

JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 54

SEPTEMBER 2014

NUMBER 3

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The JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY is published at Immanuel Lutheran College, 501 Grover Road, Eau Claire, Wisconsin 54701-7199, by authorization of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. U.S. subscriptions: \$14.00 per year, \$27.00 for two years, \$40.00 for three years (Canada: \$18.00, \$35.00, and \$52.00; overseas: \$28.00, \$55.00, and \$82.00) payable in advance. Issues are dated as the months of March, June, September, and December.

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VICTORY!

(Sermon text: Revelation 1:1-7)

Frank Gantt

Grace, mercy, and peace are yours from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

More and more we Christians are witnessing hostility from a world that is opposed to our Lord, and thus also opposed to those who in faith bow before Him. If you believe in the six-day creation reported in the opening pages of the Bible, you will be ridiculed as ignorant. If you acknowledge sin to be the cause of so much distress in the world and in our individual lives, you will be accused of being loveless. If you take a stand against the rampant immorality engulfing our nation on the basis of Scripture's moral code in the Ten Commandments, you will be called self-righteous. If you trust in Jesus as the only name by which you or anyone can be saved and that His death on the cross has made you acceptable to God, then—in the eyes of many around us and among whom we live—you are a fool.

It used to seem that Satan and those he holds captive through his lies were slowly destroying the foundations of godliness. These days, however, it seems as though they are on the brink of bringing the whole Church to its knees. The persecution of Christians has increased dramatically in recent years, and that includes an increase in martyrdom as well. Meanwhile, God's people face spiritual harassment at the hands of public universities and other secular institutions. It is not uncommon, then, for Christians to wonder in fear what will be the end of it all. I know that as a parent I am often afraid of what my children will have to contend with in the next few decades. Will there be open persecution of Christians in this country? Will there be mass imprisonments for those who trust in the only name under heaven by which we must be saved? Will the day come that those who put us to death think they are doing the world, and maybe even God, a favor? Perhaps such days will come.

This is the reason why it is so important that we turn to God's Word for the instruction and the hope that it gives. In our sermon series during the Trinity season, we are going to turn to that Word of God which speaks about all these things of which we have concerns. It is also that Word of God which cheers our hearts and, in accord with God's own promise, gives blessings to those who hear it. The Word of God before us today and in the Trinity Sundays to come is the book we know as Revelation, which in the opening verses points our attention to the promise and expectation of VICTORY! Our text today is Revelation 1:1-7, reading as follows:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. (ESV)

To many people the book of Revelation is a mystery wrapped in an enigma. Its strange and symbolic imagery, along with its use of numbers, are reason in the minds of many to put it down before they even pick it up. For others the book is just *dark* as it speaks about scorpions and beasts and plagues and even a prostitute. These are some of the things through which we will work as our series progresses; but the reality is that the book is not as complicated as it may seem. Yes, there are parts of it that we may have difficulty trying to understand, but many of those difficulties fall away as we compare what is written in Revelation to the literal, plain passages of Holy Scripture, especially what is written in the Old Testament prophets.

The fact of the matter is that the book of Revelation is not as complicated as we may imagine it to be. It really is about something simple—it's about victory. That is, the victory of Christ over His enemies and thus also the victory of the Church, which is Christ's bride. That message rings out throughout the book, beginning with the very first verses for our consideration here today.

In our Epistle reading from Ephesians 6 we were reminded that we are caught in a life-and-death struggle for as long as we live in this world. Yet it's not really against other people that we are wrestling. It's "*against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*" (Eph. 6:12 ESV). In other words, our fight—our war—is against demons and devils. This being the case, we are in a far worse situation than we can fully realize, and we cannot overcome by drawing a gun or casting a ballot. In fact, we are incapable of defeating our enemies at all on our own.

There are several reasons for this being true. One is what we may call "the fog of war." Battle tacticians speak of "the fog of war" in reference to not always knowing where the enemy is and what unforeseen circumstances could arise during a battle. That's why the US military develops all kinds of surveillance technologies—to reduce the fog of war as much as possible. However, we as believers aren't dealing with enemies that can be located by radar or infrared. We are dealing with enemies that exist in a spiritual realm. They are hidden from our sight until we witness the evidence of their presence in the form of the wicked agendas and immoral acts of man. These enemies are lurking all around us, even in the privacy of our own homes, and we don't even notice them until the damage is done.

