



REVELATION – GCI SERIES

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REVELATION: BOOK OF COSMIC SYMBOLS



To understand Revelation it is helpful to think of this writing as first and foremost a book of *symbols*. For example, we see the victorious Christ, riding on a horse (19:11-16). He wields a sword with which he smites the nations. That picture is symbolic of an *event* and divine power — the return of the Messiah, who destroys the forces of evil.



Revelation's symbols are often juxtaposed one against another. This use of comparison and contrast is seen throughout the book. In the middle chapters of Revelation, Satan's forces — the beast and false prophet — are pitted against God's earthly representative, the church. The book describes two ages of human existence, each contrary to the other. Satan, the dragon, is the remorseless adversary of God, and dominates this present world. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, rules a world of peace, popularly known as the millennium.



Revelation portrays and compares two opposing ways of life. Two symbols embody these conflicting lifestyles. A harlot pictures the deceived group, deluded by what's called her "spiritual fornication." This refers to her illicit spiritual liaisons with political rulers. Another group of people follows the Lamb, who is Jesus. These are called the spiritually pure Bride of Christ. The image of an enormous metropolis — Babylon the Great — stands for the corrupt system that seduces the world. Revelation contrasts this wicked city with the purity and perfection of the New Jerusalem. Ultimately, the latter stands for the ideal and eternal congregation of those who are faithful to Christ.



Even the promise to share in salvation is represented by this — worldly symbols. This use of



symbolism occurs in the seven letters to Christian congregations in the province of Asia. For example, the church in Ephesus is promised salvation by being told it will have **"the right to eat from the tree of life" (2:7)**. That is a metaphor for salvation and eternal life.

Norman Perrin clearly outlined this dualistic and symbolic structure of Revelation in which the spiritual realm, the church, and the world system are given their parts to play. He wrote:



At the pinnacle of power on one side is God, the Pantocrator, ruler of all (1:8). On the other is Satan, the Dragon, who has power, a throne, and great authority (13:2). Allied with God is the Lamb who was slain (5:6)... Allied with Satan is the beast from the sea (13:1-2). . . . All the people on the earth are divided into two groups; those who have the seal of God on their foreheads and whose names are in the book of life (3:5, 12; 7:3; 20:4; 21:27; 22:4) and those who bear the mark of the beast and worship it (9:4; 13:8, 17; 14:9-11; 16:2; 20:15). There is also a sharp contrast between the luxurious and voluptuous harlot, who represents Babylon, the earthly city of abominations (ch.17) and the pure bride of the Lamb, who symbolizes Jerusalem, the heavenly city of salvation (19:7-8; 21: 2, 9-11). This literary tension reflects the political tension between the adherents of the kingdom of God and those of the kingdom of Caesar (11:15; 12:10; 16:10; 17:18) (*Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, p. 142).



To the modern western world, Revelation's symbols seem weird and alien. They include a multi-headed dragon; two strange beasts; a city shaped like a cube 1,500 miles high, wide and long; marks on heads and right hands; a figure's mouth with a sword emerging from it, and so on.

These symbols were not strange to John's original audience for whom the book was written. Revelation drew on commonly known pagan myths, Old Testament and Jewish typologies, as well as New Testament Christian traditions and beliefs. These symbols were generally understood to refer to spiritual truths and historical realities. For example, in the Roman world of John's time there were various stories about a god of heaven slaying the sea monster.

Some of Revelation's symbols played off of such myths circulating in the pagan world. However, the book's symbols are heavily based on Old Testament themes, which in turn had been reinterpreted by Jewish apocalyptic literature.

In Revelation, the meanings of symbols existing in the Jewish and pagan world were again reinterpreted in the light of the Christian's experience in Christ. The point is that the symbols were not strange codes that one had to have special knowledge to understand. It's safe to say John's readers knew what he meant. In the words of G. B. Caird:

The first readers were almost certainly well versed in the sort of symbolic language and imagery in which the book is written. Whether they had formerly been Jews or pagans, they would read the language of myth as fluently as any modern reader of the daily papers reads the conventional symbols of a political cartoon. Much of this language we can reconstruct for ourselves from the Old Testament and Jewish apocalyptic writings on the one hand and from Greek and Roman literature, inscriptions, and coinage on the other (Black's New Testament Commentaries, "A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine," 2nd edition, p. 6).

This makes sense if we consider a type of modern graphic genre, the political cartoon. G. R. Beasley-Murray calls the political cartoon "the closest modern parallel" to Revelation's symbols (*The New Century Bible Commentary, "Revelation,"* p. 17).

Political cartoons use stereotyped images. Beasley-Murray gives some examples of modern cartoon symbols. Two examples are John Bull, who represents the temper of Britain, and Uncle Sam, the spirit of the United States. The lion also represents Britain and the eagle the United States. Two other symbols are the bear for Russia and the dragon for China.

Often these and other political figures are drawn as caricatures. Says Beasley-Murray, "*Frequently the situations depicted are deliberately exaggerated, and even made grotesque, in order that the message may be made plain*" (*The New Century Bible Commentary, "Revelation,"* p. 17). The operative word here is plain. That's what the symbols of Revelation were to John's congregations. They were plain, simple and quickly understood. Beasley-Murray explains the point further:

The symbols by which the contemporary political forces and the spiritual powers of heaven and hell are portrayed [in Revelation] were as traditional as Britannia and the British lion, the Russian bear, and the Chinese dragon.... What to the uninitiated modern reader appears grotesque imagery, spoke with power to John's fellow Christians (The New Century Bible Commentary, p. 17).

Most people are familiar with George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, in which animals speak. The book itself is a political-social statement about the excesses of political leadership and the subjugation of the weak. We do not think the book bizarre because animals talk in it. We know it is symbolic. We also readily understand the meaning of Orwell's symbols — and enjoy them. In fact, it was precisely because of the form in which *Animal Farm* was written that has made it a timeless piece of literature.

There are several lessons in this for us. First, we should not consider Revelation strange or bizarre. The book was probably easy to understand, extremely interesting and thoroughly meaningful to the original readers. If we can put ourselves in their place, this biblical writing can be all these things to us as well.

Second, we should not force Revelation's symbols into a literal mode. If the book is a kind of painting of God's purpose, it is much more expressionistic or impressionistic than realistic. In the words of George Eldon Ladd: "*Apocalyptic language does not convey its message in precise photographic style, but more in the style of modern surrealist art with great fluidity and imagination*" (*A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p. 111). Ladd explains that Revelation's symbols are "*not meant to be photographs of objective facts; they are often symbolic representations of almost unimaginable spiritual realities,*" p. 102.

M. Eugene Boring explains it this way:

*Many of the scenes John describes simply cannot be imaged. Not only can they not be placed on a canvas or movie screen, they cannot be placed on the screen of the mind. The vision of the exalted Christ in **1:12-16**, for example, simply becomes grotesque if one attempts to understand it as a reporter's account of what John actually saw in the objective world (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, "Revelation," p. 54).*

Here Christ is pictured as speaking through a mouth out of which a sharp double-edged sword protrudes. If an attempt is made to understand the anthropomorphic picture of Christ in Revelation 1 as a literal representation of what he looks like, this part of the portrait admittedly is bizarre. The portrait becomes meaningful only if we understand John's portrayal of the sword as a symbol of the sharpness and power of God's word ([Hebrews 4:12](#); [Ephesians 6:17](#)).

Of course, we need to be careful about overly allegorizing Revelation, as much as we need to avoid a strict literalism. As mentioned, this was probably not a difficulty John's original readers faced. They knew the situation in which they lived and the meaning of the symbols. But we are divorced from both. In the words of G. B. Caird: *Our difficulties begin when we try to decide how far to take this picture language literally and how far to take it figuratively. When John echoes the Roman legend that the dead Nero was about to return, how literally does he mean it? Does he believe that Nero was not in fact dead, or that he would be resurrected, or that another paranoiac would come to fill his empty shoes? (Black's New Testament Commentaries, "A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine," 2nd edition, p. 7).*

In one sense, these issues are only of historical importance, vital only to John's original readers. But if that was all that Revelation's symbols pictured — that is, events, situations and people in John's day — they would have little meaning for us.

However, since Revelation uses symbols to represent spiritual realities, the book has universal meaning for all times and generations. Having said this, another caution is in order. We should not dismiss the historical context and meaning of the symbols, nor their possible application to specific situations and individuals. These, however, are not the primary meanings.

The point is, symbols can have different kinds of meaning. The symbol "bear" can have a simple meaning when referring to Russia. That is, bear = Russia. On another level, the bear says something about the kind of political power the nation embodies. On a third level, "bear," already known to be symbolic of a lumbering political giant, can stand for all such empires—including perhaps the massive ancient Persian empire.

The American flag can be described as composed of 13 stripes and 50 stars. That is what the flag is, literally. It also is a symbol representing 13 original colonies and 50 states. The American flag also represents the nation. That is, when we see the flag, we think "United States." But the American flag waving in the breeze during a patriotic parade represents something much more. It symbolizes a concept — a big idea — the pride of being an American. In the same way, Revelation's symbols can have various kinds and levels of meanings. Its symbols are not what are called "steno-symbols," that is those that have only a single reference point. For example, if the symbol "bear" were such a symbol it could only be a nickname for the nation. But as we saw, the "bear" symbol has diverse meanings on several levels.

Revelation's symbols are often what are called "tensive" symbols. They are open-ended to some degree in that they can represent several conceptions or ideas. For example, if the first beast of Revelation 13 can be identified with the city of Rome in John's day, this does not exhaust its meaning. The tensive symbol "beast" may also represent the Roman Empire, or refer to a specific individual such as the emperor Nero or Domitian. "Beast" may also stand for all human empires that oppress Christians.

G. B. Caird is correct when he says that it is, "*Misleading to say that in Revelation the monster is Rome, and still more misleading to say that it is ruler worship. The monster is both an older and a newer phenomenon than Caesar, and the great city is more ancient and more modern than Rome*" (*Black's New Testament Commentaries*, "A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine," 2nd edition, p. xii).

It's important to understand that Revelation speaks of concepts that deal with an ultimate reality about which we have no direct experience or knowledge. That's why it uses symbols and why the book can indicate earthly and heavenly realities only in extremely rough outline.

To cite an example, God is pictured as sitting on a heavenly throne in Revelation. The throne represents, in symbol, to us who are limited to this physical world, the glory, the lordship and universal authority of God. Admittedly, the throne symbol is a rather poor reflection of God's universal supremacy. But those are the limitations of human language and our experiential knowledge of God.

Some commentators suggest that the symbols Revelation used were not readily understood by those of John's time. This idea claims John used coded language so that the criticism it contained of the Roman government would be kept secret from outsiders.

However, the average reader would have quite easily picked out the possible references to Rome. For example, Jews typically equated Rome with Babylon in apocalyptic writings. It was also common knowledge that Rome was the city built on seven hills. Both images are used in Revelation.

Assuming the Roman police were of at least average intelligence and could read, it hardly seems they would have missed this. M. Eugene Boring points out that the mere reference to God or Christ as king (11:15) would have clearly appeared subversive to Roman authorities.

On the other hand, only a small portion of Revelation's material could be construed as applying to Rome. Then, if John's use of symbolic material was meant to confound the Roman secret police, why is virtually *all* of the book written in symbolic, apocalyptic form?

Whatever the answer, John's purpose is clearly stated: it is to reveal, not conceal. M. Eugene Boring points out: "*With reference to the Roman government, John does not veil whom he means; he writes to reveal the essential nature of Roman power, which was not at all obvious to many members of John's churches*" (*Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, "Revelation," p. 55).

We must again remind ourselves that Revelation is not written as an attack against the outside world. It is written to be read in the church — the worshipful community of the saints. The book would not be that concerned with outsiders' reactions.

But the book is not simply a straightforward letter such as a Colossians or 1 Peter. Revelation seeks to create a symbolic world for its readers and to put them into it. The book attempts to create for them the same wonder and awe that John experienced. In modern language, we might call Revelation a "virtual reality" experience. In the words of G. B. Caird: *John uses his allusions not as a code in which each symbol requires separate and exact translation, but rather for their evocative and emotive power. This is not photographic art. His aim is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing* (Black's New Testament Commentaries, "A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine," 2nd edition, p. 26).

In conclusion, Revelation does not have as its primary purpose the aim of providing the curiosity seeker with information to bolster speculations about an apocalyptic "end-time." The symbols in the book are meant to bring forth a response on the part of God's people of continued faith in Jesus Christ as Lord of creation, the world and the church.

Author: Paul Kroll

REVELATION: REVELATION IT'S NO MYSTERY

The book of Revelation holds special interest for many Christians. With its strange, many-headed monsters and mystifying symbols, Revelation has provided through the centuries the raw material for a myriad of equally strange and mystifying interpretations and predictions.

From the second century on, every succeeding generation of Christians has had its prophecy pundits who claimed to understand and rightly "interpret" Revelation's symbols as referring to nations and events in their particular day and "proving" that Christ would return in their generation. And all of them were wrong.

Our generation is no different. With a Bible in one hand, newspaper clippings in the other and a wall full of maps behind, our modern pushers of prediction ad-diction use the power of electronic media to give the 1900-year-old message of the book of Revelation a new scramble and generate big dollars in donations to get out their "urgent" message before it's "too late."

But how *should* Revelation be interpreted? To whom was it written and why? What is its real message for Christians today?

"What must soon take place"

Most biblical scholars agree that Revelation was written sometime in the late first century after the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Jewish Temple (A.D. 70). The intense persecution against Christians in Rome launched by the Roman emperor Nero would have been at least a recent vivid memory for believers, and renewed abuse by Roman authorities was an ever-present fear. Christian hope was understandably challenged by the stories of Roman Christians being rounded up and imprisoned, butchered, fed to lions in the arena, enslaved, or smeared with tar and burned as human torches on crosses along Roman roadsides.

The author of Revelation describes himself as John, writing as an exile on an island in the Aegean Sea called Patmos, located off the coast of what is today south-western Turkey. His purpose is simple: "...to show his [Jesus'] servants what must soon take place" ([Revelation 1:1](#)). In other words, the author was writing about events of his day, not about the flow of history through the centuries and millennia to come after him.

Apparently, however, it's no fun to believe that Revelation was actually about things that were to take place "soon" after the book was written. Here we are, 19 centuries later, still trying to find ways to interpret it as having been written for our day.

Apocalyptic style

The name of the book of Revelation is taken from its first verse: "The revelation of Jesus Christ." The word *revelation* is translated from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which means "unveiling" or "revealing."

Another term for the book of Revelation, "The Apocalypse," comes from this Greek word. In modern English, *apocalypse* has come to imply "disaster" or "appalling destruction." Yet the original word simply referred to an unfolding, or opening, of events that, in the case of John's book, were to come to pass in the near future.

John chose to write in a special literary style well known to Jews and early Christians called "apocalyptic." Apocalyptic uses fantastic images and symbols to describe God's judgment and victory over the oppressors of his people and all evil. It was popular during the last two centuries B.C. and the first century A.D. The symbols and figures in apocalyptic writing were not to be taken literally, but were to be understood in the context of the apocalyptic style, similar to the way we might understand the symbolism of a political cartoon today.

