in John's numerical system signifying the totality of ruling power); here however, there are an unnumbered number (many diadems), suggesting a superior authority both in terms of length of reign and in governmental power.

Alongside the statement that on his head are many diadems, John reports that he has a name written which is known only to himself (Rev. 19:12). Although John seems clear enough that the name is written (Gk: *graphō*), he is less than clear about where it is written – the most likely location being on the head, or on the crowns. We have already noted that the rider bears the titles 'Word of God' and 'King of Kings'; however, these are formal titles, so it seems likely that the rider's unknown name is a personal one. Some have suggested that this unknown name might be the Old Testament name of God, the tetragrammaton (YHWH – Yahweh). Others have suggested it could be the 'name that is above every name' referred to by Paul (Phil. 2:9-11); in this case, the name would either be 'Jesus' meaning God saves, or possibly 'Lord' reflecting the passage from Isaiah Paul is quoting (Isa. 45:23 - Yahweh). But these solutions seem to be inadmissible by virtue of the fact that John specifically says that the name is one that only the rider himself knows.

We have however, already observed that the names of people or groups of people feature significantly in Revelation, and they are often displayed on their heads or on their crowns. Thus, the sea-beast had blasphemous names on its heads (Rev. 13:1), the city-prostitute had her name of mystery written on her forehead, followers of the land-beast have the beast's name on their hand and forehead (Rev. 13:16), and the redeemed bear the name of the Lamb and his Father on their foreheads (Rev. 14:1). All these names represent the moral principles to which the groups of people so labelled are committed. And the fact that they are written on their heads, suggests that they are also a reflection of the way they think – their attitude of mind. It seems possible therefore that the unknown name of the rider on the white horse, associated as it is with his head or his many diadems, reflects

something about the rider's approach to the task of judgement or governance in the future age.

In his gospel John writes in this way about the reception of the name of Christ: 'all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God' (John 1:12). The name of Christ stands for all that is true about him, his person, his mission, and the authority delegated to him by his Father. What then can we know about Christ's approach to the governance of the future kingdom age? The disciples once asked Jesus who would be the greatest in the kingdom age. He replied:

"The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves." (Luke 22:25-26)

It seems extremely unlikely therefore that in the kingdom age Christ's principles of governance will be modelled on the hierarchical systems of control by which the current world operates. Christ's leadership style is much more likely to be based on the principles he exhibited in his ministry – principles of service and the knowledge of God. They are in fact, the same principles expressed by Peter in his exhortation to the church in his first letter (1Pet. 5:2-3).

The divine principles of rulership (kingship) are spelled out by Moses (Deut. 17:14-20). Not only is the king to avoid accumulating the elements of power (horses, associations with other nations by marriage, and wealth), he is to immerse himself in God's law so that 'his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers'. It is doubtful if any of the kings of Israel, still less of other nations, ever attempted to implement such an approach to government, still less get close to achieving it. When discussing kingship with Pilate, Jesus said, 'my kingdom is not of this world, if my kingdom were of this world my servants would have been fighting ... but my kingdom is not from the world' (John 18:36). Pilate replies. 'So you are a king'? Jesus' response was equivocal; it is translated in the ESV as: 'You say that I

am a king', or as one version puts it: 'King is your word'. Jesus' conception of kingship was so fundamentally different from Pilate's that he was unwilling to use the word king of himself because Pilate would have totally misunderstood what kind of king Christ was claiming to be.

John tells us that the name the rider bears is 'a name that no one knows but the rider himself'. If this name does have to do with Christ's principles of governance, the name is not revealed because the true nature of Christ's kingship is something that would be incomprehensible to the rulers of this age (like Pilate); incomprehensible too, to many of his followers steeped in this world's management methods which generally mean control by dominance. Despite the 'rod of iron' label, which faced with the evil in the world will prove initially unavoidable, the settled rule of Christ will be rather different. It seems certain that the rulership style of Christ and the saints in the age to come, will be something unknown in the present age.

His mission

The mission of the rider on the white horse is to judge and make war in righteousness (Rev. 19:11), and to tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God (Rev. 19:15). It was of course, a white horse that was ridden by the first of the four horsemen in the seal sequence, who was also engaged in warfare of a kind; that rider emerged onto the scene 'conquering and to conquer' (Rev. 6:2). The seal rider however, was not involved in a battle with evil, but in a warfare for souls; the only weapon he had was a bow, apparently without arrows.

The rider of Revelation 19 however, has a real battle to face – almost certainly the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 16:16, 19:19). And he is equipped to do so. His eyes are like a flame of fire. We have observed earlier, that fire is a common Biblical symbol for judgement, and the rider's eyes have the ability to detect clearly when such judgement is warranted (Rev. 19:12). As for the execution of judgement, John tells us that he will strike down the nations, and that he will rule them (his adversaries) with a rod of iron (Rev. 19:15). It is

surprising therefore that the only weapon the rider is carrying is the sword that comes from his mouth. This certainly suggests that the rider's warfare, will not be overtly violent; he does not wield the expected 'rod of iron' in quite the way we might expect, nor does he carry a literal sword. It would, in fact, be the ultimate inconsistency if the one who said 'he who takes the sword will perish by the sword', were to execute judgement with bloody violence (Matt. 26:52). The weapon the rider has, is 'the sword of his mouth', and that should surely be enough. He is after all, 'the Word of God', and the power of the word as exercised in the case of Ananias and Sapphira in apostolic times has adequately demonstrated its power for both judgement and punishment (even if a word was not actually spoken on that occasion) (Acts 5:5).

The rider's army

The rider on the white horse has an army following him:

"And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses." (Rev. 19:14)

In Old Testament times, the army of the Lord was recruited from the people of Israel, and they fought to establish Israel in the promised land. But as we have discussed earlier in connection with the 144,000 army of God (Rev. 7:4-8, 14:1-5), the literal army of Israel foreshadowed the army of spiritual Israel who were to wage the Lord's battles on a spiritual plane. It is extremely unlikely therefore that the army following the rider on the white horse will wield weapons in any literal sense. They are said to be the army of heaven – not an angelic army – but the army of the redeemed. They are arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, like the bride of Christ (Rev. 19:8). They have no weapons. It would seem to be clear however, that if we are taking the confrontation of the rider Christ with the armies of the beasts to be a literal one (Rev. 19:19), then we must also accept that the army of the redeemed has a literal presence in these final stages of the outpouring of God's wrath.

When we considered the outpouring of the sixth bowl of wrath, we noted that the call to the nations to assemble for the battle of Armageddon was followed by an appeal from Christ to his followers to 'stay awake and to keep their garments on' in preparation for their imminent call (Rev. 16:15). This appeal we suggested, implied that the resurrection had not yet taken place, though it was very near. If the battle of Armageddon is the conflict referred to in the final verses of Revelation 19, it would appear that the resurrected and redeemed army of God have a role to play in this encounter. Although the army's exact role is not revealed, it seems likely that their presence becomes necessary to Christ the King as the millennial age advances.

It is somewhat strange that although John's visions frequently imply the resurrection of the 'saints', they actually say very little about resurrection or judgement. The one mention we have already noted occurs as part of the seventh trumpet (Rev. 11:15-19). The seventh trumpet opens with the statement that 'the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ'. We have taken this to mean that at that point in time, Christ becomes the King over a restored nation of Israel who have learned to accept him as their Messiah. The first event following the installation of Christ as King would seem to be that the nations rage and God's wrath comes (Rev. 11:18a). There is no clear indication of how long this outpouring of wrath will continue, but this statement could certainly cover the bowls of wrath elaborated in Revelation 15-16. After this outpouring of wrath comes the judgement of the saints: 'and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and saints (Rev. 11:18b). Following this, the destroyers of the earth (land) are to be destroyed (Rev. 11:18c). And this sequence of events is precisely the sequence we have suggested as leading up to Armageddon, with the resurrection taking place after most of the wrath plagues are over, but shortly before the final confrontation.

The battle

Despite the earlier suggestion that the principles of divine governance under Christ will be rather different from those in the present order, the initial mission of the rider on the white horse and his army is to bring God's judgements on a rebellious world. When discussing earlier the theology of the outpouring of the bowls of wrath, we suggested that a dramatic scene of judgement such as we have in the final section of Revelation 19 is best regarded as an essential cleansing process in which the impurities of the world are 'devoted to destruction'; it is a kind of 'sacrificial' process in which the 'defiled' blood associated with humanity is poured out at the foot of the altar and thus destroyed. It is a close parallel to the role of ancient Israel in dealing with the nations which occupied the promised land in Joshua's time (Deut. 7:1-6).

"Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great." (Rev. 19:17-18)

The imagery in John's vision is drawn from Ezekiel's prophecy foretelling God's condemnation of the Gogian aggressor of his people (Eze. 39:17-20). The imagery is horrific, and there is little value in attempting any precise interpretation of the details – it is simply a poetic but shocking representation of a destructive encounter. In Ezekiel this judgement is said to be a 'sacrificial feast' and as in Revelation, the emphasis seems to be that these judgements should be witnessed by all. The birds in Revelation, the birds and domestic animals in Ezekiel are all invited to observe and indeed to participate in the 'feast', presumably as a divine object lesson. It is a 'sacrificial' feast in the sense that all, without acknowledgement of rank or status, who have received the mark of the beast or worshipped its image together with those who were slain by the sword in the mouth of the rider on the white horse, will be devoted to destruction (Rev. 19:20). The city-prostitute Babylon has already been destroyed by the 'ten

horn' nations before Armageddon. Now, the beast, its publicity agent the false prophet, and the beast's worshippers will be destroyed as well. Together, these beasts represent those ruling powers who have usurped the authority of God for their own purposes and the agents who have supported them. They are consigned to be destroyed in the lake of fire. The lake of fire, a concept unique to Revelation, is probably modelled on Gehenna, the valley outside Jerusalem where the detritus of the city was consigned to an ever burning fire of extinction.