Thankfully, our text reminds us that there is no fog of war for Christ. Note again verse 1: "*The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.*" Christ already sees—with perfect clarity—all of the raging and raving of our enemies. More than that, He reveals to us much of what is going to happen. No, He doesn't give us all the details, but He certainly gives us enough so that we should not be not caught off guard. He does this so that we do not become overwhelmed and fall to the temptation of giving up the fight. It is a sad thing indeed when Christians walk away from the battlefield to chase after the luxuries of immorality simply because they fail to listen to what our Lord tells us about the outcome of the war that is under way. John appeals to us with this promise: "*Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.*" That means that there is no cause for fear as we witness the things that we see in this world. Christ already knows about them, all of them, and He reveals to us His victory, which He will share with all those who will listen to Him.

Secondly, we have no chance of winning this fight on our own because, quite frankly, we are weak, made so by the universal corruption of sin. Again, this is not a matter of physical strength of arms, or even mental tenacity. This is a matter of our inner nature; it's a spiritual battle that is being waged, after all. Since sin has corrupted our nature, we are easy prey to all manner of temptations—lust, pride, greed, jealousy—and thus the devil's task becomes an easier one. He only has to take advantage of our weaknesses. That's why we sin so often and so easily. That's why it's hard to turn away from an indecent picture. That's why it feels good to speak negatively about others and to tear them down. That's why we are quick to build up for ourselves all kinds of temporary treasures and to ignore both the needs of our neighbors and the spiritual needs of our own souls. It's also why we aren't always quick to submit to the instruction God's Word holds out for us. It's not that we don't know better; it's that the temptations are strong, and the ever-present sin within us makes us weak.

Yet in the words of Luther's most famous hymn: "*With might of ours can naught be done, Soon were our loss effected; But for us fights the Valiant One, Whom God Himself elected. Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is, Of Sabaoth Lord, And there's none other God; He holds the field forever.*" In our text the Holy Spirit assures us of this truth by giving John these words: "*John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*"

While it is true that we could never stand alone in this fight because of the weakness that is in us through sin, the truth remains that we aren't alone. Jesus is with us—with His grace and peace. Grace is that favor of God upon those who do not deserve it, pardoning their sins and giving them the gift of eternal life. Peace is the result of that grace at work, as the sinner is brought back into a right and good relationship with God. This grace and peace are inseparably ours in Christ because Christ is our Great Hero. He has freed us from our sins, and so also by His blood He has freed us from Satan's tyranny and death's dominion. His crucifixion was the means by which God crushed the head of the devil, as Christ, the Son of God, was "made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). The victory was then sealed forever by the Lord's own triumph over the grave and His ascension to the Father's right hand in glory. He therefore is worthy of all honor and praise, and to Him belongs all authority and power, since He is our Champion and the everlasting Victor over sin, death, and hell.

Our text ends with this statement: "*Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.*" When we hear these words, perhaps we think of Judgment Day, even as the angels told the disciples at the Lord's ascension that Jesus would come in the same way He departed. However, we get here our first taste of the kind of language that is used in the book of Revelation. It's language known as *apocalyptic*, which means that God is revealing something in a mysterious way. In the Old Testament God used this phrase, "coming in the clouds," to speak about conquering armies. If you think about the historical setting involved, it makes sense. In an arid country surrounded by deserts and wilderness, the approach of an army could be seen from far away by the clouds of dust that an army on the move would stir up. The larger the army, the larger the dust clouds would be. Jesus, too, is coming to conquer. He is conquering even now in ways that we don't always notice. In the present time He brings His victory over sin, death, and hell as His Word is preached into the hearts of sinners, freeing them from Satan's dominion and giving them peace with God. He is conquering also as the gracious waters of Holy Baptism are poured upon sinners, raising them to newness of life. He is conquering whenever sin-burdened consciences are set at peace again through the blessing of Holy Communion, Christ's body given and His blood shed for the remission of their sins. He is conquering when you sit down with your family to read the sacred Scriptures. He is conquering when you speak of salvation in Him to others. In such ways Christ is coming to us in the clouds, bringing to us victory over sin, death, and hell—and, yes, even over the world and our sinful flesh.

