

# Revelation

## Introduction

### Who

Revelation is the work of an author named John who lived on an Aegean island called Patmos. We don't really know anything concrete about this John of Patmos. We don't know where he was from, we don't know when he lived, we don't know when he wrote this book, we can't even be sure his name is John.

There are inferences we can make from the text though. He appears to have been exiled to Patmos by the civic authorities for being a nuisance and a troublemaker. Patmos, it seems, was a common place of exile for people who disturbed the civic order, but whose actions fell short of actual threats to the empire. He seems to be well educated in the Hebrew Scriptures and was probably born a Judean, as his written Greek uses a grammatical structure that bears a strong resemblance to Aramaic and Hebrew. He was probably a kind of wandering preacher or prophet in the Roman province of Asia since it is to churches in that province that his work is directed, and he has some expectation that what he writes will be read by them.

At various points in history, the idea that this John was the disciple John have been put forward, but that seems unlikely as the apostle John would have had to be nearly a 100 when the book was written. Also, most contemporary Christian writers did not advance this idea. In fact questions of authorship was one of the key issues that lead many early church leaders to question whether this was a book worthy of being read by Christians.



### What

Exactly what kind of book Revelation is can be difficult to pin down, as it has characteristics of several genres. Part of it is like an Epistle, that is a letter meant to be read by a group (actually to be *heard* by a group). Part of it is like a prophecy, to be understood as a divine communication with expectations of a behavioral response to its words. And finally, part of it (actually, a lot of it) is an apocalypse. Apocalypses were a popular type of reading material in the ancient world, numerous examples were found in the Dead Sea scrolls. There are also several apocalyptic passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, such as chapters 38 and 39 of Ezekiel and chapters 7-12 of Daniel. Apocalypses tended to be popular during periods of social instability, such as the first century which saw not only the rise of Christianity, but several civil wars for control of the Roman Empire, as well as the Jewish War that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and Judean society generally.

Some characteristics of this genre are;

- Many of the characters are spiritual beings (eg, angels and demons)
- Contain fantastical creatures
- Often involve mystical journeys to other planes of existence
- Contain no nuance or ambiguity, characters are either fully evil or completely good
- Describe times of catastrophe and disaster
- Have an overall hopeful message of a final victory by the forces of good.

I think the best analogy for us to understand what an apocalypse is to think of it as being like science fiction, especially dystopian science fiction. Its settings are futuristic, characters are often otherworldly, and their plots often revolve issues of literal cosmic importance. And like most science fiction, they have a happy, or at least happy-ish ending (No one wants to see a zombie or alien invasion movie where the zombies or aliens win).

Also like science fiction, the apocalypse genre primarily is a means to talk about situations in the present day or near future but seeks to understand these situations by taking them out of our everyday context to allow us to creatively examine them. The stories portrayed in Star Trek explore themes and issues prevalent in mid-1960's America, such as civil rights and the war in Vietnam, more than anything likely to be happening in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century.

### When

Like almost every book of scripture, it is not clear when Revelation was written. The current scholarly consensus is that the book was probably written towards the end of the first century, with the year 95 assigned as kind of shorthand. This is what several near contemporaries, such as Irenaeus, Tertulian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, believed, and there is no mention of it or allusions to it in any Christian literature before then. This time period would also seem to fit with some of the situations and concerns expressed in the book.

The emperor Domitian, who was emperor from 81-96, pushed hard to expand the cult of emperor worship and regularly claimed to be a god. Though there weren't any widespread violent persecutions under Domitian, his expansion of the imperial cult would have likely caused problems for many Christians and contributed to their social ostracism.

This timing also corresponds to the rise of a gnostic sect known as the Nicolaitans, who are mentioned by name twice, in the cities of Ephesus and Pergamum and among whose beliefs were a lack of concern with eating meat that had been sacrificed to other gods.

The end of the first century was also the period which saw an increasing tension between not only Jews and Christians, but between those Christians who had been Jews and those who had been Gentiles. This is around the same time that the final version of John's gospel was produced, which clearly shows the irrevocable division between Judaism and Christianity.

There is also a theory that the Book of Revelation as we know it, is an edited and expanded version of a work originally produced during the reign of Nero (54-68) when Christians faced state-sponsored persecutions. In this theory, the author, John, is believed to have feared that the rise of Domitian would bring about renewed persecution of the Christian movement.

## Why

The why of Revelation is somewhat murky, but clearly John of Patmos was concerned about the resilience of the church in the face of challenges from both outside and within the church. Because of his likely background as a Jew who accepted and followed Jesus, John was very concerned about the relationship between righteousness and the Law. As we see in the Book of Acts and in Paul's letters, there was a great deal of conflict around this issue, especially regarding circumcision and the eating of meat from pagan sacrifices. The Book of Acts suggests that these issues were settled by a gentleman's agreement between James and Paul but, Paul's letter suggest otherwise and the reality was probably that these disagreements and the hard feelings they engendered lingered in many communities among many believers. As we know from Acts and Paul's letters, the Roman province of Asia (modern Turkey) was the focus of much of Paul's missionary work and likely held many communities formed primarily by Gentile believers. In other words, John of Patmos may resent the "looser" strictures of Pauline Christianity which did not require full conversion to Judaism (such as circumcision) nor require the following of the Mosaic Law as prerequisites to membership. It is very possible that John of Patmos saw this expansion of the church among the Gentiles as a sign of a shallow faith unprepared for the challenges of persecution and unworthy of God.

## How to Read Revelation

Revelation is not a straightforward narrative. It is composed, broadly speaking of two parts – the messages for the churches of Asia Minor and then a series of images concerning the conflict between good and evil, ending, eventually with the complete destruction of evil and the triumph of Christ. However, this telling of the conflict of good and evil seems to contradict itself at several points so perhaps rather than understanding it as a series of events that unfold one after another, it would be more helpful to see it as a series of overlapping visions that tell of the triumph of God in different ways.

Revelation draws heavily upon imagery from the apocalyptic portions of the Hebrew Scriptures; and much of the book employs a symbolism that is unknown by us. In this it is very similar to the popular song American Pie, which seems to be clearly commenting on the popular culture of the 1960's, while also being sufficiently vague that there is little agreement about the meaning of the symbols used. It is this vagueness that likely propelled the acceptance and enduring popularity of Revelation among many as its symbolism can be easily interpreted to favor a wide variety of interpretations.

## So how did this book become part of the Bible?

Revelation's place in canon has always been disputed. The fourth century historian and Archbishop Eusebius places Revelation in the list of "accepted" books *and* the list of "rejected" books, saying each time, "if it seem proper." Gregory of Nanzianus (who formulated the doctrine of the Trinity), and Cyril of Alexandria left it out their own lists of canonical works, while St John Chrysostom (who more or less invented sermons) also never mentioned it or preached on it. However, Jerome (who translated the Vulgate), Augustine of Hippo (who invented original sin) and Pope Innocent 1 all accepted it. Across the first four centuries a number of Church Councils took up the canon, with about a 50/50 split over whether to include it or not.

The general pattern concerning whether or not Revelation should be included or not was geographical, with Western Councils and bishops accepting it and Eastern councils and bishops disputing it. To this day it is not included in the lectionary readings in Orthodox churches and the Nestorian Church (churches that began in ancient Persia) still does not recognize it as canonical.

In the Reformation period, it again began to be questioned with many reformers suggesting it should be left out of the Bible. Zwingli (a Swiss Reformer very influential in England) said outright that it was “not a book of the Bible.” John Calvin said it was impossible to understand and refused to write a commentary on it, which was the only New Testament Book he didn’t comment on, and Martin Luther wrote that he couldn’t find Christ in it and that it was “neither apostolic nor prophetic,” though later on he softened his stance.

While many learned Christians have at least questioned it, it is indisputable that it has been popular and that its fantastical imagery has been included in the works of many artists. In modern times, the violent imagery of Revelation has been popular among Christian nationalists and to those who believe in the Rapture.

Speaking of the Rapture, it is not a doctrine with a long pedigree. It was first formulated only in the 1830’s, in the United States. One of its earliest champions was William Miller, a Baptist minister who famously predicted that the second coming would occur sometime between 21 March 1843 and 21 Mar 1844, which he later revised to be October 22, 1844 exactly. At that time, many people actually sold all their goods and gathered on hilltops to await Jesus. This led to what is called the Great Disappointment, but also to the Adventist movement and eventually the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

The Rapture was developed by joining cherry-picked Bible verses to some astounding leaps of logic. In the past 190 years it has undergone various permutations and there are now several different rapture theologies and timelines in circulation. The Rapture is a doctrine that has been rejected by all mainline churches, such as the Episcopal Church as well as the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

# Revelation

## Chapter 1

V1-2 This opening, basically, serves as a kind of title and synopsis combined and is the source for our modern title as well, Revelation.