The millennium (Revelation 20)

And so, after the initial judgements of God are meted out by the rider on the white horse and his army, the millennial reign of Christ begins. The millennial age will last for a nominal period of 1000 years. It seems clear that during this period the world will be populated with mortal human beings organized as nation states similar to those that have existed during the previous two millennia. The key difference however, is the way these nations are governed and the way they relate to the Kingdom established by Christ in Israel. As the millennium advances, and the reign of Christ expands worldwide, the resurrected 'saints' will share a governmental role with Christ.

The vision of Revelation 20 gives a relatively straightforward account of the progress of this millennial age using symbols with which we are already familiar or ones that are fairly transparent. The sequence John sees is as follows:

- An angel comes down from heaven to imprison the dragon for 1000 years so that he cannot deceive that nations during this period (Rev. 20:1-3),
- Thrones are then seen, upon which are seated the resurrected martyrs of the previous ages; they live and reign with Christ in this millennial age (Rev. 20:4-6),
- When the 1000 years are ended, Satan (the Dragon presumably) is released from prison, free to persuade the nations to rebel against the reign of Christ. Those involved in

this rebellion, identified by John as 'Gog and Magog', are destroyed by divine action (Rev. 20:7-10).

We will consider further each of the elements listed above, including a rather more extensive review of the aggressors referred to by John as 'Gog and Magog'. Finally, we will review what John tells us about his vision of the judgement of the great white throne (Rev. 20:11-15).

The dragon imprisoned

"Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years ..." (Rev 20:1-2)

We have argued that the dragon represents the spirit associated with human power which usurps the authority of God for its own purposes. It is a spirit, originating with Adam and Eve in Eden (the ancient serpent), which refuses to submit to the authority of God choosing rather to exercise its own authority in defiance of God. The binding of the dragon and its imprisonment in chains in the bottomless pit, is a graphic way of indicating that this power will be prevented from exercising its malign influence over the nations for the 1000 year Millennial period. The vision is not explicit as to how this 'dragon binding' is to be achieved, but since the authority of rulership in the millennial age is to be exercised by Christ and the saints, it is likely that the power of men to usurp the ruling authority of God will be controlled by the new administration. However, when the 1000 years have run their course, this control will be temporarily withdrawn (Rev. 20:3, 7) – a somewhat surprising measure which will be considered a little later.

The first resurrection

"Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the

beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection.” (Rev 20:4-5)

Now that the dragon has been neutralised, it is possible for Christ to set up his administration. John is shown thrones and seated on them are those to whom authority to judge has been given. Such a delegation of divine authority stands in dramatic contrast to the beasts of Revelation 13, whose crowned heads had, at the instigation of the dragon, appropriated divine authority to themselves. Those seated on the thrones, are the very ones who had been martyred for the testimony of Jesus (5th seal), and who had not worshipped the beasts or received the beastly mark on forehead or hand. They came to life in order to reign with Christ during the millennial age (Rev. 20:4). This resurrection is the fulfillment of the prediction enshrined in the seventh trumpet, that once Christ has assumed his reign as King, the dead would be judged and rewarded (Rev. 11:18). Moreover, in connection with the outpouring of the bowls of wrath, we suggested that this resurrection would take place shortly before Armageddon, thus allowing the ‘army of God’ to be available to support the rider on the white horse in that encounter. It would now appear that it is this same group (the resurrected saints) who are now being given authority to judge.

There is no mention in Revelation of a conventional judgement seat as part of this process of resurrection and enthronement of the saints. However, they will certainly have been raised to meet the Lord ‘in the air’ along with those who are alive at the time (1Thess. 4:17), and it may well be that such a meeting would itself have functioned as the ‘judgement seat’ for these saints (2Cor. 5:10). It will also have been a resurrection to life rather than a resurrection to ‘judgement’ (John 5:29). What however seems incontrovertible, is that it is a resurrection in which only the redeemed saints of the pre-millennial age are involved. Revelation is clear that the rest of the dead do not come to life until the 1000 years are ended – presumably at the great white throne

judgement (Rev. 20:6, 11-15). John seems keen to reinforce this point by saying that those who have taken part in the first resurrection will be exempt from ‘the second death’ – the ‘second death’ has no power over them. The second death is not fully explained, but it presumably refers to those who are raised to be rejected at the great white throne judgement.

The final judgement

“And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea.” (Rev 20:7-8)

We have been forewarned of the release of the dragon (alias the Devil or Satan) earlier in the chapter, and now the vision gives further detail. Simply stated, the control exercised by the saints in their governmental role is removed so that those human subjects throughout the world who feel so inclined may respond to the dragon’s promptings and join forces in opposition to Christ. In order for this to happen, Christ and his saints withdraw to the ‘beloved city’ Jerusalem, and relinquish their governing control. As a result, it would appear that the rebellious subjects in the millennial kingdom organize themselves to attack the camp of the saints. God then destroys them with fire from heaven; they are consigned to the lake of fire to suffer the same fate as the beasts (Rev. 20:9-10).

The issue here is understand the divine purpose behind the withdrawal of control by the saints! On the face of it, it might seem unlikely that people who have lived under the reign of Christ for 1000 years will want to reject divine rulership in order to take power themselves! But a considered reflection about the exercise of human power over the millennia prior to the return of Christ, rather suggests that such a rebellion is almost inevitable. ‘Who made this man a ruler and a judge over us?’, is a cry that rings through the ages from the time of Moses (Acts 7:27). There will be those in the kingdom age whose hearts and

minds will not have been influenced by the millennial rule of Christ. And God does not wish to pressure people to continue as part of his kingdom if they don't really want to be there. Freedom of choice, even at this late stage, seems to be as fundamental a principle of the call of God as it was in Eden. Thus the withdrawal of the governing power of the saints must be seen as God's way of allowing human beings to make choices. Those who wish to exert their own power against Christ's regime, must, in the divine plan, be given an opportunity to do so, even though as it turns out, they do so to their own destruction.

Gog and Magog

Who then are Gog and Magog in this final rebellion? The context suggests that rather like the forces that gathered the nations to the battle of Armageddon at the beginning of the Millennium, the released dragon (Satan) now spreads its influence to the 'four corners' of the world in order to assemble a force to attack the camp of the saints at Jerusalem at the end of the Millennium. John names these powers as Gog and Magog (Rev. 20:8).

John will however presumably know, that powers named Gog and Magog feature in the later chapters of Ezekiel's prophecy (Eze. 38:2). On the face of it however, there seems little to link Ezekiel's Gog and Magog with the powers of the same name in Revelation. In Ezekiel, Gog is described as a chief prince, and Magog as the land of his origin. Together with associates they advance against the mountains of Israel to plunder the country at a time of the country's increasing prosperity (Eze. 38:12). John's reference in Revelation differs from Ezekiel's in that Gog is not referred to as an individual prince neither is Magog obviously his country. These names appear to be used as the 'title' of an undefined aggressor in the kingdom age. In Ezekiel the nations associated with Gog are specified – Persia, Cush, Put, Gomer and Beth-Togarmah and their hordes – whereas in Revelation, John is clear that his 'Gog and Magog' is not a specific group of identified nations but is formed from nations from the 'four corners of the earth'.

Moreover, a straightforward reading of Revelation's Gogian invasion sets these events towards the 'end' of the millennial age after Christ has been reigning in Jerusalem for many years, whereas Ezekiel's prophecy suggests that his Gogian invasion takes place shortly after the reign of Christ has begun. The events described by Ezekiel in chapters 34-40 form an impressive sequence:

- Ezekiel 34: God's promise to gather Israel from the diaspora and restore them. Note particularly: *"I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely (Heb: betach) in the wilderness and sleep in the woods"* (Eze. 34:25). (Note: *betach* (safely) is a covenant word, compare: Lev. 25:18-19, Deut. 12:10, Psa. 4:8).
- Ezekiel 35: God's judgement on Edom (Arabs) for their antagonism against Israel.
- Ezekiel 36: God's blessing on the land of Israel and its people. Their 'conversion': *"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."* (Eze 36:26-27).
- Ezekiel 37: Valley of dry bones. A two stage process; first returned Jews are assembled as a dead army, with no breath (37:8), then they are brought to life (37:14). This national resurrection is followed by Israel's unification and the enthronement of their king: *"My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes"* (Eze 37:24).
- Ezekiel 38-39: Then the attack by Gog and his confederates to plunder the land followed by God's judgements.
- Ezekiel 40 etc. The Temple and the land.