No matter how difficult the battles that lie ahead of us appear to be, in Christ Jesus the outcome is already certain. This truth, this theme repeats again and again throughout the entire book of Revelation, and it is the theme of all of Holy Scripture—from the first promise of the Gospel spoken for Adam and Eve (and against Satan) to the last page where Christ promises to come to deliver the fullness of His victory to His Church, His believers. Thus this Revelation is to assure us, even in the midst of our fears, that we truly are, in the words of Paul in Romans, "*more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Rom. 8:37-39 ESV). Amen!

He's Got the Whole Scroll in His Hands

(Sermon text: Revelation 5:1-14)

Frank Gantt

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

In the children's song, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," we teach our children that they have nothing to fear. After all, He's got the "itty, bitty babies," "momma and daddy," and "brother and sister in His hands." He even has "you and me, baby" in His hands. The song clearly emphasizes that there is nothing that can happen to any of God's children from which the Lord cannot protect them.

As we grow up, the things that cause us to be fearful and anxious will change. No longer are we afraid of thunder and monsters and things that go bump in the night. Now our fears come from the things

that are happening all around us and in the world at large. If you've paid any attention at all to world news, then you know not only of a new Islamic organization threatening and killing Christians in Iraq, but also their threat to attack here as well. This week will hold the anniversary of the attacks on the twin towers in New York on 9/11, and some suspect that ISIS will try to hit an American target this week. That fear is exacerbated by more recent news reporting that over 1,000 Syrian nationals are in the US whose whereabouts have been lost track of recently. Scary stuff, if you let your mind wander!

What do the days, weeks, and years ahead hold in store for us? We don't know, and not knowing is part of what causes one to be afraid. But there is always One who knows, and we know Him: the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who holds all authority in heaven and on earth. More than that, He holds the future in His hands. Jesus isn't just around, acting and reacting as events unfold in the world. He already knows what's going to happen before it happens, and He is working through it all to give to His people, the Church, His certain victory over the world and the threats of evil that they face.

In our text the future of this world is symbolized by a scroll. We are comforted today by the fact that our Savior holds this scroll in His hands. We read from Revelation 5:1-14:

Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped. (ESV)

Sometimes it seems that this world is spinning out of control. Chaos appears to have gained the upper hand over order. Terrorism and turmoil seek to bring an end to tranquility and peace. Diseases, like Ebola, are breaking out and spreading. Nations are warring against nations. Jesus told us such things would happen and would continue to happen on the earth.

He also told us that there would be much hostility against His Church. And so we see that Christians all over the world are being persecuted, chased from their homes, harassed, even executed for their faith in Jesus. The Church has hit hard times here in the United States as well. Relatively few, it would seem, have any interest in the true gospel. Not many people express a need for Christ and the forgiveness of sins. Instead, even people who confess to be Christians are falling into the hedonism of the society in which we live

When we are faced with these situations—unless we have our heads buried comfortably in the sand, blithely unaware of what is going on around us—we may be tempted to despair, to lose all hope. We look at this world and say: What is going on here? What will become of us? Is there any hope for the future?

Today it is my privilege and calling to tell you: Yes, there is hope for the future. There is Someone in charge. History has a destination, and it's a good one for those who trust in Christ as their Savior. You see, I've read the end of the book. What I mean is, the history of the future has already been written. It's like a scroll to be unrolled. And the good news is this: Someone has been found who is able to unroll that scroll and thus reveal the course of events and their final outcome. It is Someone who not only reveals the content, but is in charge of it all, ruling all things for the good of His Church and for the ministry of His Gospel. This someone is the "Lion of the tribe of Judah," the "Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8 NKJ). It's Jesus!

The setting of this text was more than a vision. The apostle John was taken into heaven by the Spirit to receive a glimpse of the world's future. He was taken into the throne room of God, where he saw and heard the company of heaven worshiping the Lord God Almighty, the Creator of all things. That is what we considered last Sunday in Revelation 4. Now, as we move into chapter 5, John has seen in God's right hand a scroll. This scroll contains the comprehensive record of everything that would take place in the world until the Last Day. But the scroll is rolled up, and it is securely sealed by seven seals which no man or angel can open. The history of the future may be written, but it is hidden from our sight.