The symbols found in Revelation might appear strange to Christians of later centuries, and they have certainly been the subject of great debate and mystery. But John used them because they were understood by the Christians of his day.

Revelation was not a riddle book to enable Christians of future generations to decipher when Jesus would return. It was a book of hope and encouragement to Christians of the first century,

written to assure them that in spite of all evidence to the contrary, Jesus Christ had already won the final victory over all tyrants and tyranny.

Even if the faithful saints must face martyrdom at the hands of the enemies of God, Revelation assures its readers, in time they will be vindicated, raised from the dead in glory and reign with Christ. Therefore, Revelation urges, the faithful should trust Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and resist any temptation to give their allegiance to those who stand against him.

Message for today

That message has the same striking force for Christians today. Whatever despots arise, wherever tyranny takes hold, Christians are assured by the message of Revelation that the day of their deliverance and vindication is coming. **“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (21:4).**

Jesus has already won the victory over the devil and all forms of devilish oppression. Though the faithful might die at the hands of the wicked, their place with the risen and victorious Lamb of God is assured. Whenever throughout history Christians have faced persecution and oppression, even as many do today in various parts of the world, they have found John’s apocalyptic book a source of great faith-building joy.

Revelation is a message of hope to all Christians through every century who find themselves walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Because Jesus reigns, every believer’s story, no matter how dismal it might be in the present, will end triumphantly.

“I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away’” ([Revelation 21:3-4](#)).

Not so mysterious

And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. ([Rev. 13:13](#))

What on earth does that mean?

Many scholars, preachers and religious hobbyists, of course, have been painting the symbolism of Revelation with all sorts of creative interpretations for nearly two thousand years. But it’s helpful for us to take note that all these seemingly baffling symbols would have made perfect sense to the people for whom Revelation was originally written. A modern counterpart might be political cartoons, whose exaggerated or even wildly distorted symbols and caricatures make perfect sense to us today.

Political cartoons use stereotyped images. G. R. Beasley-Murray calls the political cartoon “the closest modern parallel” to Revelation’s symbols (*Revelation, The New Century Bible Commentary*, p. 17). For example, there is John Bull, who represents the temper of Britain, and Uncle Sam, the spirit of the United States. The lion also represents Britain and the eagle the United States. Two other symbols are the Russian bear and the Chinese dragon.

Often these and other political figures are drawn as caricatures. Says Beasley-Murray, “Frequently the situations depicted are deliberately exaggerated, and even made grotesque, in order that the message may be made plain.” The operative word here is plain. That’s what the symbols of Revelation were to John’s congregations. They were plain, simple and quickly understood. Beasley-Murray explains the point further:



“The symbols by which the contemporary political forces and the spiritual powers of heaven and hell are portrayed [in Revelation] were as traditional as Britannia and the British lion, the Russian bear, and the Chinese dragon.... What to the uninitiated modern reader appears grotesque imagery, spoke with power to John’s fellow Christians.”

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meaning of Orwell’s symbols — and enjoy them. In fact, it was precisely because of the form in which *Animal Farm* was written that has made it a timeless piece of literature.

There are several lessons in this. First, we should not consider Revelation strange or bizarre. To its original readers, the book was easy to understand, extremely interesting and thoroughly meaningful. If we look for the overarching message to all Christians instead of the specific details intended for first-century believers, Revelation can be all those things to us as well.

Five keys to unlocking the strange book of Revelation

1. Revelation was written to encourage late first-century Christians in the wake of severe persecution.
2. It was written in a special literary style understood by first-century Christians and characterized by fantastic beasts and mystical symbols set in a titanic battle between good and evil.
3. Its message is consistent with the rest of Scripture, a declaration of the good news of Jesus Christ and a call for patience in faith as believers await their vindication and glory.
4. Its central figure is the slain, risen, victorious Jesus Christ.
5. Its central theme is the ultimate salvation of the saints.

Thomas Torrance: Apocalypse or Revelation is the unveiling of history already invaded and conquered by the Lamb of God. Apocalypse means the unveiling of new creation. At its very heart Revelation means the unveiling of Jesus Christ.

— *The Apocalypse Today*

Gordon Fee: Revelation is a Christian prophecy cast in apocalyptic style and imagery and finally put in letter form, dealing primarily with tribulation (suffering) and salvation for God’s people and God’s wrath (judgment) on the Roman Empire.

— *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*

G. B. Caird: John uses his allusions not as a code in which each symbol requires separate and exact translation, but rather for their evocative and emotive power. This is not photographic art. His aim is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing.... The first readers were almost certainly well versed in the sort of symbolic language and imagery in which the book is written. Whether they had formerly been Jews or pagans, they would read the language of myth as fluently as any modern reader of the daily papers reads the conventional symbols of a political cartoon.

— *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine (Black’s New Testament Commentaries)*

Ben Witherington III: Indeed if one is a student of the history of the interpretation of Revelation, one recognizes a near 100 percent failure rate when matching up images and events in Revelation with particular historical figures.
— *Revelation (New Cambridge Bible Commentary)*

Craig S. Keener: John’s symbolic language is meant as evocative imagery, to elicit particular responses, rather than as a detailed literal picture of events.
— *The IVP Bible Background Commentary (New Testament)*

M. Eugene Boring: Revelation has continued to speak directly to the church in times and places where Christians with no political or economic power have experienced inhuman cruelty, such as the Nazi era in Europe or the church today in countries governed by oppressive dictatorships. Response to the message of Revelation is an expression of faith in the faithfulness of God in a situation which gives no indication of it in this world.
— *Revelation (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*

PS Another view of when the Book of Revelation was written:

“When did John have this experience conveyed in the Revelation? Somewhere between A.D. 92 and 96, most likely in 96. In A.D. 92 difficult times became more difficult. Persecution in the Roman Empire had already begun in A.D. 65 under Emperor

Nero and intensified in 67 A.D. under the Emperor Vespasian. Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70 Peter and Paul had been crucified, Timothy murdered. But in A.D. 92 things got worse. Domitian was the Emperor. He was a profoundly insecure man (as most tyrants are). To compensate for his insecurity, he ordered all citizens and subject of the Roman Empire to worship him as Lord and God, Dominus et Deus. He changed the name of the Roman empire to "Eternal Empire" and called himself "Everlasting King." All citizens and subjects were to go to the temple built in his honour, take a pinch of incense, throw it on the fire of the altar and say Caesar Kurios, "Caesar is Lord." Domitian did not care what else people believed as long as they did this "little act of worship," an act of worship which was the glue that held his empire together. (From *DISCIPLESHIP ON THE EDGE and Expository Journey Through the Book of Revelation* by Darrell W. Johnson pages 23-24)

REVELATION: 1,900 YEARS OF REVELATION

The mark of the beast. Armageddon. The Four Horsemen.

666. Babylon the great. The seven last plagues.

The bottomless pit. The lake of fire.

These images of terror and catastrophe from the book of Revelation have greatly influenced the popular psyche. Even the secular press uses images such as "armageddon" and "four horsemen of the apocalypse" to describe calamities in our world.

Misunderstood book

Despite almost 1,900 years of fascination with the book of Revelation – A.D. 96 is often suggested as a date for the book – John's letter to the churches in his care continues to be misunderstood. And badly misinterpreted. One popular misconception is that Revelation has nothing of importance to say to us. It's considered to be merely a bizarre piece of first-century writing with no relevance for today. Another wrong idea is that Revelation is a codebook describing a specific outline of history written in advance. Countless interpreters have tried to "decode" the book as a handbook for predicting the end of the world.

This is not new. About the middle of the second century, a newly baptized Christian named Montanus claimed to have charismatic gifts. He taught that the church had entered the final age. Montanus and his followers predicted that the end of the world was near. The new Jerusalem was about to descend upon the nearby village of Pepuza, in what is now Turkey.

Montanus and his followers drew support for such ideas in large part from the book of Revelation. Montanus' influence spread rapidly and widely among Christians throughout the Roman world. But the prophecy of Montanus failed. By misinterpreting Revelation, he tarnished the book's reputation to the point that some Christians thought it shouldn't be in the Bible.

The claims of Christian groups from Montanus to the present – that Revelation pinpoints the events, personalities and time period of "the end" – have all failed. This should be a caution for Christians against using the book of Revelation as a predictive handbook.

For the church

We miss a lot by not reading carefully the first chapter of this magnificent vision. It is a message from Jesus Christ to his apostle John to pass on to seven churches in Asia Minor, in what is today western Turkey: "**On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: 'Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea'**" ([Revelation 1:10-11](#)).

Many people forget that Revelation is written by a church pastor to his churches – to Christians, to those who believe in and accept Jesus Christ and to those who are suffering because of their faith. John is their companion in suffering (**verse 9**). Revelation had life-and-death meaning for its first hearers because it was written specifically to them. It addressed John's brothers and sisters about dire problems. Some were being persecuted, tortured and even beheaded, as clearly indicated in [Revelation 20:4](#). These believers needed to be reminded that ultimate victory in this world belongs to those who pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ, not the emperor in Rome.

So Revelation is written to Christians who live in an often brutal world. In that sense, its message applies to all of us. Essentially, Revelation says we must overcome the world rather than allow it to overcome us ([Revelation 3:21](#)). By using seven church congregations – the number seven often depicted completion to the ancients – John suggests that the spiritual problems and emergencies facing these churches were to be considered representative of Christians throughout the Roman Empire. And by extension, these problems can be seen as threats that Christians in all places and ages must confront.

An urgent appeal

The message to the churches was simple but urgent. Christians in Asia were being challenged to walk through life as witnesses to the truth, even to the point of death. The church members, though, were experiencing their own internal crises, as chapters 2 and 3 make clear. Internal problems besetting the seven churches paralleled the spiritual state of a world in the grip of evil.

John's vision illustrates the consequences of the world's spiritual failing, through judgments such as the seven last plagues. But Christians warned about these judgments as well ([Revelation 18:4-5](#)). Revelation tells the church how to escape God's judgment on the world. The church must be in the world and deal with it, but it must not be of the world.

The message of Revelation is that the church must clean up its own spiritual house, do something about its weak spiritual state and take a stand against state persecution. The church must confront the evil in the world pictured by the beast and Babylon. When the church successfully resists the world's evil allure (and the devil behind it), it witnesses to the truth that God exists and that he rules over all.

One of the earliest Christian confessions of faith was, "Jesus is Lord" ([Romans 10:9](#)). Revelation was written to bolster that conviction. It pointed in visionary and symbolic language to the "unseen hand" of God. It is God, the book insists, who decides the fate of nations and history. The beast and Babylon attain significance only as opponents of what Jesus Christ is doing. History revolves around him, not the woman who rides the scarlet-colored beast.

Jesus Christ rules

When John was inspired to depict the future judgment of the beast and the tormentors of the church, it was his way of saying: God is in charge. Jesus Christ is Lord and he will, ultimately, bring his presence to bear on the world. This world of politics and powers is only a stage for the acting out of God's work of redemption.

Revelation's symbolic portrayal of judgment on the world is meant to be a word to the wise as well as a tremendous encouragement. The daily struggles and setbacks of Christians, their battles with faith and temptations to despair – all of this must be understood in terms of the cosmic conflict being fought in the heavenly realm.

Calling all Christians

Revelation answers the question: Who is Lord? The churches John wrote to suffered under evil rulers ([Revelation 2:12-13](#)) and from their own human failings ([Revelation 3:17](#)). The wicked seemed to flourish. Why? Where was God and why hadn't he rescued his people? Why be a Christian in such a world?

These are the uncertainties Revelation deals with. They are issues we wonder about as well. Revelation answers these questions for us today as it did for the church in the first century. The book insists that, despite appearances to the contrary, God rules. He will ultimately end the evil that seems to hold sway in our world. The church is to stay focused on the almighty God, who is the ruler of the universe, and to the Lamb, who has saved them.

The church may seem powerless on earth – and it is, of itself. But the slain Jesus was glorified, and is at the right hand of the Father, controlling the world's destiny. This Christ is not only Lord of the world but also Lord and Savior of the church.

Faith in God's sovereignty over all things – including evil – is the decisive theme and emphasis of Revelation. After 1,900 years, it is still ahead of its time.

Paul Kroll

Listen to the Music

By Paul Kroll & Neil Earle

Revelation has its roots sunk deep in the powerful rhythms of ancient Near Eastern language and life. R.H. Charles, in his two-volume work, *Revelation*, in the International Critical Commentary, enjoyed Revelation 1 on its own terms. He listened to the music. In so doing, he noted the important repetitive pattern of "threes," a pattern that symbolizes, to the Hebrew mind, certainty and confirmation.

Charles knew that in the ancient Near East, literary form was almost as important as content. The form was a key to the meaning. Imaginative speech of the kind we inadequately label "poetry" in English, attractive rhyme schemes and repetition, and colorful symbolism – these features of Hebrew writing send us verbal cues about how we should read the book.

The creativity is obvious. For example, God uses "the tree of life" from Genesis 2 as the motif for [Revelation 22:2](#). Also, the victorious saints in heaven sing "the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb" ([Revelation 15:3](#)). This is why Hebrew thought structures pervade the book. The 404 verses in Revelation contain several hundred references to the Old Testament.

Patterns of threes

In Revelation, the patterns are set up starting in verse 1. The Revelation is 1) from God 2) through Christ 3) to his servants. Christ (1) in turn sent it by 2) an angel to 3) his servant John – a double pattern of threes.

Most modern translations, except the New International Version and the New English Bible, follow the King James Version in presenting a threefold rhythm in verse 2, referring to John's witness to "the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, and to all things that he saw."

Blessed, John continues in verse 3, is

1. the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and
2. blessed are those who hear it and
3. take to heart what is written in it.

In verse 4, John sends greetings

1. from him who is, and who was, and who is to come (three!), and
2. from the seven spirits before his throne, and
3. from Jesus Christ, who is
 1. the faithful witness,
 2. the firstborn from the dead, and
 3. the ruler of the kings of the earth.

In verses 5 and 6, Jesus Christ is exalted because he

1. loves us and
2. has freed us from our sins by his blood, and
3. has made us to be a kingdom and priests.

In verse 7, we encounter a form of Hebrew poetry whereby subsequent phrases fill out the meaning of the leading thought. For example, the point "Look, he is coming with the clouds" is amplified thus:

1. and every eye will see him,
2. even those who pierced him; and
3. all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.

In verse 8, we again meet a triple declaration of Jesus Christ as the Alpha and the Omega. He is described as he "who is, and who was, and who is to come."

John makes a threefold declaration in describing the "suffering and kingdom and patient endurance" that are ours in Jesus Christ (**verse 9**).

Observing these threefold repetitions in Revelation helps us to appreciate the music of the book as well as its message. It deepens our understanding of the force and power of the inspired Scripture. Revelation is not only authoritative and inspired; it is beautiful. Let's enjoy it in all its rich dimensions.

This article was written by Paul Kroll in 1996 and updated in 2013. Copyright Grace Communion International.

Author: Paul Kroll and Neil Earle

REVELATION : A VISION OF VICTORY

In a time of declining faith, we need the Revelation message
Living faith in God is one of the burning issues of our time. That's because for all practical purposes God is dead to many Christians. They may profess to believe in God, but they think and live as if he did not exist.