Although we cannot be sure that the above sequence is strictly chronological, it is surely clear that Ezekiel sees God's care for Israel and his willingness to deal with their enemies as including the

restoration of their spiritual relationship with him and of extending blessings of peace and security to them. And as part of this process, God establishes 'David' as their king – a named historic figure surely representing David's greater son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And if the chapters are in any sense chronological, Ezekiel's Gogian invasion takes place after the installation of their king when the prosperity of the nation is on the increase. Notice particularly:

"After many days you (the Gogian host) will be mustered. In the latter years you will go against the land that is restored from war, the land whose people were gathered from many peoples upon the mountains of Israel, which had been a continual waste. Its people were brought out from the peoples and now dwell securely (Heb: betach), all of them ... and say, 'I will go up against the land of unwalled villages. I will fall upon the quiet people who dwell securely (Heb: betach), all of them dwelling without walls, and having no bars or gates,'" (Eze .38:8,11)

In a situation in which Israel are surrounded by antagonistic neighbours, as they are at the time of writing, it seems inappropriate to describe Israel as dwelling securely. However, at the future time when the prophecy is fulfilled, Israel will be secure and dwelling without bars or gates because the Lord will be present as their King.

A sequence of judgements

If then Ezekiel's Gogian conflict takes place near the beginning of Christ's kingly reign in Israel, how does it relate to Revelation's Gogian invasion a thousand years or so later? Earlier we made the point that there appeared to be significant differences between the participants involved in Ezekiel's Gogian conflict and those of Revelation. It seems clear however that they are closely related both in terms of the aggressive motivations of the nations around them, and the outcome of divine judgement. The most satisfactory explanation might be that Ezekiel is describing a relatively local response to the establishment of Christ's kingdom by a group of middle eastern nations shortly after it had been established, whereas Revelation is telling us that even after

Christ has been reigning for many years, there will be a worldwide reaction against the presence of this divine power in the earth.

Thus we have noted a sequence of judgmental conflicts which will take place following the return of Christ: (1) Psalm 2's 'nations raging' against the new King in the Middle East (Rev. 11:18) – and Ezekiel's Gogian invasion may well be a part this 'raging'; (2) the battle of Armageddon which draws in the 'kings from the East' into conflict with Christ (Rev. 16:12,16) – a conflict which may in fact, be the judgements imposed by the rider on the white horse and the army of heaven; and (3) a further conflict at the end of the Millennium when a final opportunity to rebel is given by God to the nations 'who do not want this man (Christ) to reign over them' – a conflict which, since it is the very last judgement poured out by God on rebellious humanity, could well be the equivalent of the seventh bowl of wrath (Rev. 16:17-21).

The great white throne

So far, we have followed a sequence of visions in which John reports the things he sees (Gk: '*kai eidon*' – 'and I saw'). It is a series in which both the visions, and more importantly the events represented in the visions, follow one another in time. Now, John sees a vision of a great white throne:

"Then (Gk: kai, and) I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened." (Rev. 20:11-12a)

This vision coming as it does at the end of the sequence of visions relating to the Millennium, suggests that it takes place when the Millennium has ended. We have been told that at the beginning of the Millennium there will be a 'first resurrection', and that the 'rest of the dead' will not come to life (a second resurrection) until the thousand years are ended (Rev. 20:5-6). It seems reasonable to assume then,

that this second resurrection applies to the dead of all ages (including the millennial age) who will appear before the great white throne judgement. We have also been told that ‘the second death’ has no power for those who have taken part in the first resurrection, although little explanation of this ‘second death’ has been given (Rev. 20:6). Now that the great white throne vision has revealed a second resurrection, it becomes clear just what this ‘second death’ is; those who have been brought to life again in the second resurrection, but who are not accepted by the judge in the great white throne judgement, will die again – they will suffer death a second time. And this ‘second death’ will occur at the same time as the final extinction of death itself. In the terms of the prophecy:

“Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” (Rev 20:14-15)

Two resurrections?

The view of Revelation 20 set out above suggests that the two resurrections referred to occur a thousand years apart in time. Both of course are resurrections to life, but the second is a resurrection of all those who did not participate in the first resurrection but who will stand before the great white throne. Such a sequence of events is not the conventional view of resurrection and judgement. A traditional view of the judgement seat of Christ would expect as Paul implies in his address before Agrippa that ‘there will be a (single?) resurrection of both the just and the unjust’ with the ‘just’ being rewarded with an entrance to Christ’s kingdom, and the ‘unjust’ returning to the grave (Acts 24:15, compare also Dan. 12:2 also the parables of the wheat and tares (Mat. 13:36-43) and the last judgement (Mat. 25:31-46)). Jesus however, does speak of two resurrections, though his words cannot really be taken to determine the timing of these resurrections (John 5:28-29). It is fair to say then, that none of these references explicitly address the timing of the resurrection events. It is also worth bearing in mind that the Revelation account is a highly focused

symbolic prophecy and its purpose is not to give a timetable of predicted events – recall for example, the omission of details relating to Christ’s ministry in the account of the triumph of Christ over the power of evil in Chapter 12. Since however, the various views of when judgement and the resurrections of life will take place have no overall fundamental importance for the divine purpose, we ought perhaps not to try to specify in advance how God will act in relation to things he has not clearly revealed. The redeemed saints will rule with Christ in his kingdom, and the workers of evil in the world will get their just deserts – all in God’s time.

The white throne setting

John does not tell us who was seated on the throne (Rev. 20:11). The Apostle John tells us that ‘the Father has given all judgement to the Son’ (John 5:22); nevertheless the Son judges in the name of the Father and with the Father’s authority, so that in this particular vision, we are probably intended to think of the one on the throne as God himself. After all, throughout Revelation the throne has been God’s throne, and this vision focuses specifically on God’s justice.

Strikingly, the vision opens with John seeing ‘earth and sky’ flee away from before the throne (Rev. 20:11 (ESV)). The word translated ‘sky’ in this passage is, in the Greek text, the word elsewhere translated ‘heaven’, so a more consistent translation would be to say that John sees ‘earth and heaven’ flee away. It is however, unusual that the phrase John uses is ‘earth and heaven’ rather than the more normal ‘heaven and earth’; moreover, there is no obvious reason why the translator’s ‘sky’ makes more sense than ‘heaven’, nor why the word order is reversed. It is just about possible that John is referring to the ultimate annihilation of the literal earth and heaven at some time after the Millennial age, though in this case a more dramatic descriptor of the end of the created order might be expected rather than merely that it would ‘flee away’. It is much more likely that the terms ‘earth and heaven’ are being used metaphorically to represent the ruled (earth) or the ruling (heaven) classes (see introduction – Chapter 1). There is little doubt however, that John’s description of the fate of earth and

heaven is dramatic – they flee away so that ‘no place could be found for them’, a phrase which is a word for word quotation from the Greek of Daniel 2:35 (LXX). In that context, Daniel is telling King Nebuchadnezzar about the great image the King had dreamed about, an image representing the sequence of powers that would exist in the world over historic time (Dan. 2:31-35). In the dream, the image is destroyed and ground to powder by the agency of a stone cut out of a mountain without hands (Christ); the wind then carries the remnants of the image away so that ‘no place was found for them’. The ESV ‘translates’ this last phrase as: ‘so not a trace of them could be found’ – all signs of the earlier human empires have been obliterated by the kingdom of Christ. The relevance of the destruction of Daniel’s great image of human power to the extinction of ‘earth and heaven’ in the great white throne vision is clear – the post-millennial time had come when not a trace of human power could be found any more.

There is a superficial similarity of this passing of earth and heaven with John’s description in the sixth seal of the ‘sky (or heaven) vanishing like a scroll (Rev. 6:14). However, we have attempted to show that the sixth seal represents events which will occur leading up to the establishment of Christ’s kingdom, and the vanishing sky focuses on the ‘rolling up’ of human government at that time. The great white throne vision setting is however post-millennial and the final destiny of earth and heaven are being expressed in terms which appear deliberately to exclude even a ‘trace’ of human involvement. These arguments suggest that the post-millennial passing of the ‘earth and heaven’ signifies that in this age the traditional style of government (rulers and ruled) – even government by Christ and the saints over a mortal population – will have been transcended. The vision seems to be reflecting the era spoken of by Paul when he writes: ‘the Son himself will also be subjected to him (God) who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all’ (1Cor. 15:28).

Judgement

John’s vision of the great white throne is clearly a final judgement scene:

“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done”. (Rev 20:12)

The people who will incur judgement is comprehensive – the dead, small and great, those who had died at sea, those who had died over the earlier centuries (pictured as being in ‘Death and Hades’), all in fact, who had not been raised in the first resurrection (Rev. 20:5-6) and certainly those who had lived through the millennial age. Nothing is said about the criteria which determines who will be raised and who will not. That is hardly the point of the vision. The focus of the vision is not the people who are judged or their destiny, but the justice of God. The throne is a ‘great white throne’; ‘great’, because it is God who judges, and ‘white’ because it manifests his righteousness and justice. And the point of the vision is to show that the justice of God is comprehensive; all who ever lived will in the end receive divine justice. Several Old Testament writers have observed an apparent lack of fairness (justice) in the way the world works. For example:

“There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity”. (Ecc. 8:14)

Similar thoughts are expressed by Job and the Psalmist (Job 24:21-25, Psa. 73:12-14). What the great white throne vision is telling us, is that when the purpose of God is finally brought to its conclusion, God’s righteous justice will have been exercised fully and fairly – moreover, it will be justice based on the evidence (the books). We have had reason to observe previously that God keeps records; he has ‘books’ relating to human performance as well as a book of Life recording the identities of the redeemed. It is not for us to try to figure out who will be involved in this resurrection and who will not, still less in trying to decide who

will be saved and who will not be saved. Logic would suggest that those who have responded acceptably to Christ during the millennial age will share eternal life, but beyond that it is not sensible or desirable to go. It may seem by some pointless to raise people from the dead just to subject them to the second death – send them back to the grave again. But that is not our call. Jesus made it clear to the Scribes and Pharisees that they risked some such fate (Luke 13:28). But the vision of the white throne vision is not to enable us to determine what the divine procedure on these matters will be, but to assure us that in the end, God's judgements will be just, comprehensive and rational. When human history comes to a close, all those whose names were not written in the book of life along with death itself will be thrown into the lake of fire – to be completely annihilated (Rev. 20:14-15).