Though the book is written by someone named John, the opening explains to us that its origin is in a vision believed by the author to be from God with Jesus as a kind of intermediary.

The opening also explains that the author is highlighting events in what he believes will happen in his near future. One takeaway from that is that we should understand that the author is *primarily* commenting on his current events and extrapolating from that, what might happen next.

V3 This verse tells us both that the author's hope is that this letter would be read aloud in Christian gatherings. It also reinforces the sense of eschatological urgency.

V4–6 Here the epistle-like part of the book begins, and it is pretty similar to the kind of openings we see in the Epistles. In this case, it is written from one named John to "the seven churches" in the Roman province of Asia (modern Turkey).

Where we read "churches" it likely means something more like what we would call a diocese. At this point in church history, the church is mostly an urban phenomenon, that is - the Jesus movement involves mostly people in cities, and these seven were large cities, with most of them having populations of more than 100,000 people.

At the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, most congregations would have been small, mostly meeting in private homes. The "church," therefore, represents all the congregations within a particular city, who may occasionally join together, and who are ultimately under the guidance of an elder, whose role would eventually be what we think of as a bishop. The term bishop comes from the Greek "episcope" (from where we get Episcopal) which was the Greek word for 'overseer,' the root of which, in turn, comes from the word to describe shepherds.

The number seven shows up a lot in this book (57 times) and was a symbol for completeness or perfection. In this case we can think of the seven cities as representing the whole of Christianity in the province as well as the places where the divine and the earthly are connected. The spirits could represent the "spirits" of the cities themselves or may be reference to the seven spirits of ministry as recounted in Isaiah;

The spirit of the Lord<sup>1</sup> shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom<sup>2</sup> and understanding<sup>3</sup>,  
the spirit of counsel<sup>4</sup> and might<sup>5</sup>,  
the spirit of knowledge<sup>6</sup> and the fear of the Lord<sup>7</sup>. **Isaiah 11:2**

Or they could refer to the gifts given to the church through faith mentioned by Paul in Romans;  
We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith;  
ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in  
generosity; the leader, with diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. **Romans 12:6-8**

Or possibly some other reference to seven found in the Judean-Christological tradition. At any rate,

seven would have been a well-known symbol of the divine-temporal relationship.

V5-6 These verses are a doxology, a statement of faith and belief concerning Jesus, which is composed of two triads:

The threefold nature of Jesus across time – faithful witness, firstborn of the dead, ruler of kings

The threefold nature of the Church – we are people who are loved, who have been freed, and who have been commissioned to be intercessors and advocates of God.

V7-8 Verse seven is an echo of the Ascension as described in Luke-Acts, but is even more directly a reiteration of the description of the coming of the Son of Man as described in Daniel;

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. **Daniel 7:13-14**

Verse 8 God described as alpha and omega is not drawn from anywhere else in the scripture, but by saying God is the like the first and last letters of the alphabet (in Greek) is it saying that God is the first and the last, in other words, God is everything and encompasses all – there is nothing that is outside of God.

V9-20 In the second half of the chapter, the author describes the nature of his vision and by doing so seeks to assert its truth, and therefore its authority.

9-11 John describes who he is – a Christian who has tasted of persecution while remaining committed to Jesus and who lives on the island of Patmos.

Patmos is a small island in the Aegean sea, about 40 miles across the sea from Ephesus. The general sense here is that he is on Patmos *because* of his testimony about Jesus – that he is in exile because of his faith. Exile was a popular form of punishment for people who caused trouble in the civic realm. Being in the spirit likely refers to a meditative or euphoric state, where one has the sense of being completely overwhelmed by the presence of the Spirit. It was while in this dissociative state that John hears a loud voice (who we will soon discover is Jesus) directing him to begin a record of what he is about to see and hear to be sent to the Christians in the seven major cities of the province of Asia.

V12-16 John records Jesus as appearing, to be frank, more than a little terrifying and quite different from how we usually think of Jesus appearing (Also, this is the only physical description of Jesus in the Bible). Once again though, the imagery seems to come from the prophet Daniel (10:5-9), who described seeing an ancient one on the heavenly throne in ways reminiscent of John's description here. Thus by using Daniel's description of the father for the description of Jesus, John is making an explicit claim about the relationship of the two – that they are one. This probably doesn't seem too radical of an idea to us, given our belief in the Trinity, but in the first century, the relationship between Father and Son was still very much up for debate. The issue wouldn't really be settled for another 300 or so years.

V17-20 Because of the terrifying nature of this vision, John falls at the feet of Jesus in great fear, but in His words, we encounter the same Jesus who was on the boat in the storm with the disciples, telling him to not be afraid.

# Revelation

## Chapter 2

This chapter contains the messages to four of the seven churches, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira. These messages to the churches are prophetic – they invoke the Word in order to bring about a change in behavior. Each of the messages also follows the same 6-part formula:

- Identification of recipient
- Identification of who is sending the message
- the message itself in two parts
  - condemnation
  - exhortation
- a call to listen
- an inducement for right action

v2-7 the message to Ephesus

Ephesus was the largest city (~200,000 residents) in the region (and probably the second largest city in the Roman Empire; it was home to the ancient Temple of Artemis which was the economic engine of the city because of the many pilgrims who came to visit. Ephesus was also an important early Christian center as described in the book of Acts.

Mostly the message to Ephesus is positive, they stayed true to the gospel and have called out false teachers (the Apostles mentioned here aren't *the* Apostles but refers to missionary preachers). However, the church is no longer full of zeal in the way it was when it was first founded. The exhortation is to, in essence, engineer a revival. If they cannot do so, then Jesus will "take away the lampstand," ie, cause the church to cease functioning (and likely replace it).

The Nicolaitans were a short-lived sect within the church. Aside from Revelations, they are mentioned in the writings of several early church leaders. It was said that their leader was Nicolaus the Deacon (one of the original seven) but what exactly they did that was challenged isn't 100% clear. There seems to have been some issue around eating meat sacrificed to idols and another having to do with sexual licentiousness – polygamy maybe, free love maybe or perhaps even sex acts as part of worship (this was surprisingly common in pagan worship).

The inducement for the church was to eat from the tree of life in Eden, which is a metaphor for eternal life.

V8-11 The message to Smyrna

Smyrna was a smaller harbor city but an important center for cult of the emperor (who also called himself the first and the last, and prince of peace, king of kings, etc). Apparently the Christian community there is primarily made up of people who are materially poor but who are rich in spirit. There is some kind of open conflict between themselves and some local Jews (remember the two groups still had a great deal of overlap with many seeing Christians as a kind of sect of Judaism).

Smyrna is most famous in Christian history because of St Polycarp. Polycarp is believed to have been taught by the disciple John and became the elder or bishop of the churches in Smyrna. Along with Ignatius of Antioch and Clement of Rome he is considered one of the Apostolic Fathers. He would have about 25 or so when Revelation was written. He was martyred around the year 150 when he

was 85 by being burned at the stake.

In this message, there isn't really any condemnation, just an exhortation to bear up in the face of some upcoming challenges. By second death, the author means eternal punishment after the resurrection and judgment.

V12-17 The message to Pergamum (aka Pergamon)

Like Ephesus, Pergamum was a very large city, approaching 200,000 residents. It was also the capital city of the region and home of the Roman governor.

Satan's throne may be a reference to the Imperial governor or the Pergamon Altar, which was a huge marble edifice on the Acropolis which was part of a larger temple complex dedicated to the Greek gods.

Antipas is an otherwise unknown martyr

The condemnation of Pergamum is twofold, that they have followed the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. The Balaam here is the ancient Jewish prophet mentioned in Numbers (the one with a talking donkey). In ancient Jewish tradition, the error of Balaam was connected to idolatry and sexual immorality which are, not coincidentally, the same issues associated with the Nicolaitans.

The manna, like the tree of life in the letter to Smyrna, is a metaphor for eternal life. The white stone, on the other hand, is pretty ambiguous and its intended meaning is lost to us. It is apparently something of great value, the color white in the Bible usually represents holiness or purity, so perhaps the white stones represent badges of faithfulness of some kind, markers of ones righteousness.