Such a crisis of faith among Christians is not new. The first-century church also had its own problems of faith. Like today, some Christians of that time were dying spiritually. Many Christians were pressured to compromise with the pagan society they lived in. Many in the church were enticed by the alluring immoral world to break faith with God.

The church was small, persecuted and hated. At times violent persecution tried the church's faith. With the passage of time, expectations that Jesus would return soon gradually diminished. With uncertainty and evil abounding, the church was asking two faith-related questions: Why hasn't Jesus returned as promised (2 [Peter 3:4](#))? How long must the suffering go on ([Revelation 6:10](#))?

False teachers, meanwhile, advised accommodation with pagan beliefs and Roman politics. They led many converts away from Christ and back into the world.

Then a book we know as Revelation or the Apocalypse was written to encourage the church and to restore the faith of the members. Most conservative scholars believe the book of Revelation was written about A.D. 96.

Seven short, stylized letters in chapters 2 and 3 graphically describe the major faith-destroying ideas gripping the church. These letters, written to seven churches in what is now western Turkey, address problems symptomatic of the church as a whole.

We don't know whether most of the members in the first-century churches accepted the urging of Revelation to become rejuvenated in their faith. But those Christians who took the book to heart would have experienced the power of renewed faith.

Although Revelation was written to the late first-century church, its message speaks to us as well. The book can help stir us to a powerful faith in God. The message of Revelation helps us understand that Christ is the foundation of our faith.

Vital message

Revelation's main concern is with spiritual survival. It reveals how the church can survive in a hostile world. The book proclaims the wonderful, faith-building news that, despite appearances to the contrary, God is in charge of history, the world and our lives.

Revelation assures us of a future in which evil will end, even though we may not personally live to see it. The book tells us that the many adversities and sufferings Christians endure are not in vain. Christians may suffer in this life, but in the end the returning Christ will judge the world and save his people.

The final message of Revelation is that God will intervene in human history through Christ and forever eliminate evil and reward the faithful. It tells us the future belongs to those who put their faith in the crucified and glorified Savior of humanity — Jesus Christ.

J. Ramsey Michaels, professor of religious studies at Southwest Missouri State University, puts it well: "*At the heart of the Book of Revelation is a story, the same gospel story that echoes throughout the entire New Testament, about a slain Lamb victorious over death and evil and a God who makes everything new*" (*Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, page 147).

Lord of history

Revelation encourages persecuted and suffering Christians to find strength and hope in God's power, love and justice. To this end, in the book's fourth chapter, God is pictured figuratively as sitting on the throne of the universe ([Revelation 4:1-11](#)).

Timeless Themes

Many see Revelation mainly as a forecast of specific events that can be pinpointed in our day. But Revelation does not offer — nor has it ever offered — a blueprint of future events.

Revelation was originally written to help the first-century church with its spiritual concerns. However, its message is applicable to all Christians at all times.

Revelation explains God's purpose and the causes of the world's problems, giving assurance and hope to those who follow God's will. Its main themes include:

1. God is Supreme Ruler.
2. Jesus is the Lamb of God who was slain to redeem his people.
3. Jesus is worthy of worship
4. Jesus is the Judge of the living and the dead. His final judgment of the nations will take place after his second coming.
5. God's faithful people must live in a spiritually corrupt world until Jesus returns. In spite of trials, his people remain spiritually secure.
6. Christians must remain faithful in their trials and not give their allegiance to the corrupt world characterized by "Babylon the Great."
7. The patience and faithfulness of the suffering saints will result in their receiving a glorious inheritance at the return of Jesus Christ.

In the fifth chapter, we see Jesus Christ, the Lamb, who has made salvation possible ([Revelation 5:1-14](#)). He is the key to the book of Revelation and safeguards the destiny of the church. Chapter 5 closes with a chorus of praise for the glorified Christ: **“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (verse 12).**

Revelation tells us Jesus Christ has won the victory over every evil. Through every trial, even death, his people are spiritually safe and secure through faith in him. Thus, the book of Revelation answers the question every Christian has asked: Where is God, and why are we suffering?

The book of Revelation reaches across the centuries to lift the hopes of those who trust in Christ the Lamb, and exhorts them to persevere. It has provided hope for many generations of Christians.

Victory proclaimed

That same message motivates those who follow Jesus Christ today. No matter what happens to the church, God knows the needs of his people. Even though some are killed for their faith, he will vindicate the cause of the righteous. Despite appearances to the contrary, God rules in human affairs, and he will bring his people through every trial. Revelation proclaims the joy of salvation in the midst of a turbulent and corrupt world. It focuses on the reality of the eternal kingdom of God — the new Jerusalem — in which **“there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain”** ([Revelation 21:4](#)).

God will then be with all his people in a final way when the kingdoms of the world will become the kingdom of Jesus Christ ([Revelation 11:15](#)). Until then, as members of the body of Christ, the church, we must be patient — follow God — keep the faith — trust him to work out his wonderful plan — and **“wait a little longer”** ([Revelation 6:11](#)).

Worthy Is the Lamb

One of the most paradoxical parts of Revelation is John’s vision of the lion followed immediately by a slain lamb. As the vision opens in [Revelation 5:1-5](#), John is told that the Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed to open the scroll sealed with seven seals.

But as John looks for a lion, he sees a lamb instead (**verse 6**). It is a grisly sight, for the lamb appears to have been slaughtered. This is the first occurrence of lamb imagery in Revelation. It’s as though the image has been kept for its dramatic entrance precisely until this point.

The Lamb is Revelation’s defining title for Christ. This lamb imagery, in turn, is connected to the Old Testament book of Isaiah. The imagery is central to the prophecy of the suffering servant in [Isaiah 53](#). There the future sacrifice for sin is pictured as a lamb being led to the slaughter. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy, for he was the Lamb of God sacrificed for the sins of the world.

In the book of Revelation, this lamb metaphor has a double image. It tells us the slaughtered Lamb is coming a second time as the Word of God’s wrath to deal with all who oppose him ([Revelation 6:16](#); [19:7, 9, 11-16](#)).

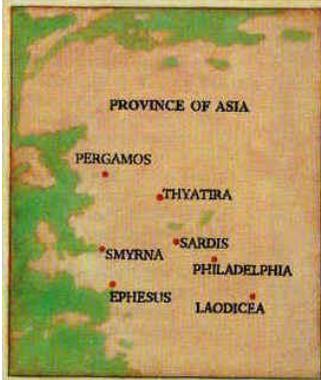
But Jesus Christ, the Lamb, first shed his own blood. That is what makes him worthy to open the scroll and reveal the message of the book of Revelation. The angelic hosts of heaven praise the Lamb, saying he is worthy to open the book’s meaning because he was killed. With his blood he purchased people for God **“from every tribe and language and people and nation”** ([Revelation 5:9](#)).

Thus, there is a paradox about the picture in Revelation 5. Though its central figure has triumphed (the Lion), he appears to have been conquered and killed (the Lamb). Jesus overcame the world by sacrificing himself. His supreme act of triumph was accomplished by shedding his own blood ([Revelation 1:5](#); [5:9](#); [7:14](#); [12:11](#)).

Jesus’ death as the Lamb of God gained a victory over the cosmic powers in opposition to God. The Lamb of God defeated Satan, sin and the power of the grave. That is the message of Revelation 5: Jesus has won the victory over his enemies by sacrificing his life as the Lamb. Through this act he is worthy to return as the “Lion” to rule the nations. Thus, Jesus as Lamb tells Christians — his lambs — that they are to suffer the outrageous darts of their oppression in patience. They must be submissive to God and place their unswerving allegiance with him. He will vindicate the cause of those whose faith remains in him.

Author: Paul Kroll, 1995, 2013

REVELATION: SEVEN LETTERS TO SEVEN CHURCHES



Revelation's seven letters to seven congregations in the Roman province of Asia provide us with a glimpse into the spiritual condition of the apostolic and post-apostolic church in a major crossroads area of the Roman world. It has generally been thought that Revelation was written around A.D. 100, though some scholars believe the book may have been written much earlier, in the mid-60s of the first century A.D.

In either case, the problems of faith found in some of the congregations should give us great pause. Since the church of the apostles and succeeding generation was beset by the spiritual crises described in Revelation 2-3, then we must also ask ourselves as Christians about our own faithfulness to the Savior. On the other hand, some of the congregations exhibited characteristics greatly praised by Jesus. This is a cause for much encouragement.

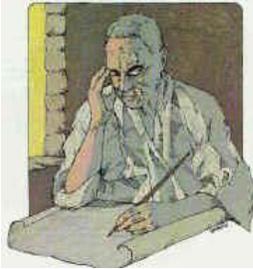
Thus, if we take to heart both the admonitions about the spiritual weaknesses and praise for the strengths of these congregations we can be both sobered and inspired. Finally, by meditating on the assurance of the promise of salvation given to each church by our Savior, we can receive comfort, joy and peace in our lives.

Message to the "seven angels" of the churches

The last verse of the first chapter provides an introduction to the messages of the seven churches, which were located in the Roman province of Asia (today, southwestern Turkey) (1:20). Chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation contain seven letters to these church congregations. These were not the only churches in the area, but these seven letters give us a picture of the spiritual condition of the church in the Roman province of Asia at the time the book was written.

The fact that Revelation is written to real congregations of Christians places the book squarely in the real world of human beings. The letters were written to seven churches that existed at a particular time in history. Real people with strengths and problems like our own made up their congregations. These are letters, not prophecies of the future. Each of the seven letters begins with Jesus speaking to members of his church. One of several attributes of his majesty, given in the first chapter, is repeated and placed at the heading of each letter. The descriptive phrase chosen from the vision is appropriate to each specific church. When such phrases run out, other pertinent statements regarding Christ's attributes are used.

The letters respectively commend the churches for their strong spiritual works and reprimand them about their specific spiritual problems. Forceful warnings to repent are given to those who are spiritually weak, along with encouragement to persevere in the faith. The letters also contain promises to those who overcome – promises of great assurance about their eternal life in the kingdom of God. These promises are given in symbolic terms.



Each letter concludes with the same statement: "**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches...**" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). The word here is "churches," in the plural. This implies that the words written to each congregation are meant to apply to *all seven churches*. This means that the seven individual church messages were meant for *all* the congregations in Asia of John's day – and, by extension, for the entire church of the time.

We could also infer that the spiritual condition of these seven congregations is characteristic of every group of Christians during the last 1900 years. Certainly,

God's people in all ages should be concerned about the spiritual problems described in each of the letters and take assurance in the promise that the overcomers will inherit all things with their Savior, Jesus Christ.

Author: Paul Kroll

REVELATION: THE CHURCHES AT EPHESUS, SMYRNA, PERGAMUM AND THYATIRA (REVELATION 2)

Ephesus: The persevering church



In the opening letter to the church at Ephesus, Christ is pictured as walking among the seven lampstands, which represent the seven churches (1:20-2:1). This corresponds to the fact that he is the leader of the church and is its Savior (John 10:28). Perhaps there is an allusion here to Genesis 3:8, where the Lord is walking in the Garden of Eden with the man and woman he had created. In each case, the Lord seeks a personal relationship with his people, and wants to interact with them and be their guide.

The statement about Jesus walking among the candlesticks recalls an Old Testament promise: “I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people” (Leviticus 26:12). This promise to ancient Israel is now made to the church, the new Israel (Galatians 6:16).

Each letter is introduced with Christ’s assertion, “I know...” (2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). Christ is aware of the distresses and persecution the church members may be suffering. He also knows what they have achieved and where they have fallen short.

Strengths of Ephesus (2:2-3)

The church at Ephesus had endured in the faith (2:2, 4). They had suffered for Christ’s name and had not grown spiritually tired. The church had also suffered the assault of false prophets trying to foist off heretical teachings. The false teachers who tried to infiltrate the Ephesian church are identified under two categories. They are “those who claim to be apostles but are not” and the Nicolaitans (2:2, 6). Neither group’s practices or teachings are specifically identified. The latter group will be mentioned again in the letter to the church at Pergamum (2:15).

The Ephesian church apparently was diligent to eliminate false teaching, before and after John’s day. Assuming the late date for Revelation, about twenty years after the book was written, Ignatius praised the church in Ephesus for rejecting those who spread heretical doctrines (Ignatius, Ephesians 9:1; cf. 6:2; 7:1; 8:1).

Spiritual problems (2:4-6)

Ironically, the Ephesian church and its leadership may have gone too far in rooting out heresy. There was a spiritual problem in the church described as a forsaking of “first love” (2:4). This is usually taken to mean the church members’ love for one another. If this is correct, perhaps hatred of heresy had created suspicion and intolerance of each other’s differences and weaknesses. Theological orthodoxy and tests of loyalty may have been substituted for mercy and compassion. This could have led to an undue preoccupation with being “correct,” resulting in the proverbial “straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel.”



Amphitheater at Ephesus

This is an important lesson to all Christians. While doctrinal purity is important to the Christian faith, it can unintentionally lead to witch hunting and condemning spirit. We can defend the faith only if we first remember to defend love for one another (John 13:34). Since the Triune God is love in his essential being, Christians will reflect that love as they have been spiritually transformed by the Holy Spirit.

The Ephesians’ loss of love was no trivial matter. “It is treated as though it involved a fall from the Christian life,” wrote G. E. Ladd, A Commentary on the Revelation of John, p. 39. If the Ephesians did not repent of their lack of love, Christ said he would remove their lampstand (2:5). This implies that they would cease to be the spiritual people of God, even though they may have claimed to do many mighty works in his name (Matthew 7:22-23). (See 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.)

Listen to the Spirit (2:7)

The church was admonished to listen to what the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ was saying to Ephesus (2:7). The fact that hearing rather than reading is emphasized infers that Revelation was designed to be read out loud in public worship. The churches were to listen to “what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7). Yet, it is the glorified Christ who is pictured as speaking in these letters. Christ and the Spirit are equated. When the Spirit speaks, it is Christ speaking.

This recalls the words of Paul, who said, “The Lord is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:17). That is not to imply a heretical modalism, where it is claimed that there is no permanent distinction between the three persons of the Trinity. The

Persons of the Trinity are distinct, as the New Testament revelation of God's nature makes clear. But each of the three persons has an intrinsic interpersonal relationship in trinity. Thus, there is one God whose three Persons are together involved in our salvation.

Promise to Ephesus (2:7)

As does each of the letters, the one to the Ephesian church concludes with a note of victory and a promise to those who overcome or conquer. The conquerors in Christ in these churches are not to overcome an earthly foe by human force or will. Their struggle is more cosmic and more personal ([Ephesians 6:12](#)). They overcome the world by conquering themselves in and through the overcoming victory that was Christ's ([Revelation 2:26](#)). The church's victory parallels his victory – the eternal victory of the Lamb of God who overcame by living and dying in faith ([3:21](#)).

The overcomers at Ephesus are promised the gift of eternal life. The symbolism of salvation for the Ephesians is **“the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (2:7)**. These symbols stand for eternal life in the kingdom of God. The tree of life symbol is used again at the end of Revelation ([22:2](#)). Both symbols go back to the beginning of the Old Testament. The centerpiece of the Garden of Eden was the tree of life, a symbol for eternal life ([2:9](#)).