In the next chapter we turn back the clock somewhat to consider the wrath angel's second excursus; this one about the Bride.

Chapter 17. The Bride

John's vision (Revelation 21)

John has been shown visions of the millennial age, and these visions ended with a glimpse of the post-millennial judgements of God. Now he sees a vision of a new heaven and a new earth; he also sees the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven prepared as a bride. John hears a loud voice from the throne declaring that God will dwell with men in this new world.

John is then invited by one of the bowl angels to see the Bride the Lamb's wife. He is taken into a high mountain and shown the holy city Jerusalem, coming down from heaven. There follows a detailed description of the city, its walls, its gates and its foundations. His guide has a measuring rod in his hand, and he tells John the city's dimensions. It is made of precious stones and of pure gold which has the appearance of transparent glass. There is no Temple in the city, and it has no need of sun or moon because the glory of God provides its light. The nations bring their glory and honour into the city.

Structure of Revelation 21 and 22

Before exploring the details of the visions John describes in Revelation 21 and 22, it may be helpful to review their structure:

- Revelation 21:1 to 21:8 – A vision revealing a new heavens and earth and introducing the new Jerusalem,
- Revelation 21:9 to 22:9 – The bowl angel's second excursus describing the holy city, the new Jerusalem,
- Revelation 22:10 to 22:21 – concluding words of encouragement and warning, followed by John's closure.

Revelation 21 – the opening vision

We begin by focusing on the opening vision (Rev. 21:1-8):

“Then (Gk: and) I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” (Rev. 21:1-2)

The question which immediately arises is whether this vision of a ‘new heaven and a new earth’ and the ‘new Jerusalem’, follows Revelation 20 chronologically and is therefore post-millennial, or whether it takes us back to the millennial age whilst possibly retaining a post millennial perspective? The visions recorded in Revelation 19:11 to the end of Revelation 20 have each begun by using the Greek word ‘and’ (Gk. *kai*) – though the ESV has usually preferred to substitute the word ‘then’, presumably because John sees the visions one after another. We however, have taken not only the visions, but also the events predicted by the visions to be a chronological sequence covering the period from the final conflict (Armageddon), through the millennial age, to the time when God ‘will be all in all’.

However, John’s visions do not stop at the end of Revelation 20, but continue with the vision of the new heavens and earth in Revelation 21. Once again, the opening word ‘and’ does not necessarily imply that this vision follows those in Revelation 20 chronologically, although a post-millennial interpretation certainly fits some of its features. For example, John tells us that the sea is no more. Which sea is John referring to? We have encountered two kinds of ‘sea’ in Revelation – one is the literal sea (or perhaps the Mediterranean sea) from which one of the beasts emerged (Rev. 13), and the other is the ‘sea’ in the temple, the purpose of which was to enable worshippers to wash before approaching God. John’s vision of the new heaven and earth however, does not mention a Temple – and we shall discover later that there is no temple in the new Jerusalem – so that the most likely interpretation of the ‘sea’ in this vision would be to take it as the sea of

the nations which according to Isaiah 'casts up mire and dirt' (Isa. 57:20). Thus, a post-millennial timing for this vision, when mortal nations would no longer exist, could well be the reason for there being 'sea no more' in John's vision. More significantly, the great white throne vision has revealed that the post-millennial age will be one in which death itself has been consigned to the lake of fire, not just for the saints but for all. And this seems to accord with the statement John hears from the throne:

"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Rev 21:3-4)

However, there is a problem with regarding this vision as post-millennial. The vision begins with John seeing a new heavens and a new earth, which is quite a dramatic turn-around from the vision immediately preceding it (the great white throne). In that vision we have been told that 'earth and heaven' had 'fled away' so that 'no trace of them could be found'. Moreover, John tells us that the 'new heaven and earth' replaces an earlier one which he calls the 'first heaven and earth' (Rev. 21:1). So what exactly did John have in mind when he makes reference to this first heaven and earth which was to be replaced by a new one? And where exactly does the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven prepared as a bride for her husband fit in with this new heavens and earth?

Our working hypothesis in what follows, is to suggest that the vision combines two overlapping 'regimes' which function over different lengths of time. We will take the bride, the new Jerusalem to represent those who have shared in the first resurrection (the community of saints); they are immortal beings and continue to exist throughout the millennium and beyond. Their relationship to divine things is elaborated in the bowl angel's second excursus, and is discussed

below. The 'new heaven and earth' on the other hand, refers to the Millennium in which the mortal population which exists in that age will be governed by the 'saints'; the 'saints' task of governing the world is seen as a part of their role as the bride, the new Jerusalem. Thus considered metaphorically, Christ and the saints would be the 'heaven' component of this 'heaven and earth' and the millennial age's mortal population would be the 'earth'. The 'heaven and earth' regime is thus limited in time (1000 years) whereas the bride, the new Jerusalem is everlasting. To support such a view we will explore first the Biblical evidence for the new heavens and earth, and then, with the help of the bowl angels vision of the bride, we will consider the new Jerusalem.

A new heavens and earth

John's vision of a new heaven and earth is surely intended to reflect Isaiah's prophecy:

"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness."
(Isa. 65:17-18)

Isaiah's prophecy is about the restoration of the fortunes of God's people (Israel) under their Messianic king. The picture he draws is one of joy and prosperity in which the frustrations of present existence are gone forever. No more weeping or distress, no more untimely deaths, no longer spending time to build or plant only to leave the results to others, and no family disasters. It would be a time of true communion with God, and he will shower blessings on his people (Is. 65:19-24). But it is also clear that these blessings will spill over to all the nations of the earth:

"For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from

Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD.” (Isa 66:22-23).

In passing, is worth drawing attention to the fact that Greek has two words normally translated ‘new’ in scripture. One is ‘*neos*’, which means recent, not of great age, young – for example, new wine (Mat. 9:17), or the younger son (Luke 15:12) – the other is ‘*kainos*’ signifying freshness or renewal; this is the word used to describe the new heavens and earth and the new Jerusalem. (*Kainos* is also the Greek word used by Peter (quoted below) and in the LXX translation of Isaiah 65 and 66). So the new heavens and earth and the new Jerusalem are not ‘brand new’, but a refurbished replacement of what already exists.

The apostle Peter refers to this new heavens and earth in his second letter. He writes that the originally created ‘heavens and earth’ which he described as existing ‘long ago’, will be followed by the heavens and earth which ‘now exist’ (that is, that exist in Peter’s lifetime). It is clear that Peter is here using the terms heaven and earth metaphorically to represent the rulers and those ruled over in the world of his day (see introduction, chapter 1). He tells us that when the day of the Lord comes, this ‘heavens and earth’ are to pass away to be replaced by a new (Gk: *kainos*) ‘heavens and earth’ in which righteousness dwells – and it seems likely that Peter has the Millennial age in mind (2Pet. 3:5, 7, 13). His description of the fate of the order ‘which now exists’ is dramatic – he writes that heavens and earth will pass away with a roar, it will be burned up, set on fire, and melt as it burns. It seems very unlikely that Peter intended us to take these expressions literally, rather, he is expressing the finality of this present order of things in the strongest possible terms. And it would appear to be Peter’s ‘now existing’ order, which corresponds to John’s ‘first heaven and the first earth’ since both are to be replaced when the day of the Lord comes. It would appear therefore that the ‘new heaven and earth’ of Revelation 21 refers to the millennial age – an age in which the old order of human government has been replaced by the new order consisting of the rule of Christ and the saints.

If this reasoning is correct, we are left with a dilemma. If we accept that the heavens and earth of Revelation 21 refer to the millennium, a time in which mortality (death) still exists among the mortal population (the earth), and that some elements of the dragon's influence still fester in the hearts of men (Rev, 20:7-9), then the statement that there is no more sea (rebellious nations) and no more death, seems out of place. It seems likely that this vision is deliberately ignoring the practical aspects of governing a mortal population in the Millennial age, in order to focus instead on the state that 'heaven and earth' will have become at the end of that age. In effect, John in this introductory vision is being assured that ultimately, as a result of the divine government during the 'new heaven and earth' regime, human antagonism to Christ will be no more (no more sea) and death will have been committed permanently to the lake of fire. But in order for that ideal state to be reached, there's Millennial age work to be done; the Millennium itself is not the end of God's objective for the world, but a key stage in the process.

A far-reaching vision?