V18-29 Message to Thyatira

Thyatira was a smaller commercial city and the center for the production of purple dyes; it was the hometown of Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth whom Paul meets in the Book of Acts outside of Philippi. It is possible that St Paul himself visited the city on one of his missionary journeys.

Similar to Pergamum, the complaint against Thyatira concerns idolatry and sexual practices. In this case though, the people John is at odds with are led by a female prophet that he pejoratively names Jezebel after the queen in the book of Kings (I) who led her husband the Israelite king Ahab to worship the Canaanite gods instead of the Lord. She was probably a gnostic, as they promised access to deep or hidden knowledge and one of the complaints against them was they had many leaders who were women.

In this message the inducement is apparently the authority to rule over people, presumably in communion with Christ (who is the morning star - aka Venus).



## Revelation Chapter 3

Chapter three is comprised of the three remaining messages to the churches in Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

### V1-6 Message to Sardis

Sardis was an important trade city between the Roman and Persian empires. In ancient times it had been the capital city of the Lydian kingdom that was defeated by the Persians and later became part of Alexander the Great's empire before eventually becoming part of Rome's. It had had a large Jewish community for hundreds of years before the time of Jesus.

The primary complaint lodged against the Sardis church is that it is lacking in zeal; with perhaps many members proclaiming belief in Jesus, but not really living lives that follow his example and teachings. Apparently John believes there is a faithful remnant who could turn things around.

### V7-13 Message to Philadelphia

Philadelphia was a relatively new city having been founded in about 190BC. It sat in the center of a rich agricultural area and was considered a prosperous city.

Like Smyrna, there is no condemnation in the message to Philadelphia. Rather, it is full of praise for their faithfulness and enduring commitment, with an encouragement to hold fast until Christ returns. The open door would suggest the pathway to salvation, and it alludes to a later episode in the book concerning the merger of heaven and earth in the new age.

This is the second time that the synagogue of Satan, full of false Jews is mentioned ("the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not.") This is not a phrase used elsewhere in the New Testament. There is something similar found in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where the small separatist sect of Jews who produced the scrolls (the Essenes) called the rest of their fellow Jews "the lot of Satan." Some have used this language to disparage all Jews. Exactly what it means is debatable, but I would like to suggest the possibility that the Synagogue of Satan may well be Pauline Christians - Christians who had been Gentiles and who had been baptized but who had not undergone ritual conversion to Judaism. As we know from Acts and Paul's letters, there were serious differences among Jesus' followers concerning the food purity codes of the Mosaic Law and that Paul was on the side of discarding these laws and that he also saw no harm in eating meat that came from sacrificed animals (1Cor 8:4) - which is one of the author's big complaints.

### V14-22 Message to Laodicea

Laodicea was an ancient city, a wealthy commercial center, and center of learning. The city had been levelled in an earthquake in the year 60, but was quickly rebuilt and flourishing again by the end of the first century. St Paul seems to have visited the city in his travels, and mentions it and prominent Christians there in his letter to the Colossians (Colossae was about 10 miles from Laodicea).

The use of Amen here as a title for Jesus is very unusual. Where usually it is a response to worship which means roughly, "let it be so." Here it is a transliteration of a Hebrew word into Greek. The Hebrew word אֲמֵן, which is pronounced *ummana* and means craftsman or artist.

This is probably my favorite complaint of all of these, that they are neither hot nor cold, but

lukewarm. This is similar to Jesus' command to let your yes be yes and your no be no – in other words, make a commitment and keep it fully without compromise. Jesus' complaint here that they see themselves as rich while Jesus understands that in truth they are poor in what matters. This is an important theme throughout the gospels, that material wealth can blind us to our need for God and to our obligations to our neighbors.

## **Review of the Letters to the Churches**

John's message to the church basically fall into three broad categories

- Positive messages and a promise to see them through coming challenges
  - Smyrna – Spiritually rich, persist in the coming afflictions
  - Philadelphia – No condemnation – resist the false Jews
- You were great but your faith has cooled, get it together and revive your faith and ministry
  - Ephesus – abandoned the love they had at first – do you the works you did at first (Hate Nicolaitans)
  - Laodicea – lukewarm faith
  - Sardis – actions no longer meet reputation
- You tolerate, or worse, welcome those whose beliefs aren't quite right
  - Pergamum – “teaching of Balaam” (sacrificed foods and fornication) Tolerate Nicolaitans
  - Thyatira – tolerate a prophet (possibly a gnostic, also sacrificed foods and fornication)

This has probably been the reality since the day after Jesus ascended, but in what ways do you these situations in our contemporary church world. Where do you think your church is along this spectrum?

## Genesis Chapter 4

This chapter marks the transition from the prophetic letters to the seven churches into the apocalyptic vision. Here, John tells of his vision or out-of-body experience of travelling with Jesus to the heavenly realm and arriving in the very throne room of God.

V1 The voice, as we learned in chapter 1, is that of Christ himself who marks the transition from letters to the contemporary churches in Asia to a foretelling of what is to come.

V2-3 the “one seated on the throne” is description we will see throughout Revelation and is meant as a way to describe God and God’s sovereignty over all creation.

God is described as looking like two gemstones, Jasper and Carnelian while the throne itself is surrounded by a glittering rainbow like an emerald. What the author is trying to convey here is a kind of otherworldly splendor that is meant to describe the glory of God.

Much of the imagery in this chapter is similar to that described in Ezekiel, who also has a vision of the heavenly realm. Ezekiel describes the throne room thus:

*And there came a voice from above the dome over their heads; when they stopped, they let down their wings. And above the dome over their heads there was something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form. Upward from what appeared like the loins I saw something like gleaming amber, something that looked like fire enclosed all around; and downward from what looked like the loins I saw something that looked like fire, and there was a splendor all around. Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking. Ezekiel 1:25-28*

V4 the 24 thrones are occupied by 24 elders. Oftentimes these elders are described as angels, but the text itself does not say that explicitly. The angelic assumption makes sense though if we remember that in the time of John of Patmos, most Christians did not yet think that any humans, except maybe Moses and Elijah, might be in heaven. To be clear, the idea that, at least some, humans enjoy a spiritual existence in heaven is an extra-biblical idea. The Bible itself suggests, for the most part, that the dead remain so until the resurrection. It is outside the scope of this study, but “going to heaven” is an idea that arose in the second century, based on the experience of Christians and supported by some ambiguous statements of Jesus (who offers contradictory statements on the subject). On the other hand, later on in the text we will encounter martyrs, who clearly are humans, so perhaps these elders are intended to be understood as humans of some sort. The number of them, 24, may itself be a clue as twenty-four doesn’t have any Biblical precedents; one theory is that they represent the 12 tribes plus the 12 disciples/apostles.

V5-6 Here we get three images, there is thunder and lightning, the torches representing the seven spirits of God, and the crystal sea.

- Thunder and lightning is a common descriptor in these visions of heaven and are drawn from the encounter of God and Moses on Mt Sinai (Exodus 19)
- The seven spirits of God, as I mentioned last week are from a passage in Isaiah (**Isaiah 11:2**). The spirit of the Lord<sup>1</sup> shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom<sup>2</sup> and understanding<sup>3</sup>, the spirit of counsel<sup>4</sup> and might<sup>5</sup>, the spirit of knowledge<sup>6</sup> and the fear of the Lord<sup>7</sup>.

- The crystal sea (which is a popular image in gospel music, especially bluegrass gospel) again comes from Ezekiel: Eze 1:22 “Over the heads of the living creatures there was something like a dome, shining like crystal, spread out above their heads.”