This was quite distressing to John, and he began to weep. John knew all about the suffering and the persecution that the Church would experience in this world. As he received this vision, he himself was in exile on the island of Patmos for his confession of Christ. So he wanted to know if there was going to be any end to the suffering and chaos. Are things ever going to get better? Does God not care about what is happening on this earth? The scroll would tell us, the scroll in God's right hand, but that scroll is closed and sealed securely with no one able to open it.

Until now. Now someone is found who is able, who is worthy. John hears the command: "*Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.*" In other words, it's the Messiah, the God-Man, Jesus Christ who has come and conquered. He has won the victory over the enemies of God's people. Therefore He is able to unseal the scroll and unroll it.

The Lion of the tribe of Judah—that is where John is told to look. And so he does, where he sees a Lamb. The Lion is a Lamb! A lion is a suitable image to represent, as one might expect, a mighty conqueror. And Christ is that. He has won the victory, but the way He has won is not what anyone would expect. Christ has conquered by being the Lamb. Lambs do not strike terror into people. They are small, frail, and timid creatures, but that particular image does not describe Christ, the Son of God. What describes Him here and the way He obtained the victory for us is expressed in the Old Testament use of lambs as the required sacrifice. Christ obtained the victory by being a Lamb – God's own Lamb sacrificed for our sins, the Innocent for all the guilty. That is who the Christ is, the Lamb that has been slain, the one whose blood could actually make and did make full atonement for every sin. Only now, let's realize, He is standing in heaven at the throne of God, alive and well.

This is where we are to look also. When the future looks bleak and uncertain, be it because of the hostility of the world against you or because of the guilt that is yours because of your sins, look to Christ, the Lamb who was slain, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He died on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for your sin, all of it. He is now risen and exalted at the right hand of God, victorious in the fight. He has defeated all your enemies: sin, death, chaos, evil, suffering, wicked rulers, the grave, and the bleak, unknown future. Christ Jesus has defeated all our foes by His sacrificial death and His victorious resurrection. Thus we, like John, should weep no more!

"And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne." Jesus holds the future in His hands. He is the one in charge, our Savior. The Lamb takes the scroll, and this prompts a joyous outburst in heaven. Everyone around the throne sings a new song to the Lamb: *"Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."*

Worthy is Christ to be praised! He has every right and the authority to open this scroll, to reveal the history of the future and to rule over those events, making them come to pass. To this Man has been

given all authority in heaven and on earth, inasmuch as this Man is also the true God who obtained victory for us. Listen, you frightened Christians! Listen, you persecuted Church! Listen to the song they are singing in heaven! By His holy, precious blood Christ Jesus has ransomed and redeemed, purchased and liberated, separated and saved a people belonging to God from every nation on earth. They're speaking every sort of language—Swedish and Swahili, German and Japanese, Arabic and English.

Yes, Christ is interested in what is happening here on earth! He has people, a people called the Church, consisting of redeemed sinners in every corner, every nook and cranny of this world. He is committed to His people. They are precious to Him. He has not forgotten any of them—any of you—despite all the suffering and the chaos and the madness going on in this dying world. Be encouraged today! Weep no more. The history of the future has been written, and Christ is holding it in His conquering, controlling hand. As events unfold, you can be sure that there is an end in sight, that the risen and exalted Christ is ruling all things now for the sake of His Church and for the sake of the Gospel by which we and all believers are going to be saved.

It doesn't always look like it from our perspective here on earth—that much is true. But that is only because of our limited perspective of things. This is why John was given this special revelation: that we would have another perspective, a new perspective, to see how things look from heaven's supreme vantage point. That's the point, the message of this book of Revelation, as we'll continually be reminded of in the continuation of our series. Look to Christ! Behold Him. Behold Him as the Lamb who was slain. Behold Him as the Lion risen and ruling all things to give us a future that is bright.

Today, as we sing our feeble praises here, know also that we are joining with the whole company of worshipers in heaven and on earth, in the most joyous song there is: "*Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!*" "*To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!*" Amen!