The further details John gives, provides us with a powerful hint that this vision has an horizon which extends well into the future:

“And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”
(Rev 21:5-6a)

These words seem to require a rather more comprehensive application than just the millennial age. It is quite unusual for the one seated on the throne to directly address John, and yet he seems to do so here. Normally, John hears a loud voice from heaven or from the temple or from an angel, or even from the throne, usually without a clear indication of who is speaking (Rev. 11:12, 12:10, 14:7, 14:9, 14:15, 14:18, 16:1, 16:17, 19:1, 19:17, 21:3). But here we are specifically told that it is the one on the throne who speaks, and in so doing he

confirms the 'title' he gave himself at the beginning of Revelation, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega' (Rev. 1:8). He tells John that he will make not just a new heaven and earth, but that he will make 'all things' new (Gk: *kainos*). And so certain is the truth of this promise, that he expressly asks John to record in writing that these things are 'trustworthy and true'. Moreover, he tells John that 'It is done!', expressing the divine certainty that just as he set the whole process in motion in the beginning (the Alpha), so he will bring it to his intended conclusion (the Omega). There is however, a vital final step still to be taken, and that step involves the 'thirsty', and those 'who conquer' (Rev. 21:6-7). The thirsty are those who have partaken of the water of life provided by God and the Lamb (Psa. 42:1, Isa. 55:1, John 4:14), the conquerors are those who have overcome sin by their appropriation of the victory of Christ on the cross.

The vision then which opens Revelation 21, clearly looks forward to a time when God's purposes will be brought to the end he has determined. The 'new heavens and earth' almost certainly refers to the millennial age in which the world comes under divine government, but the vision also looks forward to the close of the Millennial age, which will be 'the end' defined by Paul:

"Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet." (1Co 15:24-25)

As part of the governing order in this 'new heaven and earth', the 'saints' clearly have a significant role to play in bringing all the enemies of Christ 'under his feet'. But if the 'earth and sky (heaven)' are finally to be brought to an end at the close of the Millennial age (remember, 'earth and sky are to pass away – Rev. 20:11), the Bride, the new Jerusalem certainly does not pass away, but having been enlarged by the faithful of the Millennial age, extends into eternity.

The Bride rewarded

“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” (Rev 21:2)

We have already explored with the apostle Paul the symbology of women and cities as representing communities of people. There can be no doubt therefore that the Bride represents the elect of God of both Old and New Testaments. Incidentally, the word ‘bride’ here is ‘*numphē*’ (young married woman), signifying that, unlike the announcement that the ‘wife-to-be’ has ‘made herself ready’ (Rev. 19:7), this vision is portraying the time when Christ and the saints have been united. Moreover, we have already seen that it is a ‘union’ which effectively takes place at the beginning of the millennial age. It is the ‘wife-to-be’, who, dressed in fine linen, joins Christ as his army to take part in the battle of Armageddon (Rev.19:8,14); they have taken part in the first resurrection and as martyrs for Christ they have been given authority to judge in the millennial age (Rev. 20:4). Fundamentally, the Bride represents those who have conquered sin by appropriating to themselves the victory of Christ on the cross (Rev. 12:11). It is a theme which has been a key one throughout Revelation, and particularly in Christ’s letters to the churches. And the promises Christ made to the conquerors in his letters will be fulfilled in the millennial age as the following table shows.

The blessings for those who conquer

Church	Promise ...	Fulfillment ...
Ephesus	They’ll eat of the tree of life	The tree of life is by the river flowing through the new Jerusalem (22:1-2)
Smyrna	They’ll avoid the second death	They’ll be a part of the first resurrection (20:6)
Pergamum	They’ll receive hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name	They’ll have the Lamb’s name on their foreheads (22:4)

Thyatira	They'll have authority over the nations – to rule with a rod of iron	They'll be members of the army of heaven to rule the nations (19:14-15)
Sardis	They'll be clothed in white, named in the book of life, confessed before God	They are the 'wife to be' (19:8) and the bride, the new Jerusalem (21:27)
Philadelphia	They'll be pillars in the Temple, inscribed with the name of God and the Lamb	Members of the 144,000 (14:1) they will be worshippers in the new Jerusalem (22:3)
Laodicea	They'll sit with Christ on his throne.	The throne of God and the Lamb will be the focus in the new Jerusalem (22:3-5)

John's vision (Rev. 21:1-8) ends with a catalogue of those whose portion is in the lake of fire which is the second death; they are described as cowardly, faithless and detestable (Rev. 21:8). The reference to the second death would appear to be another indication of the forward-looking nature of this vision, since the second death takes place after the Millennium has ended (Rev. 20:6, 14). However, the Millennial activities of the Bride community, would seem to be the means whereby the endpoint spoken of as the elimination of the cowardly, the faithless and the detestable in the second death, is achieved.

The old Babylon and the new Jerusalem

We have previously observed that John includes in this second part of Revelation two sections which we have referred to 'excursuses'. There seems little doubt that these sections were intended to provide a dramatic contrast between the prostitute Babylon and the Bride. In first of these excursuses (Rev. 17:1 – 19:10), John records that 'one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgement of the great prostitute''. He takes John into the wilderness to see the city-prostitute Babylon who

rides the beast, and he describes how she is destroyed. There follows a dirge for Babylon (Revelation 18), followed by heavenly songs of praise and the announcement of the approaching marriage of the Lamb. The account concludes with the angel telling John, ‘these things are the true words of God’. In the second excursus (Rev. 21:9 – 22:9), John records that ‘one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb’’. The angel takes John to a high mountain and shows him, not a bride, but the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. John describes the city in highly symbolic terms and concludes with the angel’s confirmation: ‘these things are trustworthy and true’. Both excursuses (the city-prostitute and the holy-city-bride) end with John attempting to fall down and worship the angel and is told, ‘Do not do it! I am a fellow-servant with you and with your brothers, Worship God!’.

This pair of literary parallels seems specifically designed to draw our attention to the contrast between the prostitute and the Bride, but also to remind us that the message relating to both is from the Lord Jesus and is therefore trustworthy and true. This contrast is indicated in the following Table:

Jerusalem – the bride	Babylon – the prostitute
Chaste, the Lamb’s wife	Full of impure passion
Uncleanness and falsehood excluded	Full of abomination, impurities and deceptions
Source of light to the nations	A deceiver of the nations
Kings bring the glory into the city	Dominates the kings of the earth
Source of water of life and the tree of life	Dispenses the wine that makes nations drunk
Brings life and healing	Filled with blood and slaughter
Splendour through reflecting God’s Glory	Splendour through exploitation

The contrast could hardly be more dramatic. The impurity of the prostitute is contrasted with the purity of the bride. Whereas the harlot deceives, the bride brings light and truth; whereas the drink dispensed by the harlot leads to drunkenness and death, the bride brings the health-giving water of life. The harlot's splendour is self-glorification purchased through exploitation, whereas the bride's is a pure reflection of the Glory of God.

The holy city Jerusalem

In the second excursus, John is taken by one of the angels who had administered the bowls of the wrath of God to see the Bride the wife of the Lamb:

“Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, ‘Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.” (Rev 21:9-11)

In one of John's surprising switches of image, what John sees is not a bride, but the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven (Rev. 21:9). John is not of course telling us of a literal descent of a literal city; he not even telling us that the Jerusalem he sees is a transformation of the historic Jerusalem. He is telling us that the heavenly Jerusalem is a symbolic 'city' consisting of people – the saints. When reading details of the city-bride in John's account, the physical images of walls and gates, of foundations and a river, are so powerful that the fact that this is symbolic of a community of people is quite difficult to keep in mind. But the Bride, the holy city, the new Jerusalem, is a community of people who, under the direction of Christ their master and their 'husband', will be responsible for the spiritual and practical governance of the world in the kingdom age just as had been promised in the heavenly song celebrating the worthiness of the Lamb (Rev. 5:9-10).

John's experience in being taken to see the Bride, the holy city, in some ways parallels that of Ezekiel when he was taken to see the restored city-Temple (Eze. 40). Ezekiel is taken to a high mountain, where he encounters an angelic being with a measuring reed in his hand; the angel shows him 'a structure like a city' and he measures and reports its dimensions (Eze. 40:2-3). In fact, the structure Ezekiel is shown is not a city, but a Temple, equipped to enable traditional Jewish worship to take place. Like Ezekiel, John is also taken to a high mountain to see the holy city; he too meets a guide equipped with a measuring rod so that John can be provided with the key dimensions of the structure (Rev. 21:15). There are other similarities between the visions of the two prophets: both city-Temples have twelve gates inscribed with the names of the tribes of Israel (Eze: 48:30-34, Rev.21:12), both have a river flowing within the 'city' and both feature trees providing life-giving fruit (Eze. 47:1-12, Rev. 22:1-2). There are of course, many differences as well, but the similarities surely arise from the fact that both Ezekiel and John are being shown 'sacred spaces' in which God dwells with his people.

The original 'sacred space' was the garden of Eden, where, before sin entered, God dwelt with the man and the woman he had created. Later, despite sin, God's desire to dwell with his people was reaffirmed in the appointments of both the Tabernacle, and the Temple. At the heart of the Tabernacle and Temple was the 'holy of holies'; this was the inner cube-shaped room which contained the ark-throne of God with its golden lid speaking of mercy and grace. Approach to God in these places of worship was, of course, hedged about by sacrificial ritual; but it was a ritual designed not only to reveal the polluting power of sin, but to indicate the way God intended to restore fellowship between himself and mankind. The way was of course, the sacrifice of Christ – a sacrifice, which by God's grace made it possible for sins to be 'blotted out', and true fellowship between God and man to be restored. And so, through the sacrifice of Christ, the New Testament church became God's Temple; a physical building (the Temple) was replaced with one consisting of a community of people (the saints) (1Cor. 3:16-17). And John is being shown by the angel, God's Millennial 'Temple' which, like the church, is no longer an actual

building but a body of people – the Bride. There is no physical Temple in the holy city because there is no need of the kind of sacred space such as existed in the earlier Temples. In the kingdom age, the city community itself, the Bride, will be that sacred space fully sharing a unity of fellowship with God and the Lamb. (Rev. 21:22).