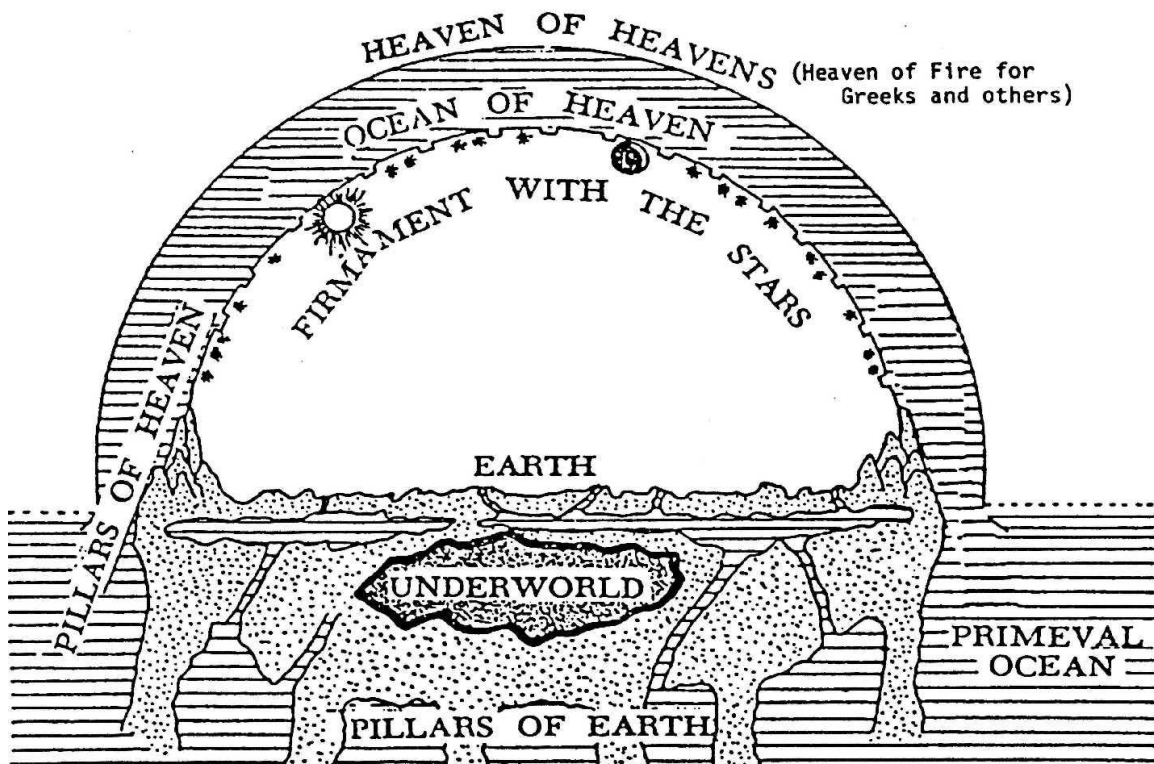


Illustration of ancient Mediterranean cosmology adapted and modified by early Christians

V6-8 The four living creatures here seem to be a combination of not only the vision of Ezekiel but also that of Isaiah (6: 1-3). In Ezekiel the creatures were identical and each had four faces (same as these here) and only four wings. In Isaiah, the creatures have six wings but their faces are not described. However, Isaiah’s creatures also offer praise in the form of the Trisagion, just as John’s do while Ezekiel’s aren’t recorded as speaking.

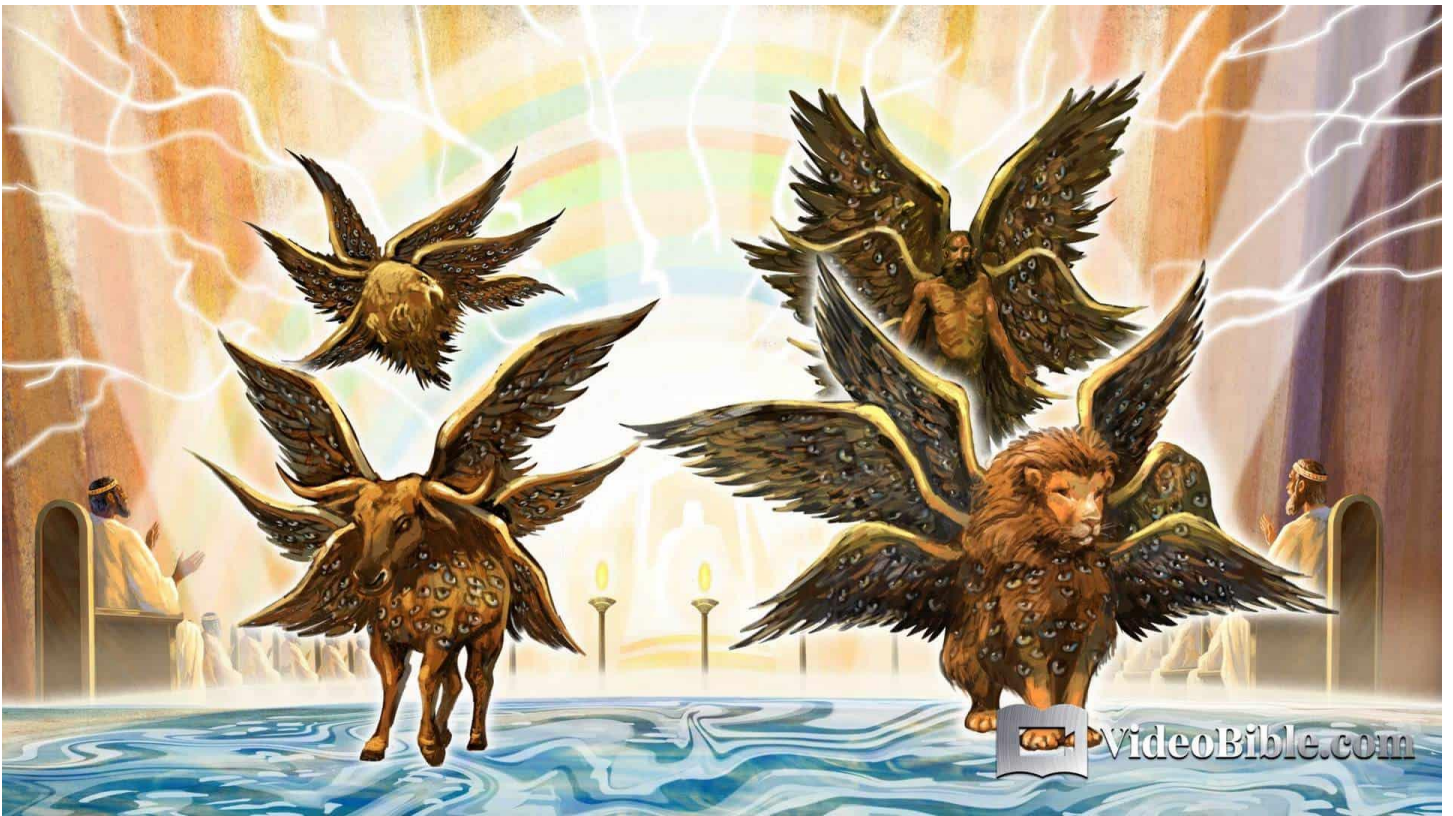
In Ezekiel these creatures are described as cherubim (not sure where the idea of cherubim as little flying babies comes from) whereas Isaiah’s creatures are described as Seraphim. I think what matters is that they are fantastical and kind of terrifying heavenly beings.

There is an interesting overlap between the description of these creatures and the images of gods from Egypt and Babylonia. the two civilizations who most closely interacted with and likely inspired ancient Israelite culture. What has most noticeably changed in John’s vision as compared to Ezekiel’s is that while Ezekiel’s cherubim were definitely in human form, John’s are not, or at least not explicitly.

Over time, these creatures came to be associated with the four gospels, though is likely not the author’s intent.

- Mark is the lion
- Matthew is the man
- Luke is the ox
- And John is the eagle.

Revelation creatures



Ezekiel Creatures



V9-11 When the four creatures give glory and honor to God, which according to v8, is always and forever (unceasing it says), the 24 elders also pay homage by foregoing their own honor (casting their crowns away) and sing their own praise, acknowledging God's sovereignty. Hopefully their words are familiar to you from the eucharistic prayer.

## Revelation Chapter 5

In this chapter we really begin to get into the action part of the vision. Where Chapter 4 set the scene, in the divine throne room, we now get to see those present in the room act.

V1 The scroll seems to be a kind of magical item as we'll see, with properties that cause actions as it is opened. That there are seven seals is significant, seven represents perfection or completeness signifying that the scroll represents the totality of God's plans for the world.

Usually, only one side of a scroll was used to write on and the grammar here in the Greek is a little unclear (since they didn't use punctuation) so it could mean that the scroll was written on as usual and the seals were on the back, which would be what we expect. Alternately, it could be read just as the NRSV has it which is to suggest there was writing on both sides of the scroll. Apparently, that was sometimes done, though usually the outside writing was just a summary of the scroll's contents.

Seals were blobs of wax melted over the opening edge of the scroll that were then allowed to harden, usually with an imprint of some type formed in the warm wax, from a signet ring or some other device. So, seals don't really lock it shut, they're more of an honor system kind of thing.