Introduction to the Book of *Revelation*

Steve Sippert

- The following makes use of both endnotes and parenthetical citation per MLA guidelines. For more information on the sources quoted, see Works Cited on page 34. Unless noted otherwise, Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

As a title for the last book of the New Testament, *Revelation* is simply the translation of ἀποκάλυψις (*apocalypse*), the very first word to occur in the Greek text. Though brief, it is enough to identify this intriguing part of Scripture, which has gone by various names that have some reference to its writer, John (e.g., *The Revelation of John*, *The Revelation of St. John*, *The Revelation of John the Divine*). Modern versions have gone with *Revelation* (NIV), *The Revelation to John* (NAS), and *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (NKJ). Though biblical book titles are not inspired, the New King James title has a sound basis in simply being a translation of the first three words in the Greek text.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ is from Jesus Christ¹ and about Jesus Christ.² Though given initially to John, it was intended for the Church of his day and beyond—to include believers not only in the province of Asia, but everywhere they would exist in this world until the Lord returns. The introductory (isagogical) matters of its divine origin, its human writer, its initial audience, its genre and structure, its occasion and purpose, etc., could certainly be covered in brief terms, as one would do for a Bible Class audience. For our purposes here this treatment aims to be more extensive, drawing mainly from two kinds of source material: author introductions to commentaries (Becker, Brighton, M. Franzmann, Lenski, W. Mueller) and New Testament survey/introduction books or notes (Franzmann,

Lillegard-Ylvisaker, Tenney, Thiessen). These provide a wide range of information that can give exegetes and teachers of Revelation a rounded, thorough awareness of the book's background.

The author of Revelation³

Given that the writer identifies himself in four places with the name "John" (1:1, 1:4, 1:9, and 22:8), one may think that little else needs to be said. That supposition, of course, would have to assume that John the writer here is John the apostle of Christ. But nowhere in the book does he further specify his identity. He does not call himself "one of the twelve" or "son of Zebedee" or "brother of James." He does not even attach to himself the title of apostle—although his brief identification by a single name was apparently enough for the original audience to know who he was. Some, including a few conservatives, have picked up on the brevity and pose the question: Which John is it? Could it be John Mark? Or a man named John whose life is not referenced in the New Testament record?⁴ Or do we have good reason to accept the traditional view that John, son of Zebedee, brother of James, and one of the 12, has indeed written the book of Revelation?

By "traditional view" we mean what the leaders of the early church held to, which has come down to us in written form. Irenaeus, a Syrian Christian leader (church father) trained in Asia Minor and Rome and eventual bishop of Lyons (Brighton 13), has testified in his *Against Heresies* (AD 180) that John, "the Lord's disciple" wrote Revelation "toward the end of Domitian's reign" (qtd. in Thiessen 317). Louis Brighton makes the point that Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp, who was the student of John in Ephesus.⁵ Another early church father who spent time in Ephesus was Justin Martyr (AD 100-165); he testified also to John the apostle as the author of Revelation in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. This testimony, independent of Irenaeus and a bit earlier than Irenaeus, may not be the earliest one extant. Though not a Christian source, the "Apocryphon of John," a Gnostic document dated to around AD 150, "equates the John of Revelation with John the apostle of Jesus, the son of Zebedee" (Brighton 12). One could go on to cite Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215), Origen, and the Muratorian Fragment or Canon (ca. 170). Clement, according to Eusebius, "says that after the death of Domitian, 'John the apostle' went back to Ephesus after his exile on Patmos" (Brighton 13). The earliest external evidence seems fairly solid, not only to identify the writer as the apostle John, but also the time of his exile to Patmos and what he did after his return.⁶

As one considers, however, the later testimony of third and fourth century sources, a few objections begin to surface. These objections have become the basis for Revelation being classed by some as *antilegomenon*. Revelation has had its detractors, including Luther. And determining authorship factors into the equation—that is, if the book's author is the apostle John, then its content is apostolic and its existence authentic; but if not, what shall we make of it? Well, prior to AD 200 the apostolic authorship of Revelation (i.e., that Apostle John wrote it) had one dissenting voice—maybe.⁷ His name is Papias (ca. 60-130), bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, who according to Irenaeus was a student of John and a colleague of Polycarp. What Papias wrote about John is accessible only through Eusebius—a quotation that Louis Brighton summarizes as follows:

Papias appears to speak of two distinct persons named John, one the disciple of Jesus and the other the elder (who was also a disciple of Jesus, but not one of the Twelve). Much has been written about this fragment of Papias as quoted in Eusebius, arguing both that it supports the apostolic Johannine authorship of Revelation and also that it provides evidence against it. However, on the basis of this fragment alone it cannot be determined whether Papias was referring to two different Johns or twice to the same John. (13)