This is an illustration of the unity of the two Testaments in their presentation of the gospel.

If [Genesis 2-3](#) describes a Paradise Lost to Adam and Eve because of sin, then the book of Revelation promises a Paradise Regained through the blood of the Lamb. The church resurrected to life (the New Jerusalem) will receive salvation (eat fruit from the tree of life) in the Lamb's eternal kingdom (the Garden of Eden and Paradise of God).

Smyrna: The persecuted church

The church at Smyrna was a suffering church ([2:8](#)). It was warned about an impending persecution and that some of its members would experience martyrdom ([2:10](#)). The church in Smyrna would soon be persecuted and martyred by Jews and heathens. This would happen for “ten days” ([2:10](#)). Most commentators take that figure to mean a short but definitely limited period of time.

Christ's introductory title as the **One “who died and came to life again”** would be encouraging to these potential martyrs ([2:8](#)). The church members at Smyrna could face martyrdom in full confidence They would be resurrected to eternal life by the one who himself was victorious over death through a resurrection..



Ancient Smyrna and modern Izmir

The members at Smyrna were poverty-stricken people. Yet, Christ says they were spiritually rich ([2:9](#)). The contrast with Laodicea is significant. The Laodicean church assumed it was rich, but it was spiritually impoverished ([3:27](#)).

Problems at Smyrna (2:9-10)

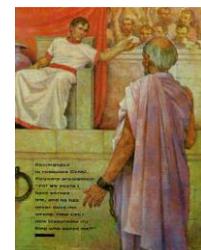
The church at Smyrna apparently suffered at the hands of a group **“who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (2:9)**. These Jews thought they were the people of God but were actually the representatives of his adversary ([John 8:31-47](#)). The people referred to were probably Jewish citizens of Smyrna who opposed the church. They may have been pressing the local government to take action against the Christians.

Why are these people said not to be Jews? They were Jews by race and religion. But they were not spiritual Jews, in the sense that the New Testament defines a Jew. Paul made the point in his writings: **“A man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit” (Romans 2:29)**. The church saw itself as the Israel of God, the “true circumcision” who worshiped God in Spirit and put its faith in Jesus Christ ([Philippians 3:3](#)).

Promise to Smyrna (2:10-11)

The church at Smyrna would receive the **“crown of life” (2:10)**. The crown here is *stephanos* in Greek, not the diadema, or royal crown. The *stephanos* was the victory wreath or trophy awarded to the winner of the games. A Roman magistrate who performed well also received a *stephanos* at the end of his term of office. In like manner, Christians who serve Christ will receive the victor's crown in that they conquer the world in Christ, the Lamb, and the victory is modeled in their faithful service to him ([1 Corinthians 9:24](#)).

The overcomers in the Smyrna church will not be hurt by **“the second death” (2:11)**. Revelation identifies the second death as the lake of fire ([21:8](#)). It is the second or eternal death. This death has no power over the faithful who have a part in the resurrection ([20:6](#)).



Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, faces his martyrdom in A.D. 155

Pergamum: a church in the center of heresy and apostasy

[The Churches at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira \(Revelation 2\) | Grace Communion International \(gci.org\)](#)

Christ introduced himself to the church in Pergamum as one who has the sharp, double-edged sword (2:12). This was another reference taken from the “One Like a Son of Man” image in chapter one (1:16).

The sword is symbolic of the penetrating word of God ([Hebrews 4:12-13](#)). More precisely, it is the discerning aspect of the word that “judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart,” and from which nothing in creation is hidden. This would have had great meaning in reference to where the members of the Pergamum church lived – in a city filled with the splendor and power of false religion.



The church was reminded that Pergamum’s power structure had wrongly judged or condemned Antipas, a faithful witness, and executed him (1:5). But God will judge the world system itself in opposition to God, of which Pergamum’s power center partakes. Revelation describes God’s judgment on “the world” in great symbolic detail. It is represented by the City of Babylon while God’s people are symbolized by the New Jerusalem. This struggle between the world and the saints, pictured in Revelation, led one commentator to label the book as a “Tale of Two Cities.”



The religious climate at Pergamum was not conducive to the Christian life. That’s because “Satan’s throne” was in the city (2:12). While the phrase has received differing interpretations, it probably refers to Pergamum as a major center of pagan religion, especially the imperial cult. The city symbolized secular power and civil religion working together to do something Satan wanted.

Problems at Pergamum (2:14-16)

While the church in Pergamum was assaulted from the outside, it also faced serious internal religious deception. This is described as the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (2:14-15). Revelation’s use of the Balaam typology underscores the book’s reliance on Old Testament symbols. Balaam’s story is found in **Numbers 22-24**. He was a prophet who manipulated Israel into falling under God’s curse. Balaam’s motive was personal gain ([2 Peter 2:15](#); [Jude 6](#)). He had been offered riches and power by Balak, a gentile king, to destroy God’s people, Israel.

The prophet found a way to accomplish the king’s desire. Balaam devised a plan whereby he caused the men of Israel to commit sexual immorality with Moabite women and to sacrifice to their gods in a community meal during a festival ([Numbers 25:1-2](#)).

Thus he led Israel into sin by causing the nation to accommodate itself to idolatrous pagan religion and its immortality. Balaam came to stand for an evil individual who seduces God’s people into sin.

But in what sense were members of the church committing sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols (2:14)? It is generally thought that this phrase refers to food eaten at festivals in which pagan gods were honored, as well as the sexual activities that may have gone on as part of such feasts. However, both expressions could also be understood metaphorically. That is, they would refer to general religious infidelity engaged in by Christians who participated in pagan rites and festivities.



Balaam and his donkey

Both a literal and figurative meaning may be in view here in Revelation. Since sexual immorality was sometimes associated with worship in pagan religion, Christians would be taking sexual license as well as committing religious infidelity if they participated in the religious practices of the city.

The Balaamites may have been teaching the converts that participating in temple feasts or other activities in which the gods were invoked was not wrong because it served a good end. The unknown prophets or self-appointed teachers, metaphorically called “Balaam,” were probably counseling accommodation with the pagan culture. Balaam and the Nicolaitans as well as another heretical group we encounter later – the followers of a prophetess named “Jezebel” – probably all taught generally the same thing. G.R. Beasley-Murray, in speaking of the Nicolaitans, wrote:

They will have maintained that idols are nothing.... Therefore Christians need not hesitate to take part in pagan feasts, whether among trade guilds or in temples.... Nor need they be over-scrupulous about acknowledging the divinity of

Caesar, for they can do it in the same spirit as many pagans did – as a gesture of loyalty to Rome, without religious significance. (Revelation, p. 86)

Revelation does not reveal the specific identity of the Nicolaitans, nor does it define all their beliefs. Irenaeus and other early church leaders claimed that the Nicolaitans practiced unrestrained indulgence (*Against Heresies*, 1.26.3). The Nicolaitans would have taught loose morals, probably under the guise of a deceptive theological rationale.

Following the teaching of the Balaamites and Nicolaitans, some church members in Pergamum had violated the freedom and grace they enjoyed in Christ. They had lapsed into a sinful accommodation with idolatry and immorality. The seriousness of the poor spiritual condition of some at Pergamum was underscored by Christ's warning. He would fight against the heretics with the sword of his mouth (2:16). The mistakes of the Pergamum church are important lessons to all Christians who must struggle to keep their spiritual balance in a darkened world.

Promise to Pergamum (2:17)

Those who conquered in the Pergamum church – who didn't fall prey to this heresy – were promised salvation under the metaphor of the **"hidden manna"** and **"white stone with a new name"** (2:17). Manna is another Old Testament symbol. It was the food God supernaturally supplied to the Israelites during their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness ([Exodus 16:11-15](#)). In Revelation the manna would refer to the spiritual food by which God gives life to his people. It is, like the fruit of the tree of life, a symbol of salvation and eternal life.

The meaning of the white stone is less clear. Several interpretations are possible. That's because stones were used in a variety of situations in ancient times. A white stone given to a person at the close of a trial meant he was acquitted of his crime. This symbolic meaning for the Christian is clear. Children of God have been exonerated of their sins through Christ's cleansing sacrifice. It is through Jesus' atoning blood that we freely receive our acquittal. The ideal of judicial judgment would also link the white stone to the **"great white throne judgment"** (20:11). This is a symbol of God's final, just and merciful judgment on humanity.

Stones also served as admission tickets to public festivals and assemblies. Metaphorically, this would mean the Christian had been granted admittance to the messianic feast at the Savior's return (19:18-19). A white stone may also have represented a happy and momentous day for the Christian – the receiving of the ultimate reward of salvation. The English equivalent would be a "red letter day." An interesting custom in Thrace was the marking of good days by a white stone (Pliny Natural History, 7.40.131; Plutarch: Life of Pericles 64; Pliny, Letters 6:11). God's intervention in human affairs and the salvation of the church in the resurrection of the dead will be a wonderful and momentous time ([Revelation 19:1-6](#)).

The color white is characteristic of Revelation. It speaks of white garments (3:5), white robes (7:9), white linen (19:8, 14), and the great white throne judgment (20:11). White, in these cases, represents a kind of spiritual purity. The meaning of the **"new name"** written on the white stone appears to have Old Testament roots (2:17). When speaking of Zion – a type of the church perfected – Isaiah repeated the promise of God to his people: **"You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow"** ([Isaiah 62:2](#)).

The new name represents a new status given to the individual by God. We see the custom in the Old Testament. Jacob becomes Israel ([Genesis 32:28](#)); Abram becomes Abraham ([Genesis 17:5](#)); Sarai becomes Sarah ([Genesis 17:15](#)). In the New Testament, Saul becomes Paul ([Acts 13:9](#)). The custom of giving a person a new name to go along with a new status was also found in the Roman world. Octavius became Augustus when he was crowned Roman emperor. For the Christian, the **"new name"** would have great spiritual significance. Christ will give the member a new status. He will be resurrected into the kingdom of God – with a new existence and unparalleled glory ([Romans 8:18-21](#)). The idea of newness in the "new name" is another theme in Revelation. We have a new Jerusalem (3:12; 21:2); a new heaven and earth (21:1); a new song (5:9; 14:3). And God says at the book's end, **"I am making everything new!"** (21:5).

Thyatira: the faithful and persevering church



The person pictured as speaking to the church in this letter identified himself as the Son of God (2:18). While this title is implied elsewhere in the book, it is used only here. Two closely allied titles from John's vision in chapter 1 began the letter – the figure's blazing eyes and feet that appear as burnished bronze (1:14-15).

Christ praised the church for its love, faith, service and perseverance. The range of praise regarding Thyatira's spiritual status was perhaps the widest given to any of the seven churches. It was the only church that is said to have improved its spiritual condition (2:19).

Problems at Thyatira (2:20-23)

However, the church did need admonishment on one vital issue. The church had tolerated the teachings of a false prophetess. She is introduced only by a metaphorical name – Jezebel. Her teaching is defined in the same way as the teaching of Balaam in the church at Pergamum (2:14). Jezebel, says Christ, “**Misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols**” (2:20). A parallel to the evil queen of Ahab was intended (1 Kings 16:29; 2 Kings 9:30). Both the original Jezebel and this unidentified prophetess threatened to destroy the true worship of God among his people.



Elijah, Ahab, and Jezebel in Naboth's vineyard

The original Jezebel's sin was leading Israel into idolatry, but she was not accused in the Old Testament of leading a sexually immoral life. Rather, her sin was in teaching others to follow religious immorality and faithlessness to the Lord (2 Kings 9:22).

This indicates that we can take the expressions of censure – “**eating food sacrificed to idols**” and “**committing adultery**” – in a figurative sense to mean idolatry. We should also be reminded that the Old Testament presented idolatry, apostasy and infidelity to God in terms of sexual metaphors – as sexual immorality, fornication, adultery and prostitution (Exodus 34:15,16; Deuteronomy 31:16; Jeremiah 3:6; Ezekiel 23:19; Hosea 9:1). John used adultery as a metaphor of idolatry elsewhere in Revelation (17:2; 18:3).

In the church at Thyatira, this Jezebel probably counseled accommodation with the world. Robert H. Mounce says, “*The fornication of which Jezebel was not willing to repent was her adulterous alliance with the pagan environment*” (The Book of Revelation, p. 104).

Her theology, as spread by her counterparts in the Thyatira church, would be especially attractive to members who were in workers' guilds. To reject guild membership would cause one to suffer economic deprivation. However, to be part of a guild required participation in its pagan religious festivities. The temptation to compromise one's Christian beliefs must have been strong for many church members. Robert H. Mounce explains:

In a city whose economic life was dominated by trade guilds in which pagan religious practices had become criteria for membership, the Christian convert would be faced with the problem of compromising his stand at least enough to allow participation in a common meal dedicated to some pagan deity. To reject this accommodation could mean social isolation and economic hardship. The Book of Revelation, p. 103

To be a member of a guild almost certainly would have meant participating in religious idolatry, immorality and debauchery. Thus, there is a dual meaning to the accusation that the Jezebel group practices “sexual immorality.” Revelation's “Jezebel” (as well as “Balaam” and probably the Nicolaitans) suggested the Christian could be in agreement with the world and still be faithful to Christ.

The Jezebel party probably would explain that “**an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one**” (1 Corinthians 8:4). Participation in pagan worship was really a meaningless activity. They would have reasoned that believers did not need to hurt themselves economically by refusing to accept a few harmless requirements posed by trade guild membership.

“*Jezebel is to be counted amongst those to whom the claims of commercial success speak more loudly than the claims of Christ,*” says William Barclay (The Revelation of John, volume 1, revised edition, p. 107). The Jezebel party apparently presented its teaching in strong theological wine, providing an excusing rationale that seemed to dispel any contrary arguments. Their theology is called “**Satan's so-called deep secrets**” (2:24).

This phrase is usually explained in two ways. It may be an ironic twist on Jezebel's own claim. Her followers may have claimed to be more spiritually sophisticated. They may have distorted Paul's teaching, claiming to understand God's will more deeply than the “self-righteous” majority who thought it ungodly to pay homage to the emperor as a god and to engage in debauchery (1 Corinthians 8:4; Romans 14:17). But Revelation says that the Jezebel party is the one that has fallen into the depths of a spiritual pit Satan has dug.

Another explanation for “**Satan's deep secrets**” is that Jezebel, like the later Gnostics, taught that only by descending into the depths of evil could one appreciate the heights of God's grace. Paul had argued against a similar idea in the church at Rome (Romans 6:1).

A majority of the church at Thyatira did not buy Jezebel's reasoning. However, the church still apparently allowed this group's teaching to continue within its midst. It had the “Corinthian disease,” which tolerated sin in the church, possibly in the misguided interest of being big-minded (1 Corinthians 5:1-7).

The issue has more than historical interest. It concerns us vitally. Says Leon Morris: *“Every generation of Christians must face the question, ‘How far should I accept and adopt contemporary standards and practices?’ On the one hand, Christians must not deny the faith. On the other, they must not deny their membership of society”* (Revelation, revised edition, p. 71).