V2-4 A mighty angel, otherwise unnamed (though you can find lots of conjecture on the interwebs) makes an announcement, apparently for the benefit of the author here because surely everyone in the throne room would already have known who is meant to open the scroll.

So again, because opening this scroll will set off a chain of events culminating in the restructuring of the cosmos, it can only be done by someone both authorized and capable of seeing events through to their completion.

The author is disconsolate that no one is apparently able. But let's look at that for a moment and ask ourselves - why. The author has no idea what is in that scroll, at least not yet. His very purpose is to be there to witness what *will* happen. There is no reason to believe that the author could do more than guess at its contents (it's one of the plot holes here) since for all he knows it contains plans for kitchen renovations. Even if we grant that the seals mark it as important (one would be the usual number, so seven makes it extra special) and of course it is in the right hand of God, which is another way of signifying its significance, as the right hand is the favored hand and it's God there's still no reason for the intensity of the reaction at finding no one worthy.

However, another way to look at it is to see his reaction as a reaction to the reality of the sinfulness of humanity. Ignoring its contents, it would still sting to realize that no one either alive or dead (on or under the earth) not even Moses or Abraham or any of the prophets or disciples could be found to have been righteous enough - including the author who seems to think himself pretty righteous. It is a subtle but deeply profound way of showing the absolute gulf between the goodness of God and the state of humans. But...

V5-6 It turns out that there is one being who is indeed worthy - the Root of Jesse, the Lion of Judah - in other words, Jesus the Christ. Here we see the true meaning of the Atonement. Here the Lion is seen as a lamb (albeit a kind of terrifying one with seven horns and eyes) whose sacrifice has rendered him, and him alone, worthy. The great gulf between God and humanity is bridged through

the actions of the one through his willingness to keep faith in God's will even through to his own death.

V7-10 Christ then takes the scroll resulting in the other beings in attendance to fall down and worship the Lamb. Again, this is a way of showing the One-ness of Christ and the Father (the one on the throne) where even the heavenly courtiers acknowledge the Christ as God.

In recognition of this honor a new song/hymn is offered in worship. In ancient Mediterranean society, songs were commissioned by rulers to tell of their greatness or to celebrate noteworthy victories in war. The song itself may be familiar to you as a form of it is used as Canticle 18 which is often said as part of Morning Prayer (and I think we've used in Sunday worship as well).

V11-14 The song is now picked up by a growing chorus of voices, first to be picked up by all the angelic host whose numbers are seemingly uncountable. This whole scene is a call back to the prophet Daniel who when he wrote of God giving authority and power to the Son of Man

*A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. Daniel 7:10*

*As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. Daniel 7:13-14*

The chapter ends with the four creatures saying Amen to the song which causes the 24 elders to fall down before Jesus (even though they had already fallen down in verse 9 when they started singing the song).



## Revelation Chapter 6

Chapter six details one of the most well-known passages from Revelation, the opening of the seals and the arrival of the four horsemen of the apocalypse.



V1-8 Each time Christ removes one of the first four seals, one of the creatures cries out “Come” and each time a horse and rider appears. Each horse/rider pair is given a unique assignment related to causing death and destruction in some manner.

1. White Horse - Has a bow and wears a crown, represents death in war from invading armies.
2. Red Horse - Has a great sword, represents murder and civil unrest
3. Black Horse - Carries a scale, used by merchants (and often represents justice), the rider represents famine as the prices here would have been hugely inflationary representing a shortage of them. Wine and Olive oil were commercial products in Roman times, produced at scale and thus preserving them would preserve the power of the landed aristocracy. So basically this is a famine induced by human greed.
4. Pale Green Horse - The rider is Death + Hades possibly meaning some kind of demonic horde. Aside from the mayhem of the first three riders, this one represents widescale destruction of a quarter of humanity from the usual side effects of war and deprivation (except maybe the wild animals eating people).

V9-17 The next two seals are a little different. They do not cause or allow human-initiated suffering, such as what the four horseman are unleashing, rather they speak to creation itself participating in God’s re-creation.

First there is a cry that arises from those who had been martyred for their faith. It is not necessarily the case that these include only Christian martyrs (of which there weren’t very many yet) but may also include righteous Jews who suffered for their commitment to God. There is a passage very similar to this in 2 Esdras

*Did not the souls of the righteous in their chambers ask about these matters, saying, 'How long are we to remain here? And when will the harvest of our reward come?' And the archangel Jeremiel answered and said, 'When the number of those like yourselves is completed; for he has weighed the age in the balance, and measured the times by measure, and numbered the times by number; and he will not move or arouse them until that measure is fulfilled.'"* 2 Esdras 4:35-37

and another in the Book of Enoch, which ultimately didn't make into the canon but which was widely read and considered scriptural in the first century and earlier.

*In those days I saw the Head of Days when He seated himself upon the throne of His glory, And the books of the living were opened before Him: And all His host which is in heaven above and His counselors stood before Him, And the hearts of the holy were filled with joy; Because the number of the righteous had been offered, And the prayer of the righteous had been heard, And the blood of the righteous been required before the Lord of Spirits.* 1 Enoch 47:3-4

There was a widespread belief in ancient Judaism and Christianity, that the coming day of the Lord was linked to the gathering of a particular number of unjust deaths among the righteous. This passage reflects that belief as it is said that the day of judgment would not come until "the number would be complete."

The sixth seal unleashes a series of natural disasters that cause even greater calamity. In response to these calamities, the survivors will wish for death to come and take them as living is too unbearable.

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This chapter and the destruction and death brought on by the first six seals being removed is, to say the least, challenging to anyone with a gospel-centric perspective of God.

As Jesus suggests at several points, terrible things because terrible things happen and not necessarily because God wishes for terrible things to happen to some people. As well, if the clearest picture of God that we have is the life of Jesus, it is hard to reconcile this divine bloodbath with that example. Jesus doesn't really do wrath (though he is angered by the hypocrisy of those who take advantage of the faith of others for their own gain). Jesus' description of the consequences of not living into the will of God, seem more like self-chosen consequences than divinely ordered punishments and they are tempered with sayings about those who are last or least in the kingdom, but who are in the kingdom nonetheless.

Though if one's understanding of God is say Old-Testament-Centric instead, there would likely be less of a dissonance. In Samuel, for example, God orders the complete and utter destruction of the Amalekites by Saul, and it is Saul's mercy in not carrying out this slaughter that invokes God's ire and results in His losing faith in Saul and raising up David instead.

The seeming disconnect between Jesus centering of Love as God's primary characteristic and the Old Testament's centering of jealousy as God's primary characteristic has long been a tension within Christianity. There were many voices which suggested that Christians should not see the Old Testament as scriptural at all in the first centuries after Jesus' earthly ministry.

For me, the book's author, despite his commitment to Jesus, still maintains a view of God rooted in

the ancient Hebrew understanding. This is understandable for someone who was raised and tutored in that tradition. This could mean that his vision was false or that he merely mis-interpreted what his vision showed him. I think the more charitable interpretation is surely the latter.

Given human history, there is surely to be a great deal of suffering, much of it caused by human fear, greed, and cruelty between now and the return of Christ. Part of our Christian calling is to stay faithful in the face of that and to not let it deter us from living our Jesus' command to love God and our neighbors with our whole selves.

## Revelation Chapter 7

After the apparent widespread destruction signified by the opening of the first six seals, this chapter is a kind of interlude describing the fate of (some of) the faithful before we get to the opening of the seventh seal and the full “unrolling” of God’s plans.

V1-3 Angels stand at the boundaries of creation prepared to unleash havoc but are held up by another angel who tells them that the people of God must be marked first, presumably as a kind of sign to allow the destruction to bypass them. This recalls the mark on the doorposts of the Israelites in the tenth plague in the Exodus story that caused the angel of death to bypass them during the plague which killed all the firstborn of Egypt.

Probably the most obvious way to understand the seal on the foreheads of those marked as God’s servants is as an anointing. Anointing with oil is a common practice in many traditions, and is quite prominent in the Judean (and thus the Christian) tradition. We see it throughout the scriptures. Historically, in Mediterranean cultures, anointing symbolized the subservience of the anointed to the anointer. In this case, it symbolizes the nature of the relationship between God and God’s people – God is Lord and master, we are the servants. This practice is embedded within our own baptismal rite where each of the baptized is anointed and “marked as Christ’s own forever.”