The city's features

As part of the 'tour' of the city-bride, John's guide, who is equipped with a measuring rod, measures the city (Rev. 21:15). We have encountered the symbolic action of measurement earlier in Revelation when John himself is instructed to measure the Temple (Chapter 8). There, we suggested that the action of measurement was intended to give assurance to the recipients of the prophecy that the measured structure would certainly be implemented in God's plan. This was clearly the point of Zechariah's account of the man with the measuring line who was on his way to measure Jerusalem (Zech. 2:1-5); the returning exiles needed to be assured that Jerusalem, then in ruins, would be rebuilt. Here in Revelation the same assurance would appear to be the point of measuring the heavenly Jerusalem. In the context of Revelation 10 we suggested that the Temple being measured could well be a third Jewish Temple, possibly even Ezekiel's Temple; here in Revelation 21 however, it is a 'Temple' of people (the saints); moreover, it is one made up not just of Jews, but of people of all nationalities.

The city John sees is a cube, like the geometry of the holy of holies; it is 12,000 stadia in all three directions (Rev. 21:16). When reviewing Revelation's use of numbers in the introduction, we noted that 12 is a number associated with God's governance of his people, and that a 1000 multiplier is often used to give large numbers some practical credibility in the context in which they are used. The unit of length, the 'stadia' (or should it be 'stadium'?) is said to measure about 285 m. Thus a city measuring only 12 stadia across would be relatively small (just over 2 miles); on the other hand a city measuring 12,000 stadia across would be excessively large (2125 miles). However since the city is a community of people, neither the numbers nor the cubic

geometry are to be taken literally – the city represents God’s holy of holies, his sacred space in the Millennial age, and it is large enough to accommodate as many people as will be required.

The structure of the city John sees is that of a strongly fortified city, well protected with walls both high and thick whose dimensions are multiples of twelve (again not to be taken literally). On the face of it, the apparent need for the holy city to be fortified in his way seems unnecessary, since it is God’s holy city – why should it be at all vulnerable? But there is little doubt that the ‘Bride’ community, at work in a world of potential opposition, will inevitably be subject to attack of one kind or another (as we have seen from the bowls of wrath), and the city’s strength provides assurance of its invulnerability. It has twelve gates inscribed with the names of the tribes of Israel, each protected by an angel (Rev. 21:12). In Biblical times, gates were the centre of power and control in a city – the place where significant decisions were taken, particularly about access. John is shown that the holy-city has three gates on each of its four sides (Rev. 21:13); this means that since the gates will never be shut (Rev. 21:25), access is assured, at least in principle, at any time and from any direction.

Each gate is described as a single pearl (Rev. 21:21). Jesus spoke about the kingdom of heaven as the pearl of great price (Mat. 13:45-46), and the way a pearl is generated by an oyster in response to an irritant is often used as an illustration of how the gospel develops in the heart of a believer in response to adverse circumstances (such as the four horsemen of the seal sequence). It’s difficult however, to know whether such insights are intended or not in Revelation’s symbology; it is however clear that the gates of the city will play a key part in the way the city functions in the ‘heavens and earth’ of the millennial age. Applying these characteristics to the bride-community, suggests that the support from that community will always be available to all those in the mortal world who need it – the gates are always open to those aspiring to enter.

The twelve gates of the city bear the names of the tribes of Israel, and its twelve foundations bear the names of the twelve Apostles (Rev.

21:14). Such a naming arrangement indicates that the holy-city includes both Old and New Testament saints, but it also hints of its formation through historic time. The fact that it is the gates which bear the names of the tribes and the foundations which bear the names of the Apostles is surprising. It might be thought that God's dealings with mankind in Old Testament times would be the foundation, and the dissemination of the Gospel in the New Testament times, the gates. The holy city specifications however, tell us something different. God's work in the Old Testament period was the 'way in' to the restoration of fellowship between God and man (the gates) demonstrating through its Temple ritual how this restoration would be achieved; the new Testament gospel on the other hand, is concerned with the implementation of that restoration through the cross of Christ, which is without doubt, the foundation upon which God's salvation by grace stands (1Cor. 3:9-11). This being the case, it is appropriate that the foundations of the holy city should be adorned with the precious stones which under the law were attached to the high priest's breastpiece:

“The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, 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.” (Rev 21:19-20)

In the original breastpiece the stones were engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel. It was also formed into a kind of bag into which the stones of judgement, the Urim and Thummim, were placed (Exo. 28:29-30). Urim and Thummim were used to provide divine decisions, rather like casting lots; the breastpiece was therefore referred to as the breastpiece of judgement. In Revelation however, the precious stones on the foundations represent not just the tribes of natural Israel, but the whole community of spiritual Israel. Under the ritual of the law, the breastpiece was worn by the high priest on the day of Atonement when he entered the holy of holies bearing the names of the people of Israel close to his heart. In the holy city version of the holy of holies, the precious stones now represent the saints of all generations; moreover,

they have not only been carried into this sacred space by a greater high priest, the Lord Jesus, but they have become an integral part of its foundations. They stand not simply for the presence of the saints in the holy city, but also for the judgmental role they will undertake on behalf of the King.

For glory and for beauty

The city has other outstanding features. The walls were built of jasper and the city itself of pure gold which John describes as being like clear (or transparent) glass (Rev. 21:18, 21). The precise significance of these 'building materials' is not immediately obvious. It is clear however, that they are not only intended to convey glory and beauty, but also to supplement the brilliance of the city's environment. The city has no Temple because the actual presence of God and the Lamb have replaced what the Tabernacle/Temple used to represent (Rev. 21:22). Moreover, the city has no need of the sun or moon, for the glory of God gives it its light (Rev. 21:23). And without doubt, John's description of its construction of jasper and gold like clear glass, is intended to make the point that this divine light would be reflected and transmitted within this environment without shadow. Light is of course a familiar metaphor for the knowledge and appreciation of salvation through the work of Christ (John 1:9, 8:12). But once more, these things should surely be interpreted to refer not to a physical structure but to the community that is the Bride, the holy city. In the Millennial age the members of this bride-community will be the transmitters and reflectors of the glory of God to the world. So John brings this section to a conclusion with these words which reflect those of the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 60):

“By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.” (Rev 21:24-27)

Some have perceived a difficulty with this statement. If the 'it' in the above verse is the holy city, the Bride, the community of the saints, it seems to some inappropriate to speak of the kings of the earth bringing their glory and the honour into it (this community). But the text should not be taken to imply that the kings and members of the nations become a part of the bride-community; indeed, such a view is ruled out by the final statement which says that only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will enter. However, the role of the members of the bride-community is to teach and to guide the human populations of the world for their spiritual and practical benefit; and in the process, they will inevitably share in the 'nations' blessings, and rejoice with them in their achievements (their glory and honour).

In summary, the nations will walk by the light of the Bride community. It will be a journey which will provide opportunities for individuals within the national populations to have their names inscribed in the book of life. To become a part of that community however, they must await the post-Millennial great white throne judgement when those whose names have been written in the Lamb's book of life during that age will become a part of the eternal Bride.

Chapter 18. Eden restored

John's vision (Revelation 22)

In Revelation 21 John records having been invited by one of the bowl angels to see the Bride the Lamb's wife; he is taken to a high mountain and shown the holy city Jerusalem. Now in Revelation 22, the angel's description of the Bride continues. John is shown the river of the water of life flowing through the middle of the street of the city. Alongside the river he sees the tree of life bearing twelve kinds of fruit, the leaves of which are for the healing of the nations. John is told that the throne of God and the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will worship him and see his face. The city needs no lamp or sun since the Lord God is its light.

Following the angel's description of the holy city, Christ proclaims that he is coming soon, and that he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of God's purposes with mankind. The prophecy ends with a blessing on those destined to enter the holy city, and an appeal from the spirit and the Bride to come and take the water of life freely. John's 'letter' to the seven churches ends: "the grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen."

A new Eden

The bowl angel's revelation of the Bride, the holy city, is continued from Revelation 21 into Revelation 22:

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." (Rev 22:1-2)

Thus John portrays the city-Bride as a new Eden complete with trees of life, and in so doing he brings the whole Bible to an end with images which parallel those in Genesis. The Biblical account had started with the garden of Eden as a sacred space in which the newly created man and woman had been placed in intimate fellowship with God (Gen. 2:8-9). From the beginning, there had been the potential for eternal life because the tree of life was placed in the middle of the garden. Sadly however, there was also the potential for sin, because the serpent was there also (Gen. 3:1). The original human pair were certainly not barred from eating of the tree of life, and it is possible that maintaining life by regular eating rather than imparting life after a single bite was its actual function. However, the tree of life was not the only tree in the garden – there was also the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:9). The serpent had suggested that if Adam and Eve ate of this particular tree, they would be like God knowing good and evil, and thereby qualified to make decisions independent of God. Sadly however, mankind's decision to believe the serpent's lie, brought separation from God and a curse on the ground (Gen. 3:17-18). Now, John's vision of the restoration of Eden is an assurance that the fellowship with God that was lost in the original Eden will be restored; it is a redemption which has been made possible by the grace of God manifested in Christ.