Christ had been patient, hoping for a change of heart in the Jezebel faction (2:21). But the group had refused to repent of their teachings. Thus, the moment of judgment had arrived. Jesus warned that he would cast the compromisers on **“a bed of suffering...unless they repent”** (2:22). The Greek word here is simply **“bed.”** The translators have caught the Old Testament idea behind being on a bed. It meant to be sick or injured ([Exodus 21:18](#)). To be cast on a bed would mean someone had inflicted suffering upon you.

The Jezebel faction – if they remained unrepentant – would become an object lesson and be brought to justice. The fact that God is a God of justice as well as mercy – that being a Christian is serious business – would become evident to “all the churches” (2:23). Here is another indication that the message to each church applied to all seven. The majority at Thyatira who did not hold to this “gospel of expediency” was counseled to hold on to their spiritual understanding (2:24). They would have no other “burden” imposed on them.

Promise to Thyatira (2:24-28)

The church members at Thyatira were encouraged to continue in the faith – **“until I come”** (2:25). They were to be overcomers and do Christ’s will to the end. *“This is the nearest we have in the seven letters to a definition of the conqueror,”* says G. R. Beasley-Murray. *“He holds fast the traditions of faith and life delivered to the Church and the coming of Christ (v. 25) and he keeps Christ’s works till the end (v. 26) – whether that ‘end’ be the Lord’s parousia or his own death”* (Revelation, p. 93).

The promise of salvation is described as **“authority over the nations”** (2:26). The overcomer will **“rule them with an iron scepter”** and **“he will dash them to pieces like pottery”** (2:27). These statements were taken from [Psalm 2:9](#).

Some scholars feel that the original wording gives a somewhat different meaning than the English. Ruling should be understood more in the sense of shepherding. Wielding an iron scepter should be seen more in the context of a shepherd’s staff or club, used firmly but with tender loving care. If so, there is still the problem of how to understand the companion phrase, **“...he will dash them to pieces like pottery”** (2:27). The sheep are given guidance; the enemies are shattered.

Whatever the case, the meaning is clear: The now powerless church existing under human government will have power over the nations under Christ. The saints will inherit the earth, as Christ said ([Matthew 5:55](#)). And they would judge the world in whatever way that “judging” is to be understood ([1 Corinthians 6:2](#)).

The church at Thyatira was also promised the **“morning star”** (2:28). Several explanations have been offered for this symbol. Perhaps Christ is in view here, if we are guided by his symbolic self-description at the end of Revelation: **“I, Jesus...[am] the bright Morning Star”** (22:16). To “have” Jesus as the Morning Star would mean to be in his glorious presence – to be with him. This would explain the promise that in the resurrection the saints glorified will be with Christ, wherever he is ([John 14:3](#)

REVELATION: REVELATION 3:1-6 – SARDIS: THE “DEAD” CHURCH

The “dead” church



The church at Sardis was described as being **“dead”** (3:1). It appeared to be alive – had **“a reputation of being alive”** – looked spiritually vibrant on the outside – but was spiritually lifeless. The church was Christian in name only. This recalls Christ’s scathing rebuke of the Pharisees who **“look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean”** ([Matthew 23:27](#)).

Says G.R. Beasley-Murray: *“The appearance [of the Sardis church] is that of a beautifully adorned corpse in a funeral parlour, and the Lord is not deceived”* (Revelation, p. 95). The church needed to stir up the living Spirit of God in order to come to life.

What was dead about the church and what needed reviving? First, there was no indication of persecution or trouble from outside forces. Neither was there any heresy within, in contrast to some of the other churches. Things seemed

to be peaceful and religiously correct. Perhaps it was a church that was too good to be true. Its religiously proper appearance may have only meant that it had fully and silently compromised with the truth and the pagan society around it. G.B. Caird calls Sardis “the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity” (*A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, p. 48).

That might explain its calm and sedated outward appearance. George Eldon Ladd defined the Sardis church as “a picture of nominal Christianity, outwardly prosperous, busy with the externals of religious activity, but devoid of spiritual life and power” (*A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p. 56).

Paul had described such Christians by saying they seemed quite religious but denied God’s power in their lives ([2 Timothy 3:5](#)). This community of the living dead needed the power of God to bring them back to life.

Christ therefore gave Sardis a jolting command to **“Wake up!”** ([3:2](#)). The rousing call was meant to encourage the church to take action. The members were to strengthen what little remained, to obey, to repent ([3:2-3](#)). Jesus told the church at Sardis to wake up or he would come like a thief does. **“You will not know at what time I will come to you,”** he said ([2:3](#)).

Promise to Sardis (3:4-6)

While most in the church at Sardis were in a dead spiritual state, **“a few people”** were faithful to Christ, and had **“not soiled their clothes”** ([3:4](#)). They were promised that they would be taken on a walk in Christ, and to be dressed in white ([3:4-5](#)).

White garments are mentioned on five other occasions in Revelation. The church at Laodicea needs them to hide their spiritual shame ([3:18](#)). The 24 elders wear white garments ([4:4](#)). The martyrs waiting for God’s judgment are given white robes to wear ([6:11](#)). The armies appearing with the Messiah also wear white and clean linen ([19:14](#)). The great multitude of the saved in Revelation 7 wear robes made white in the red blood of the Lamb (**verse 14**). The color paradox makes the point. It implies that the color white stands for God’s people made spiritually pure and justified by Jesus’ blood.

That means the few in Sardis who were given white robes had been made right and just before God. We should not lose sight of the fact that the robes are given to the Sardians as a gift, reflecting the fact that we do not justify ourselves by good works; we are made spiritually right by the work of Christ.

In the ancient world, white clothing also stood for festivity. Ecclesiastes counseled people to “be clothed in white” – to enjoy their food and drink with a joyful heart ([9:8](#)). Those clothed in white will feast at the marriage supper of the Lamb in the kingdom of God ([19:9](#)). It will be their day of victory, a time to put on the best of clothing, clean and white.



The righteous saints in Sardis were also promised that their names would appear in the book of life ([3:5](#)). Only those names entered in the Lamb’s book of life will be allowed into the New Jerusalem ([21:27](#)). The idea of a divine ledger is an Old Testament figure of speech for the Lord’s salvation ([Exodus 32:32](#); [Psalm 69:28](#)). Daniel was told that at the end-time, **“everyone whose name is found written in the book – will be delivered”** ([12:1](#)).

It was also a common New Testament way to speak of salvation, of having a part in the kingdom of God. Jesus used the term ([Luke 10:20](#)), and so did Paul ([Philippians 4:3](#)).

Hebrews speaks of “the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven” ([12:23](#)). The entering of a person’s name in a book of life is another metaphor for salvation and eternal life.

The metaphor would have been familiar to the non-Jews in the Sardis church as well. Ancient cities in the Greek world kept registers of the names of their citizens. Criminals were removed from the civil register and lost their citizenship. Sardis, as the western capital of the earlier Persian and Seleucid empires, would have kept the royal archives for to a wide area.

Finally, Jesus promised to acknowledge the name of the overcomer in Sardis before his Father ([3:6](#)). This recalls Jesus’ promise as the incarnate Son of God: **“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven”** ([Matthew 10:32](#)).

Author: Paul Kroll

REVELATION: REVELATION 3:7-13 – THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA AND THE KEY OF DAVID

The church that kept the faith



Up to this point, phrases from the vision of chapter 1 were used to identify the speaker. Apparently, there was no suitable expression to introduce an important point for the Philadelphians. The letter to the church in Philadelphia begins with Christ identifying himself as “**holy and true**” (3:7). The Holy One is a common Old Testament title for God ([Isaiah 40:25](#); [43:15](#)). He is also true in the sense that he is faithful and trustworthy. God can always be counted on to keep his promises ([Titus 1:2](#)).

The key of David

Christians of the first century lived in an uneasy relationship with Judaism. Most Jewish Christians probably attended the synagogue, took part in ritual worship and used the Hebrew Scriptures as their Bible. Then on the first day of the week they met with those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah.

At the same time, the church considered itself the rightful spiritual heir of Judaism — the new Israel ([Galatians 6:16](#)). It had accepted Jesus as its Lord, the Messiah spoken of in the Hebrew Scriptures. The church saw itself as composed of spiritual Jews who had received “circumcision” through the Holy Spirit ([Romans 2:28-29](#)). This naturally caused a rift between Christians and Jews, as they both claimed to be God’s people.

That meant Jewish Christians often endured exceptional pressure and stress. They were called apostate Jews by their own relatives. Non-Christian Jews accused Christians of being usurpers. They insisted that Jews and not Christians had the open door to God’s presence and the keys to the kingdom.

The Christians in the Asian city of Philadelphia were among those who took the brunt of these claims. Then, in about A.D. 96, John, in the book of Revelation, assured those in the church that they were, indeed, the heirs to salvation ([Revelation 3:7-13](#)).

John wrote that Christ is the One “**who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open**” (verse 7). Christ had set an open door before the church that “**no one can shut.**” What was this key that unlocked a door that could not be shut? The answer lies in analyzing the key and door metaphor, which is found in the writings of the prophet Isaiah. He referred to an individual of his time named Shebna who had charge of the palace of the Judean king. Today, we might call him the chief of staff.

The prophet Isaiah said the Lord would replace Shebna with a man named Eliakim. The Lord would “**place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open**” ([Isaiah 22:22](#)). Thus, Eliakim would be a kind of gatekeeper with power to control entry into the royal kingdom. As the king’s steward, he would decide who could or could not have access to the king.

This story in Isaiah serves as a prophecy of the Davidic Messiah. “*The imagery suggests that Christ is the only one who can grant access to God,*” writes Norman Perrin. Christ “*has given the Christians at Philadelphia access to God and no one can deprive them of it*” (*Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, p. 86).

In the book of Revelation, John used this Old Testament metaphor to get across a vital message to the church in Philadelphia, and thereby to all Christians. That is, Christ has the key of David. He opens the door for the church — his royal household — and allows it to come into the presence of God. In short, Christ has granted Christians access to God. No one can deprive them of that access, which means that God gives them salvation.

The key in Revelation does much more than open the way to talking with a national king. In Christ’s hand, the key opens the door into the presence of God, his kingdom and eternal life. Not only does Christ open the door, he *is* the door to the kingdom ([John 10:7, 9](#)). Thus, it is Jesus who presents himself to the church as the way to salvation ([John 14:6](#)).

A second interpretation of the open door and key statements is that the open door set before the church was a wide-open opportunity to engage in evangelistic activity and preach the gospel. Paul used a similar metaphor in this manner ([1 Corinthians 16:9](#); [2 Corinthians 2:12](#); [Colossians 4:3](#)).

However, Revelation usually uses imagery from the Old Testament, and the Old Testament background of the key and door metaphor works against this idea. The prophet Isaiah was speaking of access to the king, not evangelism to the world. The concept of access is also more in keeping with the context of Revelation. There is no evidence to support the interpretation of these passages as the church’s missionary activity.

The book of Revelation has a different purpose — that of providing much-needed encouragement and comfort during trying circumstances. It presents the church not as a soul-conquering body but as an organism fighting for its very life in a hostile world. That’s because the church was being intimidated by those who “**claim to be Jews though they are not**” (3:9). George Eldon Ladd explains the situation:

“The immediate background of the phrase was the claim of the Jews in Philadelphia that they were the true people of God who held the key to the Kingdom of God. John contradicts this claim by asserting that the key to the

kingdom which had belonged to Israel really belongs to Jesus as the Davidic messiah (5:5; 22:16) and had been forfeited by Israel because she had rejected her Messiah” (A Commentary on the Revelation of John, p. 59).

These Jews will ultimately have to acknowledge that Christ loves the church. They will recognize that the church is composed of the true people of God, rather than the Jews as a nation. The Christians at Philadelphia would have been greatly encouraged when Christ identified himself as the true Messiah, and as one who controls access to the eternal kingdom. When he opens the door “no one can shut” it – and no one can prevent entry to the people for whom he opens it (3:7).

The local Jewish community of Philadelphia may claim that the kingdom belongs to the Jewish community. But they “are liars” (3:9). Christ has used the key of David to set an open door before the church, not the synagogue. The door to the synagogue may be closed to the Christian; the door to Christ’s heavenly kingdom is wide open. But even as the church is persecuted — and its members martyred — it should remember the promises of its leader, Jesus Christ. He alone holds the key to God’s presence and has opened the door to his kingdom and the church’s salvation.

Synagogue of Satan (3:9)

The Jews of Philadelphia who were persecuting and intimidating the Christians are called a “synagogue of Satan” (3:9), as they were identified in the letter to the church in Smyrna (2:9). They will experience a reversal of fortune – be forced to acknowledge that the church constitutes the true people of God (3:9).

The background for verse 9 is also to be found in the Old Testament, but with an unexpected twist. Isaiah had pictured the victory of Israel over its enemies (60:14). In one place Isaiah said gentile nations would do homage to Israel at the start of the kingdom. “They will bow down before you and plead with you, saying, ‘Surely God is with you...’” (Isaiah 45:14).

The imagery of Isaiah bears a striking similarity to Revelation 3:9. But a stunning reversal of fortune has occurred. What the Jews hoped to gain from the gentiles, they themselves must render to the Christians. The Jews in Philadelphia must play the part of the heathen and concede that the church contains the people of God. Revelation here underscores the notion that the Jews are no longer the people of God as a national or ethnic entity, since they have rejected their Messiah (Matthew 21:33-43, especially verse 43). The new Israel – the church – has taken their place as God has moved forward to fulfill his promise of grace. The church is the true “Israel of God” even though it is largely composed of Gentiles (Galatians 6:16).

Revelation 3:9, however, looks to the time when the Jews will finally acknowledge (thus, “bow down” to) their Savior and the largely gentile church as the people of God. In that time, “All Israel [that is, the Israelite people as a whole] will be saved” (Romans 11:26).

Promise to the church (3:10-12)

Because the church in Philadelphia has kept faith with Jesus, he will keep them from “the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth” (3:10). This expression “hour of trial” refers in Revelation to the affliction on the world to come before God’s kingdom is established on the earth. This period of worldwide ordeal is a main theme of Revelation. The book informs the reader that “the hour of his judgment has come” (14:7). The death of the world system, dubbed “Babylon the Great,” which stands in opposition to God, is described in dramatic symbolic language in Revelation 15-19. The doom of this Babylon comes “in one hour” (18:10). “In one hour” the world’s Babylonish “great wealth” is “brought to ruin” (18:17, 19).

When the world’s anti-God system collapses, the church will face terrible persecution and martyrdom. That’s because it will be called on as a faithful witness to the rule and authority of God in a godless world. But because the names of the faithful witnesses are written in the book of life, they will be delivered and saved for eternal life.

While the church will suffer persecution, it will not be destroyed. That’s because the hour of trial comes “upon the whole world” to try “those who live on the earth” (3:10). This does not include the church. In Revelation, the phrase “whole world” or “those who live on the earth” is always used for the godless world or enemies of the church (6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:8).

Whatever the Spirit says to an individual church such as Philadelphia applies to all the churches (3:13). Thus, it can be understood that the promise of protection applies to the church universal. Various images or metaphors are used in Revelation to describe the protection the church receives during this worldwide trouble. The earth is not harmed until the saints are sealed (7:1-8). The individual worshipers are counted, a sign of God’s caring protection on those he personally knows (11:1). The woman, a symbol for the church, is protected in the wilderness (12:14-16).