V4-8 The initial anointing is reserved for the 12 tribes of Israel, 12k each to make 144k altogether.

The list of tribes here is unique. The Bible actually identifies 14 different tribes in various different books (the same happens for the names of the disciples). In all fairness, only the tribes of Benjamin and Judah (and Levi, kinda-sorta) had actually continued to exist after the destruction of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 720 BC (so 800 years before this was written). It also seems that tribal identity in second temple Judaism wasn’t really much of a thing in day to day life.

Revelation	Numbers	Deuteronomy	Judges
Judah	Judah	Judah	Judah
Reuben	Reuben	Reuben	Reuben
Gad	Gad	Gad	Gad
Asher	Asher	Asher	Asher
Naphtali	Naphtali	Naphtali	Naphtali
Manasseh	Manasseh		Manasseh
Simeon	Simeon	Simeon	Simeon
Levi		Levi	
Issachar	Issachar	Issachar	Issachar
Zebulun	Zebulun	Zebulun	Zebulun
Joseph		Joseph*	
Benjamin	Benjamin	Benjamin	Benjamin
	Ephraim		Ephraim
	Dan	Dan	Dan

\*mentions subtribes of Manasseh and Ephraim

So, we can surmise that the number 144k is merely symbolic, the multiple of the square of the

mystical number 12.

V9 The 144k are then expanded by an uncountable number of people from every nation. It seems pretty clear that this group is different from the Judean 144k, but you can find interpretations that say otherwise. Various Christian and Christian-adjacent groups, most famously the Jehovah's Witnesses, have claimed to be the 144,000.

My interpretation would be that the groups are meant to represent two different covenantal groups, those who are *ethnically* Judean, genetically descended from Abraham and those who are *spiritually* Judean, descended from Abraham by virtue of their faith in Christ (the Lamb) (and who have perhaps truly converted) which fulfills God's promise to Abraham back in Genesis;

*I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."* Genesis 22:17-18

As previously mentioned, the white robes represent righteousness and the palm branches represent victory, similar to what we see in John's description of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

V10-12 The circle of worship and praise expands to include the 144k and the great multitude as well as the angels, the elders, and the four creatures.

V13-14 The elder makes clear to John that those in white are those who have, *by faith*, come through the great ordeal. It's not exactly clear what ordeal we are talking about here. Remember that in chapter 6, the sixth seal revealed the martyrs under the altar who were given white robes and told to wait, but these are seemingly different from that group. These have washed their robes in the blood, but there's no mention of their own blood or suffering other than that have survived the "great ordeal." The ordeal may be referring to specific issues facing Christians in first century Asia Minor, it could represent the theoretical challenges all Christians face in trying to live in the example of Jesus, it could mean death itself. At any rate it, presumably, they represent all Christians (ie, you and me) who stand before God and offer their praise.

V15-17 the elder continues, in verse, to expand our understanding of this multitude. Through faith they have attained eternal life and a life without the weight of mortal life, they have enough, they do not know discomfort, fear, or loss, living wholly within the love and joy of God.

## Revelation

## Chapter 8

The destruction continues! But first a short pause.

V1 The seventh seal is opened (removed) by Jesus and now the scroll is able to be fully opened, representing the fullness of the Eschaton (the fulfilling/completion) of all things and the enormity of that action brings silence as the immensity of it is too great for words.

V2-4 Eight angels are present and seven are given trumpets and one is given an incense censer full of burning incense which makes a great cloud which represent a great cloud of prayers that surround Christ.

V5 The angel then takes fire (presumably hot charcoal pieces) and throws it from the divine altar onto the earth, causing even more distressing portents and destruction. Essentially, this action symbolizes the judgment of God on the earth.

That the day of the Lord is a terrifying event comes from the writings of the prophets such as this passage from Isaiah.

*Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty! Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will melt, and they will be dismayed. Pangs and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at one another; their faces will be aflame. See, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the insolence of tyrants. Isaiah 13:6-11*

V7-12 Like the removal of the wax seals from the scroll, each of the seven trumpets results in some terrible event. These trumpet-induced catastrophes echo some of the plagues in Egypt from Genesis but bigger and world-wide in scope

### First Trumpet

Hail and fire and blood rain down on earth, destroying a third of the surface, a third of the remaining trees and all the grass.

Similar to the 7<sup>th</sup> plague of hail and fire.

### Second Trumpet

A burning mountain is thrown into the sea – destroying sea life and shipping

Similar to the first plague of turning water into blood.

### Third Trumpet

A blazing star (with a name! – Wormwood) falls and poisons fresh water causing many to die.

There isn't really an Egyptian analogue, though like the second trumpet it has a similar effect to the first plague)

### Fourth Trumpet

The lights of the sun, moon, and stars is diminished by a third.

Similar to the ninth plague, 3 days of darkness

V13 After the first four trumpet blasts, an eagle flies over heaven and cries Woe, woe, woe surely as a foreshadowing of what will happen when the three remaining trumpets are blown.

The image of the eagle has parallels in the prophet Jeremiah, who describes God's wrath as sweeping down like an eagle;

*For thus says the LORD: Look, he shall swoop down like an eagle, and spread his wings against Moab; the towns shall be taken and the strongholds seized. The hearts of the warriors of Moab, on that day, shall be like the heart of a woman in labor. Moab shall be destroyed as a people, because he magnified himself against the LORD. Terror, pit, and trap are before you, O inhabitants of Moab! says the LORD. Everyone who flees from the terror shall fall into the pit, and everyone who climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the trap. For I will bring these things upon Moab in the year of their punishment, says the LORD. Jeremiah 48:40-44*

And;

*Therefore hear the plan that the LORD has made against Edom and the purposes that he has formed against the inhabitants of Teman: Surely the little ones of the flock shall be dragged away; surely their fold shall be appalled at their fate. At the sound of their fall the earth shall tremble; the sound of their cry shall be heard at the Red Sea. Look, he shall mount up and swoop down like an eagle, and spread his wings against Bozrah, and the heart of the warriors of Edom in that day shall be like the heart of a woman in labor. Jeremiah 49:20-22*

## Revelation Chapter 9

Chapter nine continues telling of what happens when the seven angels blow their seven trumpets, the fifth and sixth, presented here, are particularly gruesome and aptly called “woes.”

V1-6 The fifth trumpet causes a “star” (probably a metaphor for an angel) to descend from heaven to earth to open up “the” bottomless pit. Revelation is the only Biblical book that mentions a “bottomless” pit\*, but the Hebrew Scriptures frequently refer to the “depths” and in a couple of places\* mention the depths of the Pit in connection with the place of the dead, Sheol.

Locusts are released across the earth (just as in the 8<sup>th</sup> Egyptian plague) that can instead of eating up plant life as usual are instead given the ability to sting like scorpions and are given the mission to torture people not marked as God’s own for up to five months.

\*For example;

- Isaiah 14:15
- Proverbs 1:12, 9:18, 28:18
- Psalms 16:10, 30:3,9, 69:15, 88:6, 103:4, 143:7
- Job 33: 18, 22, 24, 28, 30

V7-12 The description of the locusts here is rooted in the book of Joel that uses similar descriptive language to describe a marauding army of demonic beings that are locust-like.

*Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near - a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come. Fire devours in front of them, and behind them a flame burns. Before them the land is like the garden of Eden, but after them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them. They have the appearance of horses, and like war-horses they charge. As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, like a powerful army drawn up for battle. Before them peoples are in anguish, all faces grow pale.*

Joel 2:1-6

The demonic army is led by an angel, though whether a fallen one or one in good graces is unclear. Abaddon means “place of destruction” in Hebrew is in several places in the Hebrew Scriptures mentioned either alongside Sheol or in reference to place of the dead. Apollyon means “destroyer.”

V13-19 The sixth trumpet causes a voice to come for the “four horns” of the altar of heaven. This is a reference to the altar of the temple as described in Exodus 27:1-8



The altar is basically a large (7.5' square) bronze grill for cooking the sacrifices. The altar is not in the tent but outside in a courtyard.



The four angels here are not the same four who stood at the “corners” of the earth but are a different four. The language of releasing them and their being bound suggests that these may be fallen angels who lead demonic armies. Thus the sixth trumpet, like the tenth plague unleashes widespread death and suffering.

The beasts of the cavalry are truly terrifying with lion’s heads that breathe fire like dragons and tails that are biting serpents. Their rampage leads to the death of the third of humankind.