Ezekiel's vision

Ezekiel had seen something remarkably similar to John's vision of Eden when he was shown the future Temple (Eze. 47). In Ezekiel's vision the river flows eastward from the Jerusalem Temple. He was invited to test the depth of the water by attempting to cross it at various points; after a few attempts, he found that the river was too deep for him to wade through. It was a mighty river of purification; it flowed into the dead sea, and in the process brought that sea to life (Eze. 47:9). Trees bearing fruit grew on both sides of the river, and the trees bore leaves that did not wither and had healing properties (Eze. 47:12).

The correspondences between Ezekiel's vision and John's are clear.

The detail Ezekiel's gives us in his vision however, suggests that it is a prophecy with a literal fulfillment. For example, the Temple faces east, and the life-giving water flows downhill from the threshold of the Temple into 'the Arabah' where it enters the dead sea (Eze. 47:8) – the Arabah is a stretch of low lying ground adjacent to the dead sea. Whether in the purpose of God Ezekiel's vision will actually be implemented is unclear, but it's literal fulfillment in the Kingdom age is by no means impossible, and certainly not inconsistent with the spiritual fulfillment of John's symbolic vision. And in relation to this spiritual fulfillment we must not lose sight of the fact that John's vision, from Revelation 21:9 through to 22:5 including these Edenic elements, speaks of the Bride, the community of the saints.

The Bride, the new Jerusalem, the holy city, is a community in which there will no longer be anything accursed and in which fellowship between God, the Lamb and his servants will be perfected (Rev. 22:3). The members of this community will see the Lamb's face, his name will be on their foreheads and they will worship him (Rev. 22:4). It's difficult to know exactly what these words mean in terms of personal experience, but we can readily perceive the inexpressible privilege implied by them. Moses was not allowed to see the face of God, he was only permitted to see his receding glory (Exo. 33:20, 23). Moreover, Paul speaks of our current understanding of God to be like someone who sees dimly as in a cloudy mirror, but he says the time will come when we shall see him 'face to face' (1Cor. 13:12). True disciples, as the Lord's spiritual 'betrothed', have been privileged in this present age to be able to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2Cor. 4:6), but in the future age of which John speaks, the members of the city-Bride community will actually see Christ face to face – they will know as they have been fully known (1Cor. 13:12). There is no darkness there, for as we have already seen from John's earlier description of the city (Rev. 21:23-24), the Lord God will be their light (Rev. 22:5a) and by this light they will govern in the age to come (compare Isa. 60:19-20).

Healing the nations

But the timing dilemma remains. Does the vision of the city-bride relate to the 1000 year Millennium age, or to the eternal post-Millennial age, or both – and where does the healing of the nations fit in (Rev. 22:2)? Generally speaking, when John speaks of the Bride, he is referring to a community consisting of immortal ‘saints’ who will continue to exist (probably with the addition of Millennial saints) into the time when ‘God will be all in all’ (1Cor. 15:28). But as we argued in the previous chapter this immortal community has a key role to play within the time limited ‘new heavens and earth’ – the Millennium. And that role is to minister to the mortal population of the world the purifying effects spoken of in Ezekiel’s vision of the new Temple (Eze. 47:1-12). They are to provide the nations with access to the water of life which not only purifies, but which also brings life where there was no life before; not literal water of course, but the ‘living water’ which Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman about (John 4:11-14). In the Millennial age the community of the Bride is to mediate access to the trees of life, which bear fruit continually and bountifully – again we are to think not so much of literal fruit but of the spiritual fruit of which Paul speaks (Gal. 5:22-23). The same trees that sustain life in that age, also provide healing for the nations – the forgiveness of sin and the restoration of fellowship. In short, the role of the Bride, the new Jerusalem in the Millennial age is to complete the redemptive work spoken of by the Apostle Paul:

“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing (apokalupsis) of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” (Rom. 8:19-21)

The children of God are the Bride, the new Jerusalem. Their revealing (Gk: *apokalupsis*) at the coming of Christ, will be the means by which the world’s bondage to corruption will be transformed into divine

freedom. It is tempting to think of the 'Kingdom of God' as a period of rest and relaxation – every one 'sitting under their own vine and fig-tree'. But that's not the impression Jesus gives in his parables; in both the parables of the talents and the pounds (or minas) the reward for faithful service would appear to be extended service in the age to come (Mat. 25:21,23, Luke 19:17).

Trustworthy and true

The end point of the bowl angel's revelation of the Bride, the new Jerusalem, is a statement assuring John that God will surely bring about the promises conveyed by these visions:

“And he said to me, ‘These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.’” (Rev. 22:6)

The assurance is not, of course, just for John, but for all of God's 'servants'. And the grounds of this assurance comes from the fact that the visions have been given to John by the 'God of the spirits of the prophets'. The recipients of Revelation in the seven churches of Asia, Jew or Gentile, would have learned much of what they knew about the purpose of God in Christ from the Old testament prophets. There were also New Testament prophets within the churches who had been empowered by the Holy Spirit to restate the same message. The angel is simply making sure that the recipients of John's 'letter' (Revelation), appreciate the divine authority behind it; he is saying that it should be given the same status as if it came from one of the Old Testament prophets. This would have been important in the early days, since the book of Revelation was a relative latecomer to the canon of the New Testament, and its authenticity though sometimes questioned, needed to be clearly affirmed. Jesus will later personally reinforce this same assurance (Rev. 22:16).

Passing over for the moment Christ's interpolation about coming quickly (Rev. 22:7), John then brings the bowl angel's account of the

Bride to an end by recounting his attempt to worship the messenger and being rebuked for it (Rev. 22: 8-9). As we have suggested earlier this must surely be a literary marker, as well as a warning to his readers not to make the mistake of offering inappropriate worship (Chapter 14).

A warning

The bowl angel who had been showing John the vision of the Bride now tells John not to seal up the prophecies contained in Revelation for the time is near (or 'at hand') (Rev. 22:10). The phrase 'the time is at hand' is the identical phrase with which the book opened (Rev. 1:3). The word 'time' here (Gk. *kairos*) according to Thayer's lexicon signifies a fixed or definite time – so the phrase 'the time is at hand' might be translated colloquially as 'the moment has come'. Daniel had been told to seal up the scroll of his prophecy, because its fulfilment was to be many years in the future. However, as far as the prophecies contained in Revelation were concerned, the 'moment had come' for them to be revealed; they were events which would affect all mankind from that time forward. We have attempted to show, that the various elements of the prophecy – churches, sealing people for God, trumpet calls for Israel, and the beastly powers – were all in action at the time Revelation was circulated, and that they would continue to unfold throughout history until Christ returned. Indeed, with regard to the people of God living in an evil world during the period between the cross and the return of Christ, it would be true to say that there is an ongoing sense in which the message of Revelation is 'at hand' (near and relevant).

The angel goes on to remind John that the events included in the prophecy would continue to be relevant in a world in which both evildoers and righteous people apparently carried on their lives as 'normal' (Rev. 22:11). It would be an environment in which both good and bad behaviour would have become habitual – rather like the people of Peter's day who said 'all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation' (2Pet. 3:4). But such apparent continuity would not last. Jesus is coming soon, and he will bring redemption to

some and judgement to others (Rev. 22:12-13).

Coming soon

Christ's assurance that he is coming soon (Rev. 2:16, 3:11, 22:7, 22:12, 22:20) presents some difficulty to modern readers. Two thousand years of history have passed since Revelation was written and Christ has still not returned. The word 'soon' (Gk: *tachu*) is quite often translated in English versions as 'quickly'. This translation, combined with the expectation that Christ's coming will be like a thief (Rev. 3:3, 16:15) has suggested to some that his second coming will occur suddenly – in which case of course, the 'soon-ness' of the 2000 years of delay is not an interpretive difficulty. However, an examination of the passages in which the word *tachu* (and its cognates) appear, suggest that whilst quickly, meaning at great speed, is a possible translation, quickly, meaning without delay, fits the context far better in most cases. And bearing in mind the prospect of potential persecution faced by the recipients of Revelation, it would be much more meaningful for them to be told that the return of Christ would not be delayed, rather than that he was coming suddenly. It would appear then, that 'soon' is probably the best translation of the Lord's words. The question then is, how did Jesus intend us to interpret his promise to come soon?

It's not an easy question to answer. There are however, some aspects of the timing of events which seem relevant. We have already had reason to recall Jesus' own words about the timing of his coming. Towards the end of the Mount Olivet prophecy, he said, 'but concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only' (Mat. 24:36). Moreover, after his resurrection when the apostles asked him whether he was then going to restore the kingdom to Israel he said, 'it is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority' (Acts 1:7). It would appear therefore, that Jesus fully accepted that the timing of his second coming was in the hands of the Father. In fact, when discussing the second coming of Christ in Revelation 14, we observed that the decision to 'reap the earth' (Christ's harvest-time coming) was not made by the 'Son of Man' (Christ himself), but was

passed to him by an angel as a command from the throne (God presumably) who told him that the ‘the time had come’ (Rev. 14:15).