As we saw earlier, the church at Smyrna was told it would receive “the crown of life” (2:10). Philadelphia was also told not to let any person take its crown. In both cases, the word is *stephanos* – which refers to the wreath of victory

awarded to winners of athletic contests. This would have been a meaningful word to the church in Philadelphia, as the city was famous for its athletic games.



Christ promised the faithful in Philadelphia that he would make them pillars in God's temple (3:12). And, they would never again leave his presence. This is another symbol of assurance that the members would gain *eternal* admission into the kingdom of God.

Christ also promised to write three names on the believer – the name of God, the name of the New Jerusalem, and Christ's new name (3:12). Ancient pillars had the names of people they honored inscribed on them. The metaphor means to say that God will honor and bless his people. But in what way?

First, the believer will have God's name. In the Old Testament, the Lord told the priests to pronounce specific blessings on Israel, which concluded with this thought: **"So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them"** ([Numbers 6:27](#)).

Second, to be named with the city of God – the New Jerusalem – is a symbolic way of saying that the believer has citizenship in God's spiritual commonwealth ([Galatians 4:26](#); [Philippians 3:20](#); [Hebrews 12:22](#)).

Third, the believer is to have Christ's own *new* name. Perhaps this refers to a future full revelation of Christ himself, which cannot be grasped until the believer is glorified ([1 John 3:2](#)).

Author: Paul Kroll, 1995, 2013

REVELATION: REVELATION 3:14-22 – LAODICEA: THE COMPLACENT CHURCH

Christ introduced himself to the church at Laodicea as **"the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation"** (3:14). These titles were not taken from the description of Christ in chapter 1. Neither do they have any parallels in the final chapters. However, the ideas in the names are implicit to the book of Revelation as a whole.

Jesus is the faithful and true witness. He spoke and did only what the Father commanded him, no matter the consequences ([John 3:34](#); [5:36](#); [12:49](#)). Christ as faithful witness was a sharp contrast to the Laodiceans, who witnessed only to their own supposed spiritual works.

Problems at Laodicea (3:15-19)

Like the church at Sardis, Laodicea had been bitten by the bug of complacency. But this church was also spiritually arrogant in its self-satisfaction. It was the only church Christ did not commend for anything. Tragic, indeed! The church thought of itself as rich and in need of nothing from Christ. Although many of the members may have been materially rich, the "wealth" it claimed for itself would be spiritual. What is in view here is Laodicea's spiritual pride and complacency.

The members needed to buy true riches in the areas of life where they felt they had no lack. This is explained in metaphorical terms as gold refined in the fire (3:18). Christ is the refiner of the human soul, which he purifies as the refiner does gold ([Malachi 3:3](#)). What needed refining was Laodicea's faith so that it would become genuine ([1 Peter 1:7](#)).

Laodicea also needed white clothes to cover its spiritual nakedness (3:18). White garments are used as a symbol of righteousness throughout Revelation (3:4, 5; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 19:14). They also represent the proper apparel to wear at important festivities. The church cannot gain the righteousness of Christ through its own effort. The white garments are spoken of as given to the saints (6:11; 19:8). They are made white by being washed in the justifying blood of the Lamb (7:14). Without the white garments of righteousness, the church is spiritually naked. Nakedness is a symbol of spiritual shame and worthlessness ([Ezekiel 16:35](#); [2 Corinthians 5:3](#)).

The Laodicean church was spiritually blind. Its members thought they could see – thought that they were rich and without any needs. But Christ counseled them to apply a spiritual eye-salve so that they could see how far they had fallen. They needed to be zealous and repent (3:19).

Laodicea's spiritual works are described as neither cold nor hot (3:15-16). This may refer to the water supply available in Laodicea and two nearby cities, Hierapolis and Colossae. Hierapolis was the site of hot, spa-like waters, used for medicinal purposes. Nearby Colossae was known for its cold and pure drinking water. But the waters of Laodicea were considered nauseous and undrinkable, not useful for any meaningful purpose. Like the city's water supply, the church is useless in its service to the Lord, and Christ is about to spit it from his mouth.

The church does not show forth the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The metaphor of the water supply says not so much that the church is half-hearted, but that its works are barren of God's power. The church reflected human ways and aspirations, not Christ's. It was far from the living water it desperately needed from him ([John 4:10-14](#); [7:38-39](#)).

Promise to Laodicea (3:20-21)

In the letter, Christ used a metaphor of himself standing at the door and knocking on the minds and hearts of the smug Laodiceans.

Someone or something standing by a door is a well-known biblical metaphor. Jesus used the door metaphor in the context of his disciples' urgent need to stay spiritually alert ([Mark 13:29](#)). James pictured Christ as the Judge standing at the door ([5:9](#)). Jesus spoke of his disciples as waiting expectantly for the master so they could open the door to him ([Luke 12:36](#)).

The image of Christ standing outside and knocking may also imply that the Laodiceans have locked him out of their church! But the metaphor is also a symbol of promise. Christ is waiting outside, hoping the Laodiceans will be open to his correction and change their ways. If they do, he will come in and share a meal with them ([3:20](#)). The fellowship meal figures prominently as a symbol of togetherness with Christ in the kingdom ([19:9](#)).

This leads easily to the final promise – a place on Christ's throne, the symbol of his ruling authority ([3:21](#)). If the members of the church repent, they can eat and drink at Christ's table in his kingdom and sit on thrones of judgment ([Luke 22:30](#)).

The fulfillment of this promise is described under the millennial rule of Christ ([20:4](#)) and in the eternal new creation ([22:5](#)). But the Laodiceans must overcome in Christ, and in the same way he overcame. Because he conquered, he has been given royal authority – which the church can have as well ([3:21](#)).

Summary

To summarize, in chapters 2 and 3 we have seen the deep spiritual problems in the church, at least in the Roman province of Asia at the end of the first century. The cares of this life, the penetrating power of the society around the members and wrong spiritual attitudes have blocked out the church's view of Christ to one degree or another.

To many members in the seven churches, the world seemed to be the only compelling reality. They had a desperate need to see behind the scenes, and discover the unseen reality of Christ and God. Members needed to refocus their minds on the real power of the universe, the place where salvation lies – in Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Revelation takes up this theme in chapters 4 and 5, revealing where the true salvation of the church lies, which is in the heavenly rule of God and the salvific work of the Lamb. The world system of evil to which many were falling prey will be judged by God and replaced by his eternal kingdom, the New Heavens and New Earth. That's the rest of the story in Revelation.

Author: Paul Kroll, 1995, 2013

REVELATION: WORTHY IS THE LAMB (REVELATION 5)

One of the most paradoxical parts of Revelation is John's vision of the lion followed immediately by a slain lamb. As the vision opens in [Revelation 5:1-5](#), John is told that the Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed to open the scroll sealed with seven seals. But as John looks for a lion, he sees a lamb instead (**verse 6**). It is a grisly sight, for the lamb appears to have been slaughtered. This is the first occurrence of lamb imagery in Revelation. It's as though the image has been kept for its dramatic entrance precisely until this point.

The Lamb is Revelation's defining title for Christ. This lamb imagery is connected to the Old Testament book of Isaiah. The imagery is central to the prophecy of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. There the future sacrifice for sin is pictured as a lamb being led to the slaughter. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy. He was the Lamb of God sacrificed for the sins of the world.

In the book of Revelation, this lamb metaphor has a double image. It tells us the slaughtered Lamb is coming a second time as the Word of God's wrath to require the blood of all who oppose him ([Revelation 6:16](#); [19:7, 9, 11-16](#)). But Jesus Christ, the Lamb, first shed his own blood. That is what makes him worthy to open the scroll and reveal the message of the book of Revelation. The angelic hosts of heaven praise the Lamb, saying he is worthy to open the book's meaning because he was killed. With his blood he has "purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" ([Revelation 5:9](#)).

Thus, there is a paradox about the picture in Revelation 5. Though its central figure has triumphed (the Lion), he appears to have been conquered and killed (the Lamb). Jesus overcame the world by sacrificing himself. His supreme act of triumph was accomplished by shedding his own blood (**Revelation 1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11**).

Jesus' death as the Lamb of God gained a victory over the cosmic powers in opposition to God. The Lamb of God defeated Satan, sin and the power of the grave. That is the message of Revelation 5: Jesus has won the victory over his enemies by sacrificing his life as the Lamb.

Through this act he is worthy to return as the "Lion" to rule the nations.

Thus, Jesus as Lamb tells Christians — his lambs — that they are to suffer the outrageous darts of their oppression in patience. They must be submissive to God and place their unswerving allegiance with him. He will vindicate the cause of those whose faith remains in him.

REVELATION: REVELATION 6 – THE SIX SEALS

Chapter six of Revelation continues John's vision in the throne room of heaven. His eyes fix on the Lamb (Jesus Christ) as he opens the first of the seven seals that had sealed the scroll with writing on both sides (**5:1 with 6:1**). John then says, "**I saw, and behold. . .**" (6:2, *Revised Standard Version*). This expression, variously translated in English versions, is frequently used by John to introduce new visions (**4:1; 6:5, 8; 7:9; 14:1; 19:11**).

We should note that the scroll's contents are not here being revealed. Only the seals are being broken in chapter six. As each seal is opened, John sees one of the four horsemen riding away, then the souls under the altar, then the heavenly signs. But all seven seals must be removed before the scroll can be opened and "read." The seventh seal is not opened until 8:1. We are probably to understand that the scroll itself is not opened until the sounding of the seven trumpets.

The vision in general

The six seals include the four horsemen, the vision of the souls under the altar and certain cosmic disturbances. The seventh seal apparently is a "**silence in heaven**" that initiates "**God's wrath**" (**6:17 with 8:1**).

What do the seals represent? The first four seals can be seen as portraying problems such as war and famine that have always been with us. In a way, they show the self-defeating character of sin, which has characterized the world from its beginning. The seals, then, could represent a dramatic portrayal of the world's self-inflicted judgment upon itself. They represent the terrible effects of man's way, which works against the peace and abundance God has in mind for humanity.

Biblical scholar Robert D. Wall says of the seal visions: "*God has given earth over to itself to engage in a global, civil war, preventing its inhabitants from attaining the very things that make for their peace and security* (cf. [Rom. 1:28-31](#)). Together the horsemen take peace from the earth; these symbols of military strife call attention not only to a fallen creation, which now exists under the curse of God, but also to earth's need for God's shalom" (*New International Biblical Commentary*, "Revelation," p.110).

We should carefully note that the Lamb must open the seals and it is his servants, the four living creatures from God's throne, who beckon the riders and their horses to, "**Come!**" (**6:1, 3, 5, 7**). The horsemen must be given permission by the Lamb and God's agents before they can accomplish the evil they intend to do. This implies that it is God who is Lord of history and man's activities.

The first four seals of Revelation are the famous four horsemen of the Apocalypse. Each is riding a different colored steed — white, red, black and pale green (**6:1-8**). As we shall see, the horse colors take on specific symbolic meanings, such as red for war.

The imagery has counterparts in the Old Testament, this time in [Zechariah 1:8-11](#) and [6:1-8](#). There, the horse colors don't seem to have any special significance. In Revelation they are central to the symbolic meaning of each horse. In **Zechariah** the horses, called the "four spirits of heaven," are sent out into the earth with no effect noted (**1:11; 6:5-8**). In Revelation the release of the horses brings disasters to the earth. In Zechariah the focus is on the horses but in Revelation the riders seem more important. Here the horses merely lend their color to the motif.

In Zechariah's vision the horses fan out across the earth. In some sense, they patrol the earth — perhaps as God's "eyes." Some commentators have noted that colors symbolizing the four winds — perhaps a way of saying the four corners or entire earth — were used in chariot races accompanying the official opening of an emperor's reign. That being so, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse would be telling us that the disasters and anguish they portray are worldwide.

First Seal: White Horse

The white horse is mounted by a rider who **“had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer”** ([Rev. 6:2](#)). Some have confused this image with the one in Revelation 19, also a rider on a white horse. A quick comparison of chapters 6 and 19 reveals the two riders have little in common except that they ride white horses.

The white horse rider in chapter 6 is bent on conquest. The intent of the rider in chapter 19 is to exact divine and *just* retribution for sin. This rider is called “Faithful and True” and he judges and makes war with justice ([19:11](#)). He is called **“the Word of God”** and his name is **“King of kings and Lord of Lords”** ([19:13, 16](#)). The rider on the white horse in Revelation 19 is unmistakably Jesus, the triumphant Messiah coming to rule the world.

Who, then, is the rider of the white horse in Revelation 6? He is accompanied by three other mounted horses. Their riders portray destruction and death. The white horse and its rider should be interpreted in a consistent manner. It would not make sense for this rider to represent the conquering Christ who restores peace to earth.

In the expanded symbolic universe of Revelation, perhaps the white horse rider of chapter 6 represents false messiahs who claim to represent Jesus. They conquer others “in his name,” so to speak. We could say the image even refers to all saviors — religious or secular — who come in the name of peace and justice but bring war and tyranny. Thus, the two riders on white horses serve as theological bookends for Revelation. The messiah figure in Revelation 6 is a fraudulent copy of Jesus Christ, the true messiah. When the white horse rider of Revelation 6 goes out to conquer, havoc and death result. When the Messiah on the white horse of chapter 19 goes out to conquer, he ushers in peace and salvation.

As Revelation can be thought of as a tale of two cities — Babylon the Great and the New Jerusalem — it is also a tale of two systems. There is a false system represented by its messiahs who think they can bring peace through conquest (as did the Roman Empire). But only Christ can bring in lasting peace and eternal life in the kingdom of God.

The four elements in the description of the rider on the white horse in Revelation 6 bear this out. He rides a white horse, holds a bow, is given a crown and goes out **“as a conqueror bent on conquest”** ([6:2](#)).

White is said to be the color of victory. Apparently, many victorious warriors rode white horses as an emblem of their triumph. The symbol has persisted. In the old cowboy movies, the hero was dressed in light clothing and often rode a white horse.

The bow is also a symbol of war and conquest. Some see here a reference to the feared Parthians. They were well known for their archery skills in battle. “A ‘Parthian shot’ still means a final, devastating blow, to which there is no possible answer” (William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series*, “The Revelation of John,” volume 2, revised edition, p. 4).

The dreaded Parthians, on Rome’s eastern flank, were an undefeated enemy. In a failed invasion, the Roman armies were defeated in A. D. 62 by the Parthian general Vologeses in the Tigris river valley. The disaster must still have been remembered in the days when Revelation was written. The churches in the Roman province of Asia (to whom the book was written) must have been quite aware of the Parthians as bowmen riding white horses. Such a horseman could serve as an immediate metaphor of military power and conquest.

However, Revelation’s visions and content contain many dozens of allusions to the Old Testament. Here we also find the metaphor of the bow as a symbol of conquest ([Psalm 46:9](#); [Jeremiah 49:35](#); [Ezekiel 39:3](#); [Hosea 1:5](#)).

The crown, which the rider of the white horse wears, is also a symbol of military conquest. The Greek word here is *stephanos*, which was the victor’s wreath, not the *diadema*, which meant a royal crown.