So far, from the trumpets:

1/3 trees and grass burned up

1/3 earth burned up

1/3 of the sea turned to blood

1/3 of all sea creatures killed

1/3 of all ships destroyed

1/3 of the rivers and springs destroyed

1/3 sun and moon was darkened

1/3 of the stars were darkened

1/3 of the day was darkened

And now 1/3 of humans killed

Previously, of course, 1/4 of the earth was allowed to be killed by the third rider (as well as those killed

by war, civil unrest and famine from the work of the first three riders).

Also, all the stars fell from the sky, the full moon became like blood, the sun black and every mountain and island violently moved in an earthquake.

And more yet, there are angels ready to destroy earth and sea who are waiting for the elect to be marked.

V20-21 And yet, despite all that, those that have so far been left alive ("spared" seems too charitable) did not see fit to question their choices or way of life, at all.

I'd like to pause here a moment and remark on how pessimistic John's view of humanity is. There is, and always has been, a sense of the immutable wickedness of people within some streams of the Judeo-Christian thought. We see it throughout the scriptures, in the books of Exodus and Judges for example, where the Israelites fail and fail again to remember and honor God. We see it in the many many exhortations against foreigners where their primary fault is their failure to honor God and their propensity to lead God's people astray. We see it in the history of communities which have sought to separate themselves from what they understand to be the corruption of others. That was the story of the Essenes, the people who created the Dead Sea Scrolls, we see evidence of it in the communities described in the letters of John, we see it in apocalyptic cults and traditions today, communities as different as the Westboro Baptists and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

At the same time, we also see the opposite impulse in scriptures. We see it in the books of Ruth and Jonah, each of which shows the potential goodness in others. We see it throughout the prophets and their concern for the stranger and the alien. We see it in the mission to the Gentiles championed by St Paul, and we see it in the gospels in Jesus' frequent embrace of outsiders and ministry to Gentiles.

The people of God are always challenged with the difficulty of living in the kingdom while being simultaneously enmeshed in evil and sin. Personally, I think it is dangerous for us to assume that the propensity to selfishness, fear, and evil actions rest wholly outside of our selves and our communities. We are all of us prone to stumbling off of Christ's path, the weeds and the wheat grow within all of us. For me, one of the key takeaways from the example of Jesus, and one that does not come naturally to me, is the necessity to seek the goodness of creation in others. I would also add that humility about our own capacity for righteousness is equally warranted.

## Revelation Chapter 10

We get a short digression from the trumpet inspired destruction of earth and humanity while John receives a couple of "gifts," one in this chapter and one in the next.

V1-2 Another angel with a shining face and legs of flame appears and is apparently quite large as he is cloaked in a cloud with a rainbow over his head.

V3-4 The angel shouts and seven thunders ring out offering more portents (no doubt of destruction) but for some reason, John is told to not record these.

V5-7 Essentially, the message of the angel to John is that final purpose of God is about to be realized and the work of salvation complete.

V8-11 Then the same voice as in verse 4 (presumably Jesus) tells him to take the small scroll held by the giant angel and to eat it.

This is a reference to Ezekiel where the prophet is given a scroll to eat. This symbolizes accepting God's call to share God's word.

*But you, mortal, hear what I say to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you. I looked, and a hand was stretched out to me, and a written scroll was in it. He spread it before me; it had writing on the front and on the back, and written on it were words of lamentation and mourning and woe. He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.*



William Blake

Ezekiel 2:8-3:3

# Revelation

## Chapter 11

In this chapter, John of Patmos receives a second “gift”, and then we finally get the seventh (and last) trumpet.

V1-2 The author is given a measuring rod, which seems to be a metaphor for assessing the righteousness of Israel, as it leaves out the Court of the Gentiles. And to clarify here, we seem to be talking about the Temple in Jerusalem (not in heaven), which according to the consensus on when this book was written (ca 90AD) had been destroyed over 20 years earlier. So, in reality, the gentiles had long ago trampled over the holy city and essentially levelled it.

The forty-two months is drawn from Daniel chapter 7, where the meaning of the four beasts is interpreted to him and in his vision, Daniel is told that the fourth beast will ravage the earth for three and half years or 42 months. Interestingly, that is also the approximate amount of time between the outbreak of the Jewish revolt and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD.

V3-6 The two witnesses will also prophesy for the same amount of time (1260 days is ~ 42 months). Often, the two witnesses are not identified, but that has not stopped people from guessing who they might be over the last two thousand years. The most common suggestion is that they are Elijah and Moses (deduced from the Transfiguration) though Enoch and Elijah are also suggested, because scripture suggests that neither of them died but were instead taken bodily into heaven.

Other guesses are that the witnesses do not represent individuals at all, but are metaphors for the two covenants (the new one with Christ and the older one with Moses and the other patriarchs).

A little confusingly, the witnesses appear as pairs of olive trees and lampstands. This is taken from Zechariah, where the prophet speaks of his vision where he sees two lampstands on the sides of God’s throne and by each an olive tree which provides the oil for the lamps. Zechariah is told that the lampstands represent God’s word to Zerubbabel, who is the person who led the first Israelites back to Jerusalem at the end of the Babylonian exile.

At any rate, these witnesses have been granted tremendous authority over the world to bring about significant destruction and suffering.

V7-10 Here we get the first reference to “the beast.” This beast is not Satan (as we shall see a bit later) but another being who takes up ultimate worldly authority (for a time at least. The Beast is usually thought of as the Antichrist, though the term Antichrist does not actually appear anywhere in Revelation, it’s only use comes in the first letter of John.

At any rate, this beast arises from the bottomless pit mentioned in chapter 9 and makes war on the “witnesses” and triumphs over them. For me, this reinforces that the witnesses aren’t individuals but represent something like the church.

The reference to Sodom and Egypt actually means Jerusalem, which has been corrupted by inhospitality and idolatry (the sins of Sodom and Egypt).

Not being buried is/was a real outrage and that wicked humanity celebrates their death and defilement reinforces how bad those being punished really are. And the torment the witnesses offered is part of a long-standing narrative, reinforced in the gospels, about the indifference and hostility to the messages of the prophets.

V11-14 Just as God did for Jesus, is also done for the dead witnesses and they are resurrected and allowed to ascend into heaven.

This is basically drawn from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians

*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

1 Thess 4:13-18

V15-18 The seventh trumpet is played, and we return our attention to the throne room of God, where there is an announcement of the beginning of Christ's true reign over the earth. In response, the 24 elders again bow down on worship and sing a prayer of thanksgiving to God.

This also causes the heavenly ark of the covenant to be opened, and as we know from Scripture, when the earthly ark was opened, the full might of God was unleashed on the enemies of Israel. The same is about to happen here.

## Revelation Chapter 12

Here comes the dragon.

V1-2 A “great portent in the sky” involving a pregnant woman. This has long been associated with the Virgin Mary and the Star of Bethlehem and the twelve stars most likely represents Israel, so that taken together she is the embodiment of the Christian movement, which saw itself as the continuation of Israel in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem.

V3 The Dragon is usually understood to mean Satan, the great enemy of God. In the original Greek, the word we translate as dragon is the same word that is translated as Leviathan in the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint). In the Hebrew Scriptures, Leviathan represents a chaos monster that battles against the ordered creation of God.

The number of heads and crowns likely represent worldly kingdoms or rulers, but there is no consensus around who or what exactly. For us, I think it's enough to know that it symbolizes worldly dominance.

V4 The wiping out of a second third of the stars is meant to represent not only the destructive power of the dragon, but also that it's destructiveness is careless.

The dragon is anticipating eating the woman's child. Obviously, the child is meant to represent Jesus

V5-6 However, the child meant to be king of kings is taken up into heaven and the woman is also rescued and taken to a place of refuge. Wilderness often represents a place where God takes care of God's own. It's where Jesus is tempted and also where angels tended to his needs, it is the place from which John the Baptist emerges, it is where Elijah retreats (several times) and from where the chariot of fire takes him up into heaven, it is where David goes in his battle against Saul, and of course, it is the place where God keeps the Israelites until they are ready to cross over the Jordan.

Thought the symbolism of the ascension is pretty clear here, it doesn't really account for the crucifixion and this passage in Revelation is the only place where the ascension of Jesus is characterized as him being “rescued” from Satan.

Symbolically, this encounter of the woman and the dragon is about the struggle between Israel (both old and new) and Satan. To the original audience of this, this likely represented the struggle between their nascent movement and the hostility of both the Roman authorities and the Jewish religious leaders who did not accept Jesus' claims about himself.