It seems very likely therefore that Jesus fully accepted that the timing of his second coming was a decision the Father alone would make. The Father is of course in sovereign control of the events of history, and there are no doubt many factors which determine how God will act in any situation. One of these factors is the response of the people or nation with whom God is dealing – the classic example being the preaching of Jonah. Jonah’s message had been stark, ‘Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed’. Much to Jonah’s annoyance, the Ninevites respond by turning from their evil ways, and as a result, Jonah records, ‘God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it’ (Jonah 3:10). God changed his mind. Jesus too was fully aware that in grace and compassion, God could change his plans. He was also aware that there were times when a crucial response from an individual or a nation was required if God was to act – a fact which is of particular importance to Christ’s return. When lamenting over Jerusalem Christ said, ‘For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’’ (Mat. 23:39). The timing of the return of Christ would depend on the response of Israel. So although God had delegated to Christ ‘all power in heaven and on earth’, it would appear that the decision about the Lord’s return would remain with the Father.

If the above argument is accepted, Christ’s statement that he is coming soon takes on a different character. Rather than a positive statement of future action based on his own authority, it becomes an expression of intent – it is, in effect, Jesus letting his people know that as soon as the decision is made by the Father, there will be no more delay. There can be little doubt that the Christ who yearned over Jerusalem (Mat. 23:37) would want to bring about the future deliverance of that city as soon as it became possible to do so. Similarly, one could imagine Christ being impatient to respond to the souls under the altar in the fifth seal who were crying out, ‘how long before you will judge and avenge our blood’? But Christ would accept that the decision to act was the Father’s, and he would subject his own

wishes to those of the Father as he had memorably done on an earlier occasion (yet not as I will, but as you will (Mat. 26:39)). The promise from Christ that he is coming soon, then becomes not a promise of instant action, but a statement of a personal desire to accomplish the things promised, combined with an assurance to the recipients that he had not forgotten them but was impatient to respond.

The desire of the Lord's to act 'soon' on behalf of his people, cannot surely be doubted. We have already observed Jesus interrupting the account of the outpouring of the bowls of the wrath of God with his promise to come soon (Rev. 16:15), and we have treated this interruption as a marker of the Lord's desire to deal with the rebellious nations by bringing the army of the saints into action (Rev. 19:14). Now in this last chapter of Revelation Christ issues his promise to come soon a further three times. In the first of these Christ effectively interrupts the bowl angel's account of the Bride (Rev. 22:7):

“And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.” (Rev. 22:7)

In this message Jesus clearly wants both to encourage and to warn those who were a part of his existing 'betrothed' (the church membership). He wants to remind them of his promise to come soon, but he also wants to warn them not to take their status as the Bride elect for granted. It was a reminder that they still needed to prepare for his coming, to keep the words of this book, and to watch, just like the virgins in the parable. Then after the angel's instruction not to seal up the prophecy with its hint of the continuation of human activity both bad and good (Rev. 22:10-11), he repeats his promise to come soon for the second time. This time he adds that he will bring his recompense with him – a recompense which represents divine justice to those people, bad and good, of which the angel had just spoken (Rev. 22:12). And then, for the third time Jesus promises to come soon (Rev. 22:20). It was his final word, 'He who testifies to these things (that is Christ himself) says, 'Surely I am coming soon''. And John responds, 'Amen, come, Lord Jesus'.

Alpha and Omega

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” (Rev 22:12-13)

Immediately following the second statement of Christ’s intention to come ‘soon’, Jesus proclaims himself to be the Alpha and the Omega. It’s a ‘title’ used three times in Revelation (Rev.1:8, 21:6, 22:13). As we pointed out when commenting on this title in John’s introduction, when first used it is linked with the name Yahweh, the covenant name given by God to Moses. It is a ‘title’ based on the verb ‘to be’ in Hebrew and implying that Yahweh was the eternal existing one, who was (existed) in the past, who is (exists) now, and who will continue to be (exist) in the future. But in Revelation, the future ‘will be’ is changed to ‘who is to come’. This modification undoubtedly points to the fact that whatever was true of the past, the future manifestation of God would be focused on the person of Jesus Christ.

The second time the ‘title’ Alpha and Omega is used (Rev. 21:6) it is associated with the new heavens and earth of the Millennial age, and the phrase, ‘the beginning and the end’ is added by way explanation. In its final use, its significance is further expanded by declaring the bearer to be ‘the first and the last’ (Rev. 22:13). These are statements intended to reassure the recipients of the letter that although their comprehension of the beginning (the Alpha) can only be partial, and even with the prophecy of Revelation to reveal how God’s purpose will work out, the end (the Omega) must also be beyond their comprehension, nevertheless, the fact that both Father and Son identify with the title Alpha and Omega, assures disciples that God’s scheme of salvation, which began in Christ, will have its end according to the divine purpose embodied in Christ. When Paul writes about the unfathomability of God’s scheme of salvation he refers to it as ‘a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory’ (1Cor. 2:7) – the Alpha. But it is also a wisdom which has an assured end, ‘I am sure of this’ he writes, ‘that he who began a good

work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ' (Php. 1:6) – the Omega.

A comparison

“Blessed are 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 gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.” (Rev 22:14-15)

There is some uncertainty about whether the above verses are a continuation of the words of Jesus or not (Rev. 22:13). However, there is no obvious reason why they should not be. Moreover, it seems possible that in these verses he goes on from speaking of repaying each for what he has done (Rev. 22:12) to commenting on the two groups involved (the evil and the righteous). On the positive side he speaks of the white robed multitude, those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:14); they are the people of the Bride community who enter the holy city by the gates and have the right of access to the tree of life (Rev. 21:27, 22:2). But it remains a stark fact, that even while the blessed rejoice in redemption, there are some who are outside the holy city – described by John, among other things, as ‘everyone who loves and practices falsehood’ (Rev. 22:15). If these verses refer to the population of the Millennial age, it seems likely that the wickedness involved has been exaggerated in order to highlight the contrast between the two groups. In that age, the enemies of Christ and the saints in the mortal population will be in the process of being ‘put under the feet of the Lord Jesus’; some will continue to ‘practice falsehood’, but at the same time there will be opportunities for others, maybe even the majority, to be redeemed and thereby ultimately to enter the holy city. But the wicked will inevitably remain outside.

Further assurance

Jesus then personally assures the members of the churches that the message contained in the prophecy although mediated by an angel, was nevertheless a message from him (Rev. 22:16). He wants them to be certain that John's letter was truly a testimony for the churches from the risen Lord. And his assurance was anchored by two Old Testament references. He was the root and the descendant of David – a clear reference to Isaiah's prophecy about the one upon whom the spirit of the Lord would rest (Is 11:1) and without whom there would be no King for Israel and no salvation for the world. He was also the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David – the one who had conquered, enabling the scroll of life to be unrolled and the identities of the redeemed to be revealed (Rev. 5:5). He was also the morning star prophesied by the Balaam on the occasion that dubious prophet was obliged to bless Israel against his will (Num. 24:17).

The spirit and the Bride

“The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.” (Rev 22:17)

Who is the spirit and the Bride here addressing? The appeal to ‘come’ is often taken to be addressed to Christ by the church and the indwelling spirit. But that hardly makes sense. The whole of Revelation is a message from the risen Lord to the churches, not the other way round, and he has just promised to come as soon as he is able. It would seem rather inappropriate therefore for this appeal to come to be addressed by the churches to Christ. Moreover, the second half of the verse is not addressed to Christ at all; it is addressed to salvation seekers – anyone who is thirsty or who wishes to take the water of life at no cost. It seems much more likely therefore, that the appeal to ‘come’ is an appeal from the spiritual Bride addressed to unbelievers to come to Christ.

The Bride as we have previously seen, represents the community of the new Jerusalem, the holy city. The spirit of course, is the spirit of God, and the Bride empowered by the spirit of God will in its fullness be the immortal community of Millennial age saints. Of course, the church in the present is not the Bride but is rather the 'betrothed', the 'wife-to be' (Rev. 19:7); nevertheless, the Bride's appeal even now, is to all those who recognise their thirst for the water of life, to come to Christ. It is precisely the appeal made by the 'living beings' in the seal sequence when they say with a voice like thunder 'Come' (Rev. 6:1), since there we regarded the living creatures as representing the preaching church. Moreover, we observe that it is not only the spirit and the Bride who issues the invitation to 'come', it is also 'the one who hears' (Rev. 22:17). This implies that those who have already heard the appeal and those perhaps who have responded to some extent, are able pass the message onto others, so that one way or another those who have not heard will hear the appeal and have the opportunity to respond. It seems likely therefore that when John writes 'the spirit and the Bride say, Come', he is expressing an appeal which is intended to be communicated by the spirit to all those who are seeking salvation in Christ.

The conclusion of the matter

John, before he concludes has one final practical piece of advice. He warns against adding to or taking away from the words of this prophecy (Rev. 22:18-19). In our day of printed volumes this seems hardly necessary. But in John's day, because the document was to be distributed to the churches it would have to be copied many times by hand. And with a prophecy as important as this, a possibility of miscopying, or worse still fraudulent copying, had to be severely guarded against. Moses had issue a similar warning to Israel (Deut. 4:2). Paul also had offered strong words against the potential distorters of his message (Gal. 1:6-10). And without doubt, the penalties for distorting the message of the book are extreme indeed:

“And if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.” (Rev 22:19)

It is not something that one could imagine that anyone with any reverence for Scripture would do. Nevertheless, it is as well perhaps, that we take the Lord’s prohibition on distorting the text of the letter seriously. It is certainly a warning which places a heavy responsibility on the interpreter.

Finally, John records that Jesus is coming soon, and ends his letter with these words:

“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.” (Rev 22:21)