Thus, the white horse and his rider symbolize the spirit of conquest and militarism. Their meaning would differ from the red horse who more specifically stands for warfare. As we know, there is more to conquest than war alone. Economic power, propaganda, the use of religion, diplomacy and political shrewdness are also part of successful conquest.

Second Seal: Red Horse

The second horse’s meaning seems clear. It is a symbol of war, of slaughter and bloodshed. The red horse has a rider who takes **“peace from the earth”** and wields a **“great sword.”** In his wake, people **“kill one another”** ([6:4](#)). The Greek word usually translated “slay” has a more ferocious meaning. “Slaughter” or “butcher” would bring out its nuanced meaning more forcefully. The horse rider has a great or huge sword, indicating the extent of the carnage he creates.

Third Seal: Black Horse

This rider represents hunger and famine. We can see this from the symbols accompanying him. The horse he rides is black, a color that describes a famine-racked body.

The black horse has a rider with **“a pair of scales in his hand” (6:5)**. A scale would be used to measure and carefully dole out food. It could refer to bread being rationed by weight in a famine, or grain being measured by volume. We see this being done in the Old Testament. In the siege of Jerusalem, the people would **“eat rationed food in anxiety and drink rationed water in despair” (Ezekiel 4:16)**. God told the Israelites they would suffer famine if they sinned and they would be forced to **“dole out the bread by weight” (Leviticus 26:26)**.

A voice accompanies the vision of the black horse and its rider. It announces: **“A quart of wheat for a day’s wages, and three quarts of barley for a day’s wages.” (6:6)**. The expression “a day’s wages” is a translation of the Greek word *denarius*. The denarius was a Roman silver coin equal in value to the daily wage of a working man ([Matthew 20:2](#)).

Bible scholar Robert H. Mounce says the price of the wheat and barley as described in the vision appears to be ten to twelve times their normal cost in ancient times (*The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, “The Book of Revelation,” p. 155). Revelation describes a condition where basic goods are sold at greatly inflated prices. Thus, the black horse rider depicts times of deep scarcity or famine but not of starvation.

The English word “quart” translates *choenix*. Apparently, a *choenix* of wheat was the daily ration of one adult. Thus, in the conditions pictured by Revelation 6 the normal income for a working-class family would buy enough food for only one person. The less costly barley would feed three people for one day’s wages.

The voice also says, **“Do not damage the oil and the wine!” (6:6)**. People are told to be careful not to harm precious foodstuffs. We should note that the warning sets limits to the destruction the black horse rider can cause. Anciently, oil and wine were not luxuries. They were basic commodities or necessities of life. **“Grain, new wine and oil”** was a standard threesome describing the staples of life ([Deuteronomy 7:13](#); [11:14](#); [Hosea 2:8, 22](#); [Haggai 1:11](#)). Once again we see that the black horse describes dire want but not total famine.

There is an interesting case regarding the destruction of vineyards in Asia from emperor Domitian’s reign that may have formed the background to this verse. During his reign a shortage of grain and surplus of wine upset the economic equilibrium of Rome.

Domitian first ruled that no new vineyard should be planted. Then, he commanded that half the vineyards in Asia be cut down. This created a near revolt because the vineyards were a major source of income to the people of Asia. Domitian was forced to reverse himself. In fact, he later prosecuted those who had allowed their vineyards to go out of cultivation because of the fall in wine prices.

Fourth Seal: Pale Horse

The pale horse has a rider called “Death,” and “Hades was following close behind him” (6:8). The Greek word for “pale,” *chloros*, elsewhere in Revelation describes the yellow-green of vegetation (8:7; 9:4). The word is the root for the English “chlorine.” It is here used for the tell-tale and sickly look of death due to a virulent pestilence. The hue or tint in view here is probably to be understood as the color of a corpse — of death.

The rider is Death, and his companion is Hades or the grave — for Hades is the place of the dead. We should here picture death and Hades gathering up the victims of man’s civilization — the casualties of war, starvation and plague. Only Christ can unlock the dead from the grave and give them eternal life (1:18). Both Death and Hades will ultimately be thrown into the lake of fire (20:14). That is, they will be destroyed — swallowed up in the eternal life granted to their victims.

The four horsemen bring immense suffering to the human race. John writes: **“They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth” (6:8)**. Once again we see that power is given to the horsemen. They can cause only the damage God allows. The evils they represent are not caused by God, of course. In his wisdom and patience God acts to fulfil his covenant purpose even in the midst of humanity’s evil opposition.

There are some common elements between the four horsemen and God’s judgments described in the Old Testament. God’s “four dreadful Judgments” sent against Jerusalem — sword and famine and wild beasts and plague” — are similar to the effects of the four horsemen ([Ezekiel 14:21](#)). The combination of “sword, famine, and plague” is also found in various places in Jeremiah ([14:12](#); [15:2](#); [21:7](#); [24:10](#); [29:17-18](#); [42:17](#); [43:11](#)).

Fifth Seal: Souls Under the Altar

When the fifth seal is opened, John sees **“the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained” (6:9)**. These are the faithful witnesses and overcomers, the church in its ideal state. They are a major interest of Revelation (1:9; 12:11, 17; 19:10; 20:4).

The word “testimony” here comes from the Greek *martyria*. It means “witness.” Since Christians were often killed for being faithful witnesses of the testimony Christ had given them, they came to be called martyrs.

The fifth seal, then, has a much more narrow focus and interest. It describes the witnessing community, willing even to die for the truth of Jesus Christ. Jesus had left no doubt that the church would be hated, persecuted, and that some of its members might be martyred. The synoptic Gospels carefully preserve Jesus’ warning about persecution ([Mark 13:9-13](#); [Luke 21:12-18](#)).

Matthew wrote: **“You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me” (24:9)**. John remembered Jesus’ words as well: **“A time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God” (John 16:2)**.

In Revelation the glorified Christ simply emphasizes the warning he gave during his incarnation. The passages in Revelation that discuss the people of God, think of them collectively as a martyr church. For example, the Beast will have the power **“to make war against the saints and to conquer them” (13:7)**. He **“will attack them, and overpower and kill them” (11:7)**.

The overcoming of the saints in Revelation is a conquest that ultimately comes through their death. And this characteristic seems to represent the people of God as a group. In [Revelation 20:4](#), says J. Ramsey Michaels, *“Those who ‘lived and reigned with the Christ for a thousand years’ are described not simply as ‘the church,’ or as those who ‘believed in Jesus,’ but as ‘the souls of those beheaded for the testimony of Jesus’” (Interpreting the Book of Revelation, p. 136)*.

Thus, the fifth seal pictures tribulation on the true people of God because of their religious convictions. For this reason John sees them represented as “souls” under the altar.

In the Old Testament sacrifices, most of the blood was poured out at the bottom or base of the altar ([Leviticus 4:7](#)). The life or soul of the animals — and of humans — was said to be in the blood ([Leviticus 17:11](#)). Paul used the idea of an offering to describe the persecution he suffered and his imminent martyrdom. Both were, he said, **“like a drink offering” (Philippians 2:17; 2 Timothy 4:6)**. In that sense, Revelation sees Christians who suffer persecution or martyrdom as sweet sacrifices offered to God.

We should note that the scene in Revelation 6 picturing souls under the altar is not meant to explain what the state of the dead is. It is a metaphor for martyrdom. Revelation is describing, in a graphic and meaningful way, that the faithful have been killed for their convictions.

These souls under the altar are pictured as crying out, **“How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (6:10)**.

Servants of God down through the ages have asked the same question ([Isaiah 6:11](#); [Jeremiah 47:6](#); [Zechariah 1:12](#); [Luke 18:1-8](#)). David had asked precisely this question on a number of occasions ([Psalm 13:1](#); [35:17](#); [74:9](#); [79:5](#); [80:4](#); [89:46](#)). **“My soul is in anguish,”** he cried out, **“How long, O Lord, how long?” (Psalm 6:3)**. Habakkuk asked: **“How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?” (1:2)**.

We could readily imagine how the church of John’s day would have related to this question of “How long?” Jerusalem had fallen a generation earlier. (This assumes a date for the writing of Revelation as being around A.D. 96.) The early expectancy of Christ’s return had not materialized. The church was suffering at least sporadic persecution from Jews and Roman authorities. Some Christians had been martyred, banished or had their property confiscated.

How should the church understand the persecution and martyrdom of its people ([Revelation 2:2, 9](#); [3:9, 13](#))? The fifth seal tells the church this persecution and martyrdom is not random or meaningless. It is a sweet sacrifice to God, who knows precisely what the church is suffering and enduring.

Perhaps some opponents or “believers” were scoffing about the Christian belief in Christ’s return. John’s church would have faced a situation not unlike Peter’s a generation earlier. Some may have been asking, as in Peter’s day: **“Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:3)**.

Peter had counseled patience. **“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness,”** he said ([verse 9](#)). In the same way, Revelation’s sixth seal counsels the church of the 90s A.D. to have patience — **“to wait a little longer” (6:11)**.

The question of “How long?” is addressed to a sovereign, holy and true God (6:10). Sovereign Lord is a rendering of *ho despotes*. It described one who was a master of slaves. We are to understand that God has total power over the forces of the world. But he is not an unfeeling dictator or despot. God is a holy and true master. He is beyond evil and thoroughly trustful.

This God will vindicate the saints in the end over the “inhabitants of the earth” (6:10). This phrase appears several times in Revelation and refers to unrepentant humanity (3:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:8, as well as 13:12; 14:6).

The world is human society that has been led astray by the devil or Satan (12:9). It lays under his spiritual sway and control (1 John 5:19). The world’s people are “*at home in the present world order, men of earthbound vision, trusting in earthly security, unable to look beyond the things that are seen and temporal,*” says G.B. Caird (*Black’s New Testament Commentaries*, “A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine, 2nd edition, p. 88).

On the other hand, faithful Christians admit that they are “**aliens and strangers on earth**” and desire “**a better country — a heavenly one**” (Hebrews 11:13, 16). They seek the kingdom of God and the New Jerusalem. In Revelation these saints cry out to God to avenge their blood or martyrdom (6:10).

Some have recoiled at this desire as being less than Christian. However, we should see this not so much as a wish for personal vengeance or revenge but as one for vindication. The martyrs are not out to avenge themselves against the specific people who did them harm. They want the *cause* for which they gave their lives to be vindicated. The martyrs desire Jesus Christ to return and bring his reward of salvation as well as his universal rule.

“It is not the individual perpetrators of the crime but the world’s judgment which is in view. The real parallel to this passage is . . . the parable of the widow’s cry for vengeance. . . with the lesson ‘How much more will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night?’ (Luke 18:1-8)” (G.R. Beasley-Murray, *The New Century Bible Commentary*, “Revelation,” p. 136).

To vindicate the saints is by necessity to pass judgment on the world. If God is to pronounce the saints righteous, he must judge the persecutors to be what Revelation says they are. The sinning world must be sentenced in judgment. Says G. B. Caird: “*The point at issue here is not the personal relations of the martyrs with their accusers, but the validity of their faith. They have gone to their death in the confidence that God’s word. . . is the ultimate truth; but unless in the end tyranny and other forms of wickedness meet with retribution, that faith is an illusion*” (*Black’s New Testament Commentaries*, “A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine,” 2nd edition, p. 85).

For this reason, the fifth seal pictures the “souls” as receiving white robes (6:11). In the book of Revelation white robes are symbols of blessedness and purity. We find a little later that the redeemed have white robes (7:9). They were white and clean having been washed in the justifying blood of the Lamb (7:14).

Sixth Seal: Cosmic Signs

When the sixth seal was opened, John saw awesome cosmic disturbances. There was a great earthquake, the sun turned black, the moon became blood red, stars fell to earth, the sky folded up like a scroll, mountains and islands moved (6:12-14).

The contents of the first five seals had been described in similar words in the “little apocalypses” of Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. The cosmic catastrophes described by the sixth seal were also mentioned by Jesus in this same discourse. “**Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened,**” said Jesus, “**and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken**” (Matthew 24:29).

The similarities between [Matthew 24:29](#) and [Revelation 6:12-14](#) are obvious. Leon Morris says, “*The importance of this is that John’s picture of a ruined universe was not some strange new teaching for his readers. It was a restatement of beliefs already held on supreme authority. What the faithful Witness at one time had said on earth, He now repeats from heaven*” (*Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, “Revelation,” revised edition, p. 107).

More than this, what Jesus had said in the synoptic Gospels was closely reminiscent of the Old Testament. The prophet Joel had spoken these words in God’s name: “**I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord**” (2:30-31). This was typical prophetic language to describe God’s judgment, the end of the world’s kingdoms and the inauguration of the kingdom of God ([Haggai 2:6](#); [Isaiah 13:10](#); [34:4](#); [Jeremiah 4:23-28](#)).

In the Old Testament earthquakes were also regular features of divine visitation. When God descended on Mount Sinai, “**the whole mountain trembled violently**” ([Exodus 19:18](#)). Isaiah prophesied of a time when the Lord would “**shake the earth**” ([Isaiah 2:19](#)). In Haggai, the Lord says: “**In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land**” (2:6).

This language had been picked up in Jewish writings of the intertestamental period and had become typical of apocalyptic tracts. In apocalyptic literature the “end of the world” was described by cosmic disturbances of various kinds (1 Enoch 80:4ff; Sibylline Oracles 3:801-802; [4 Ezra 5:4-5](#); Assumption of Moses 10.5).

Thus, for the members of the seven churches of Asia, the meaning of the seals would have been quite well understood. William Barclay says: “*Strange as John’s pictures may seem to us, there is not a single detail which is not in the pictures of the end time in the Old Testament and in the books written between the Testaments*” (*The Daily Study Bible Series*, “The Revelation of John,” volume 2, revised edition, p.15).

It would have been evident to the church of John’s day that the opening of the sixth seal was meant to be a precursor of God’s judgment against human-directed civilization. It was, in the words of Robert H. Mounce, the “*grim announcement that the end of the world was at hand*” (*The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, “The Book of Revelation, p. 161). The end of the world, of course, is to be understood within the context of the new beginning and the new creation that God brings about.

John described the human reaction to these terrifying cosmic distresses. People hid in caves and tried to seclude themselves from God and Christ ([6:15](#)). This language, too, is reflected in the Old Testament. **Isaiah** had written: “**Men will flee to caves in the rocks and to holes in the ground from dread of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to shake the earth**” ([2:19](#)).

But the heavenly disruption merely presages a greater terror. It is God’s “wrath.” **People cry out to the rocks and mountains: “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come”** ([6:16-17](#)).

The “**wrath of the Lamb**” is an unusual expression — used only once. But we should note that this is something the terrified people call the calamities they experience. They do not see the Lamb of God as the one who gave his life for human sin or God as the one who sent his Son to die ([John 3:16-17](#)). The inhabitants of the world still see God only as a vengeful being.

The “**wrath of God**,” of course, is a basic theme of the Bible. Revelation tells us much about it ([6:17](#); [11:18](#); [14:10](#); [16:19](#); [19:15](#)). It is another way of describing the “day of the Lord.” The prophet Joel described it as “**dreadful**” ([2:11](#)). **Zephaniah** said it was “**a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness**” ([1:14](#)).