V7-9 Once the woman and baby are safe, Michael the Archangel leads the angelic army (aka the angelic host) into battle against the dragon (who is now specifically named as Satan) and some angels who had followed the dragon, a kind of heavenly civil war and defeats them. But rather than destroying the enemy, they are allowed to reconstitute themselves on earth.

V10-12 A hymn is sung extolling the victory, but also suggesting that “battle” was won through the willing sacrifice of at least some of the angelic host. There is also a clear inference to how the battle against Satan is being “fought” on earth by Christ's followers faithful witness.

V13-17 Being stranded on earth, the dragon then takes up the pursuit of the mother but she is able to flee from him using eagle's wings and then he tries to flush her out by unleashing a flood, but the earth itself comes to her rescue and so frustrated the dragon instead turns to pursue the other children of the woman, i.e., the followers of Jesus.

In many ways, this struggle resembles mythic stories of battles between gods and fantastic beasts. For the most part, I think John is using a style of story-telling that would have been familiar to his intended audience as a way of introducing the Christian ideas he thinks they need to understand.

## Revelation Chapter 13

We continue with the story of the “dragon” who we have been told is Satan, who has led a rebellion against God and has been exiled, i.e. “thrown down,” to Earth.

v12:18- 13:4 The dragon awaits on the shore as a beast (i.e. Leviathan) comes up from the sea. Presumably this is the same beast we encountered in chapter 11 who did battle with the two witnesses and is often called the Antichrist (though again, that’s not a term actually used by the author of Revelation). Here we learnt that like the Dragon, this beast has seven heads and ten horns, and on its horns, it wears ten crowns (diadems). It is also described as having the body of a leopard, the feet of a bear, and the mouth of a lion. It also bears blasphemous names, though what these are isn’t said. We also know that one of the heads has received a mortal blow (i.e., a killing blow) but that the beast is, nevertheless, alive.

We are also told that the power of the beast derives from Satan (the Dragon) and that people worship the beast because they do not see any alternative to doing so.

Ok, so the general consensus is that this beast represents the Roman Emperors. There had been, basically, eight emperors and seven since the death of Jesus, but after Nero’s death, in a period of just over 6 months, three others made short-lived claims to be emperor before Vespasian took control, so seven real emperors plus three “pretenders” gets us to ten. Nero famously committed suicide by ordering a servant to stab him, so it is believed that is the reference to the head with the mortal blow. However, there was a conspiracy theory, especially popular in the East (where John of Patmos lives) that Nero hadn’t died and would someday return. As to the blasphemous names, the Emperors titles included some that might be familiar to us; Son of God, Savior of the World, Prince of Peace, Incarnate God. And in truth, the power of the emperor was vast and would have taken great courage to defy it.

V5-8 Again we see the beast engaging in conflict for 42 months, and that it would prevail over the saints. If the beast is the Roman imperium, then John is saying that it will come into conflict with the church and will seem to prevail over it (at least at first). Given the history of persecutions, some of which had already occurred, and with much worse yet to come, it is not surprising that many people have interpreted this as referring to the experience of the early martyrs persecuted by Rome.

V9-10 This short bit of poetry is a paraphrase from something Jesus says when confronted in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:52) which is itself a paraphrase of the prophet Jeremiah (15:2 & 43:11)

V11-12 We now encounter a second beast, this one from the earth (i.e., Behemoth) who would appear to be harmless (lamb’s horns aren’t very threatening) but who speaks like a dragon (meaning that it speaks lies) and who uses its false appearance to bring people to the worship of the first beast. The consensus here is that this beast represents the priests of the Imperial cult. They wouldn’t seem to hold any real power, yet they still exercise dominion over others through the requirement that all must participate in emperor worship. Though these aren’t the people carrying out the oppression of the Christians, they would surely have been the ones ferreting out and reporting dissenters to this civic requirement.



V13-14 Here, we are told of the ways that this beast holds power over the populace, primarily by trickery. It describes the use of idols (statues in the likeness of the emperor), magic tricks that seemed to animate the statues (this is a well-documented practice), the delivery of oracles.

The mark is a little unclear. Traditionally, slaves were tattooed to show their status and ownership, but though that was as many as half the people in the Roman Empire, it wasn't everyone. So, it may refer to a ritual marking that was seen as a counter to the sign of the cross marked at baptism. As to the number, 666, there are several theories linking that to systems which translate Latin or Greek names into Hebrew and since Hebrew doesn't have separate numerals, but uses letters, the names can be given a numerical value. The most common interpretation is that 666 refers to Nero, suggesting that John of Patmos was very greatly concerned about the belief in Nero's return.

## Revelation Chapter 14

This chapter contains three separate vision, each of which offers hope to the beleaguered people of God.

V1-5 The author's vision now shows him "the Lamb," which we have already been told is Jesus and now he has gone to Earth and is in Jerusalem, which ancient Jews and Christians both considered to be the center of the world. And with him are 144,000 especially devoted followers. Generally, it is assumed that these are the same 144,000 we encountered in Chapter 7 since they too were sealed on their foreheads as these are.

They sing a new song, that only they can sing. This fits with the belief that the ways of heaven are not necessarily understandable to mere mortals. Curiously we are also told that these are male virgins. Male virginity is not really a thing in the Bible. The closest we get is when Paul, in the seventh chapter of 1Corinthians says that while he is single, and commends it, if people do want to have sex, they should get married.

Generally speaking, the Bible's view on sex is that is a positive thing when it provides pleasure for the couple, increases the bonds in a relationship, and when it leads to procreation. When it falls outside of these parameters, as in a rape, then it is considered bad. The ideal state for sex, then, in this view would be heterosexual marriage, as it has the potential for fulfilling all three.

Culturally, female virginity prior to marriage and monogamy within marriage was privileged (less so for men) because it provided a higher confidence that the woman's children were also the husband's and ethnic purity was a BIG concern for the Israelites. Though today, Judaism is matrilineal, that seems to have been fully established after the destruction of the Temple.

V6-13 After seeing the vision of Jesus in Jerusalem, the author now describes a vision of three angels flying high in the sky, each bearing different but related messages.

The first angel bears the "eternal" gospel, which is not about the resurrection but is a call to repentance (similar to the message delivered to Nineveh in Jonah).

The second Angel announces the destruction Babylon, and by Babylon, we mean Rome. To some extent this is in code so that if someone from outside the Christian community read it, it wouldn't be immediately obvious that it is an anti-Imperial screed.

The third angel tells everyone that worshipping beast #1 will result in divine punishment. So, altogether, it's kind of a carrot and stick message.

But in verses 12 and 13 we see a message of hope for those who remained committed to Christ and who have not given in to the demands to the imperial cult.

V14-16 Here we see the Son of Man, on a cloud being commanded by an angel to harvest the faithful from the earth. The term Son of Man is sometimes used in the Hebrew Scriptures as a merely poetic way to say human, and in Ezekiel (and once in Daniel) to refer to an apocalyptic figure at the end of

time. Of course, Son of Man is a self-referential term used by Jesus in all four gospels. But it isn't clear here whether or not John of Patmos is meaning Jesus here or someone else, partly because he just referred to his vision of Jesus as the Lamb in Jerusalem, partly because it would be odd for an angel to give Jesus a command, and partly because in the following verses it says a second angel with a sickle appears (and then a third). Jesus himself also said that God would send His angels to reap the righteous at the end of time. So, its ambiguous at least but what really matters is that the faithful are being swept up into God's care.

Then two angels, also with sickles, work together to gather up the grape harvest and press it all on God's "wine press of wrath." This is another metaphor for judgment and derives from imagery in the prophet Isaiah where God refers to unleashing His wrath as being similar to those who tread grapes to make wine.

The LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, "See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him." They shall be called, "The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD"; and you shall be called, "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken." "Who is this that comes from Edom, from Bozrah in garments stained crimson? Who is this so splendidly robed, marching in his great might?" "It is I, announcing vindication, mighty to save." "Why are your robes red, and your garments like theirs who tread the wine press?" "I have trodden the wine press alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their juice spattered on my garments, and stained all my robes. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year for my redeeming work had come. I looked, but there was no helper; I stared, but there was no one to sustain me; so my own arm brought me victory, and my wrath sustained me. I trampled down peoples in my anger, I crushed them in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth." Isaiah 62:11-63:6

This isn't really all that different from what Jesus says;

"When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 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, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Luke 21:20-28