The wrath of God isn’t spiteful hate or personal vindictiveness. It is God’s holy response to unrepented sin that is the cause of the misery and suffering humans bring upon themselves.

The fearful people of earth living during this time of judgment — from kings to slaves — ask a legitimate question: “Who can stand?” ([Revelation 6:17](#)). The question is actually a quote from [Malachi 3:2](#): “**Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?**” J. Ramsey Michaels has pointed out a possible connection between the question at the end of chapter six — “Who can stand?” — and the vision of the secure church in chapter seven. This chapter describes various groups who are “standing” (*Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, p. 56).

Four angels stand at the four corners of the earth ([Revelation 7:1](#)). Later, angels stand around the throne ([7:11](#)). A great multitude of the saved stands before the throne of God ([7:9](#)). Thus, those with God — the angelic hosts and the saved — are the only ones who can “stand” or remain safe when God’s wrath strikes.

Author: Paul Kroll

REVELATION 7 – WHO ARE THE 144,000?

The 144,000 martyrs are described in the first vision John sees in book of Revelation, chapter 7. Later, he will see a vision of the great multitudes in white robes. Both groups appear to represent the full number and universal nature of the company of God’s people as Revelation presents them. Let’s look at the details of John’s visions of the 144,000. The 144,000 is the first group to be sealed and protected from what is coming ([Rev. 7:3-8](#)). Revelation 14 describes them as those who were “**redeemed from the earth**” ([14:4](#)). John says “**they have not defiled themselves**” ([14:4](#)). The 144,000 follow the Lamb wherever he goes and “**no lie was found in their mouths**” ([14:5](#)).

The context suggests that the 144,000 symbolize those who are true to God and his way. This group is composed of *spiritual* virgins, who do not commit spiritual fornication by following false religious and philosophical teachings. Neither have they refused to repent of ungodly behavior. They are true to God’s perfect way. Those whom God has “sealed” will survive the outpouring of God’s wrath. They may suffer trials, persecution or even martyrdom, but they are saved for eternal life.

The sealing of God's servants has much in common with a vision the prophet **Ezekiel** experienced. He saw human figures in Jerusalem (which is probably a symbol for the righteous remnant among the tribes of Israel) disturbed over the sins being committed in the city (9:4). They also received a "mark" on the forehead, as a sign of their faithfulness to God's way.

What does it mean to be marked and sealed in the way Revelation 7 speaks of? To be "sealed" is a symbolic way of saying that the 144,000 are identified as belonging to God. They are "marked" as his special people. In ancient times, a seal commonly indicated possession, much in the way a rancher's brand identifies which cattle belong to him. Merchants in ancient times would also place seals on packages to certify ownership.

To have the seal of God, then, is to belong to God – to be his spiritual child. Paul explains that God has **"set his seal of ownership on us"** (2 Corinthians 1:22). Christians can be sure of God's divine care for, **"The Lord knows those who are his"** (2 Timothy 2:19). The saints are sealed by the Holy Spirit **"for the day of redemption"** (Ephesians 4:30).

Ownership includes protection from condemnation, and the seal of God protects his people. Those who lack this seal face the judgment of God. The plagues fall only on **"those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads"** (9:4). They are the ones marked by their owners – the devil and his world system (13:16-17; 14:9; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4).

The servants' "mark" or seal is contrasted with the mark the followers of the "beast" receive. They are branded with the mark of his name or his number on the hand and forehead (13:16; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). This singles out and labels such people as the enemies of God and slaves of the beast.

What is being contrasted in Revelation, then, is the security of the faithful with a fearful world that can find no protection from the judgment of God. The church, powerless before the state apparatus, is being encouraged to see that God has already separated it for eternal life. The authorities or enemies of the church may be able to kill the body, but they cannot harm the soul (Luke 1:68-74; 12:5).

It seems clear that the vision in Revelation 7 has the church in view, not the ancient nation of Israel. The emphasis in the New Testament is on the *spiritual* people of God or his church. It is not interested in racial distinctions (Galatians 3:28). Paul says that the heir of Abraham is the person who is in Christ (Galatians 3:29). He is the father of all who believe (Romans 4:11).

The believer in Christ is the true Jew (Romans 2:29). Peter speaks of the church as a holy nation and chosen people (1 Peter 2:9). Paul said of the church: **"It is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus"** (Philippians 3:3). These are phrases and ideas taken from the Old Testament and applied to the New Testament church. The church is the extension of national Israel, or better, its replacement, elevated to a spiritual plane.

Certain details within the enumeration of the 144,000 indicate that Revelation 7 has the church in view. John has been careful to tell us that there are 12,000 people sealed from each tribe. But we notice several irregularities in his list of the tribes. In fact, John's list does not agree with the order of any other list of the tribes in the Bible.

The tribe of Dan is missing in his list. To keep the number of tribes at 12, the tribe of Joseph appears twice, once under his own name and once under the name of his son Manasseh. Joseph's other son, Ephraim, is not mentioned. In the Genesis lists of the tribes, Reuben, as first-born, comes first. But John begins his list with Judah, rather than Reuben, the oldest son of Jacob or Israel. John may give preference to Judah because Jesus Christ belonged to the tribe of Judah (Hebrews 7:14).

John's list omits the tribe of Dan. This tribe settled in Laish after the Exodus and lapsed into idolatrous worship (Judges 18:30). Later, the king of Israel, Jeroboam, set up one of two great worship centers opposed to the God of Israel in Dan (1 Kings 12:28-29). Though Dan appears in different locations in the Genesis lists, he does appear. No matter what his spiritual condition, his inheritance in Israel was guaranteed by birth, not moral uprightness. His omission in Revelation implies inheritance comes not through human birth – rather, it comes through faith in Christ.

Interestingly, we do find Dan included among the tribes listed in Ezekiel (48:32). Yet, despite the fact that the last chapters of Ezekiel serve as a model for parts of Revelation, Dan is omitted in (Revelation) chapter 7. Dan's omission from John's list must have made an important point to the church about idolatrous worship. Some of the seven churches are chastised for idolatry – that is, they are selling Christ out for Caesar worship and for participation in the ways of this world. Revelation implies that if they continue to do so, their candlestick will be removed – as was Dan's. They will not be included in the register or roll of spiritual Israel.

The irregularities in the list of tribes help us to identify the 144,000 of the "tribes" of Israel as a metaphor for the church – the spiritual Israel. This understanding of "Israel" accords well with the historical situation during John's day.

Is the church to be literally limited to 144,000? Circumstances militate against such an interpretation. If true, it would mean that only some of those who accepted Christ in the first century are saved, and none since, as the number would have been filled to the full early on.

Revelation's use of numbers also suggests that the 144,000 are not meant as a literal count. Since Israel is a *symbol* for the church, we should not take the 144,000 as a literal number either. Revelation is a book of cosmic symbols, and it uses numbers such as seven and twelve in symbolic ways. Twelve seems to be used as a foundational number, such as in the twelve apostles and twelve tribes of Israel. The number 144,000 (12 x 12 x 1000) would then tell us the church is a complete "nation" of large size.

Author: Paul Kroll

REVELATION 11 – THE TWO WITNESSES

Many Christians through the ages have wondered who the "two witnesses" of Revelation 11 happen to be. The two witnesses are among the most dramatic characters of Scripture. They prophesy before the world for three and a half years (1,260 days) (**Rev. 11:3**). During this time, they can strike the earth with whatever plague they desire, and cannot be harmed by their enemies (**11:5-6**). Ultimately, they are killed by the beast (**11:7**) but they rise to life in three and a half days (**11:11**). How are we to understand the two witnesses and the unusual happenings surrounding their lives?

Are they two actual people who prophesy before Jesus' return? Do they symbolize the church in an aspect of its gospel preaching? Commentators have found Revelation 11 quite difficult to interpret and have identified the two witnesses in more than a dozen ways. Let's see what the book of Revelation tells us.

John does not name or specifically identify the two witnesses. However, some indicators point the way towards at least their symbolic identification. Revelation describes the two witnesses as two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the Lord (**11:4**). Not surprisingly, an Old Testament passage contains these images. **Zechariah** saw a vision of a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at its top containing seven lights. By the bowls, one on each side, were the two olive trees (**4:2-3**).

Zechariah asked the angel for the identity of the two olive trees. The angel's answer was: "**These are the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth**" (**4:14**). That is, they are witnesses or prophets of God.

The subject of Zechariah's book was a call to God's people to repent (**Zechariah 1:3**). As did their ancient predecessors, the two witnesses wear rough sackcloth, a badge of the office of a prophet who calls people to repentance. In ancient times, sackcloth was the garment depicting mourning and contrition (**Jeremiah 4:8**; **Matthew 11:21**).

In Zechariah, the two olive trees stand beside the lampstand that has seven lights. Revelation uses a lampstand as a symbol of the church (**1:20**). Perhaps John was trying to tell his readers that the two witnesses were to be identified with the church, perhaps as its representatives or leaders. Through them the divine light of God reflected by the churches is made evident to the world (**Matthew 5:15-16**).

Moses and Elijah as models

It's also possible that the two witnesses are symbolically modeled after Moses and Elijah. They "**have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain**" (**11:6**). This power was associated with Elijah, whose prayer caused a terrible drought in Israel (**1 Kings 17:1**).

Elijah's deed was proverbial among Jews in the first century. James mentioned the drought as an example of the power of a righteous person's prayer (**James 5:17**). He said that Elijah's prayer caused a drought of exactly three and a half years — the time referred to in Revelation in various forms. Luke also referred to the famine in Elijah's time, and said it had a length of three and a half years (**Luke 4:25**). Interestingly, in **1 Kings** the time of the drought is said to be "**the next few years**" (**17:1**) or **about three years** (**18:1**).

As did Moses, the two witnesses "**have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague**" (**11:6 with Exodus 7:14-21**). This recalls Moses' role as God's agent, who through ten plagues — including turning the Nile and the waters of Egypt into blood — brought down the most powerful kingdom of the day.

Also, like Elijah, the two witnesses can consume their enemies with fire, if they try to hurt them (**11:5 with 2 Kings 1:10**). This fire is said to "**come from their mouths**" (**11:5**). Such a literal occurrence would be an odd sight, indeed!

It seems clear, then, that the two witnesses are portrayed as coming in the power of both Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest prophets of the Jewish nation. The writer appears to be creating a symbolic universe for his readers in which he is making a connection between God's acts in Jewish history and through the church.

Literal or symbolic?

Perhaps there is a literal aspect to the fire from heaven or other elements, but we cannot neglect their metaphorical meaning. Fire coming from the mouth is a symbol used for powerful preaching. The image was used of Jeremiah's witnessing: **"I will make my words in your mouth a fire and these people the wood it consumes"** (Jeremiah 5:14).

However, Jeremiah did not do any miraculous works. He was a prophet who spoke God's word. That was the only "fire" that came out of his mouth. He "tormented" Judah with his spiritually sharp words, which his hearers could not bear.

We must be careful, then, how we interpret the images of Revelation. Is the preaching of the two witnesses the "fire" that "kills" their enemies by being unbearable? Or do they actually call down real fire from heaven, which is said to come from their mouth — at their request? (To repeat, it would be strange, indeed, if actual fire came from the mouth of two human beings. Yet, that would be the conclusion of a literal interpretation of this image.)

In any case, the imagery of Revelation 11 is so carefully worked out to coincide with the most noteworthy accomplishments of Elijah and Moses that it cannot be accidental. John is giving his hearer — readers a message. When you think of the two witnesses, think of Moses and Elijah.

Why was he doing this? Here is one possible answer. The Jews commonly expected that Elijah and Moses would somehow "return" before the end-time (Mark 9:11). This idea was based on Old Testament texts. The prophet Malachi had written in God's name: **"I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes"** (Malachi 4:5). Of course, Jesus had already pointed out that Malachi's "Elijah" was a symbol for a great prophet, in this case John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11-14). So had the Gospel of Luke (1:16-17).

Thus, the church should have understood that "Elijah" had already come, and he was symbolic of John the Baptist. Perhaps, because of some Jewish thinking to the contrary, a question about this had arisen in the church.

In the same way, the Jews expected a Moses to come on the scene at some point in the future (John 6:14). This idea may have come from Moses' prophecy of Christ (**"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers"**), which was sometimes misunderstood to refer to Moses himself (Deuteronomy 18:18).

Christ himself seemed to play on this important symbolism. It was Moses and Elijah who appeared with Jesus in the Transfiguration (Mark 9:4). Apparently, the disciples who saw this associated the vision with the kingdom to come at the end of the age.

Why these two prophets?

But why bring up Moses and Elijah in particular, or at all? We have to see the early Christian church as struggling with Judaism over the question: Who are the true people of God? The Jews expected Moses and Elijah to appear before the kingdom could appear — and come to them because *they* were its children. Because of this controversy it was necessary for Christ and the church leaders to say something about these two Old Testament giants in terms of their relationship to the church.

They implied that these two prophets are to be associated with the church and not with Judaism. The Gospels are keen to connect the prophets with Christ, not the Jewish authorities. But the question — Who are the true people of God? — continued through the decades.

Now, in the last decades of the first century — with only John left of the original witnesses — what we might call the "final statement" is made about this matter.

(Assuming a late date for the writing of Revelation.) He makes his point by first associating Elijah and Moses with the faithful church, and then by casting the church in the image of the two ancient spiritual giants of faith.

This is obviously a symbolic interpretation of the two witnesses. Some, of course, interpret the material in Revelation 11 in a literal matter. The two witnesses are said to be two individuals who will create real plagues. The problem is that this interpretation demands that a real temple must exist in Jerusalem, with sacrifices being offered (11:1). There must also be a real temple in heaven containing the ark of the covenant (11:19). Precisely seven thousand people must be killed in an earthquake (11:13). And, fire must come from two human mouths (11:5).

A symbolic interpretation avoids these problems of interpretation. The temple, for example, could be the church and not a physical building. Indeed, that is the New Testament meaning of the temple. Could we not, then, also see the two witnesses as symbolic of — or at least representative of — the church universal in the end-time?

Revelation pictures the church as a martyr church. It is the souls under the altar — representing the church — who were "slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained" (6:9). This is precisely what happens to the two witnesses — they are martyred for their *testimony* (11:7).

That the two witnesses are called lampstands indicates how Revelation understands their role. In the words of G.R. Beasley-Murray, “*They represent the churches fulfilling their vocation to bear witness to Christ in the final time of tribulation,*” (*The New Century Bible Commentary, “Revelation,”* p. 178).

Revelation had already introduced the martyr Antipas of Pergamum (2:13). He was called a “**faithful witness**” and was a representative of the church as a whole who had remained true to Christ’s name. Perhaps that is the sense in which we should understand the two witnesses.

It seems possible, then, to explain the two witnesses as symbols of the witnessing church. Certainly, that was the role of the church in the days of the apostles. Based on the commission given by Jesus, that responsibility remains the continuing role of the church until “**the very end of the age**” or his return (Matthew 28:19-20). In the words of Robert W. Wall: “*The two witnesses symbolize the entire worshiping community which bears collective witness to God and to God’s Christ*” (*New International Biblical Commentary, “Revelation,”* p. 150).

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