Luther, for one, expressed doubts about Johannine authorship, partly because of the Papias quotation in Eusebius (Becker 7). Though it may not settle the matter for some scholars, Siegbert Becker may be on to something in his attempt to clarify what Papias could have meant. In the context Papias apparently called all of them (Peter, James, Matthew) "elders," which is applied to John as well, but not to a Christian man named Aristion. The implication seems to be that John was in the same class as Matthew, Peter, etc. (an elder/apostle), but Aristion was not. As for the double mentioning of John by name, the

first occurrence is clearly past tense when Papias said: “I made it a point to inquire what were the declarations of the elders (presbyters), what was said by Andrew, Peter, or Philip. What by Thomas, James, John, Matthew, or any other of the disciples of our Lord.” The first mention of John is tied to a past tense verb. But the second mention of John in the original Greek of Eusebius is present tense and can be rendered “What is being said by Aristion and the presbyter John.” In noting a likely distinction of time, Becker interprets Papias then to mean that Apostle John was still alive and active when Papias was making the inquiries that he mentions.⁸ “Presbyter John” can then be understood as Apostle John—a connection that also fits well with the “Elder” designation used by the writer of 2 John and 3 John.

Early sources that show any dissent against Revelation are a mixed bag, to say the least. Papias is a questionable example, and he seems to be fodder used by Eusebius, whose opinion of Revelation is also hard to pin down. Dionysius of Alexandria (died ca. 264), a student of Origen, “believed that Revelation was written by a John, but not the apostle. He came to this conclusion primarily because of the difference between the literary styles of John’s gospel and Revelation, though he accepted Revelation as inspired and canonical” (Brighton 14).⁹ A few others have followed suit, taking issue with the apostolicity of the book based on their perception of content or genre, or doubting the book’s authenticity based on its misuse by chiliastic teachers. It seems at least in some cases that first a dim view is taken of the book; then aspersions are cast at the identity of its writer being the apostle John. But, it should be noted, none of the dissent comes until 130-150 years after John’s death. In addition, this dissent is contrary to the earlier testimony of the second century and early third century. The perception some have had of Revelation’s content notwithstanding, what are the sufficient grounds to overrule the earlier testimony?

Accepting the traditional view, then, that Apostle John is the writer and also the statement of Irenaeus that John wrote Revelation during the time of Emperor Domitian (ca. 95-96), we can form a picture of John and his ministry in relation to the seven churches in Asia, who first received this book. In the words of Brighton: “According to Athanasius, John was known as ‘the theologian’ (ὁ θεολόγος) of the apostolic church” (18). We also consider what John wrote about himself in his gospel, that he was the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” who was there in person as an eyewitness of the incarnate Christ, the “Word” made flesh (John 1:1-14), the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). And to think that these deeds and sayings of Jesus took place some sixty-five years before John wrote the last book of the Bible. What John saw and heard as a younger man in the company of the Messiah he later would preach as the Lord’s apostle, first in Jerusalem as one of its pillars (Gal. 2:9), then at a later time in Ephesus. His ministry in Asia began at a time after Paul’s and extended to the end of the first century and perhaps a little into the second century.

As far as we can tell, he would outlive all the other apostles—the last one alive and so in a position to do what Franzmann and others have noted: “In his wisdom, God left this servant of Christ alive to vouch for the veracity and faithfulness of those writings that would be accepted by the church. . . . After John’s death the church would not consider including in the canon a previously unknown writing lately brought to light, for there was no longer a living apostolic voice to vouch for its authenticity. . .” (Brighton 21-22). Thus when John writes Revelation, he has the reputation, especially in Asia, as the lone apostolic voice still alive, who can identify himself by simple name only and expect his initial audience to recognize him conveying to them what God had told him to write. It was this “mature John, who was recognized as the elder and theologian” (Brighton 22), that Christ used to impart His Revelation to the Church militant as she awaited His promised return in glory.

The target audience of Revelation

Several passages in the book indicate both an immediate and a general target audience. Already in 1:3 there is a hint that Revelation is to be handled like other New Testament books—it is to be read aloud in the worship assembly. Thus John writes: “*Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it, for the time is near*” (NAS). Notice the singular reader “he” and the plural listeners “those.” The arrangement of having one read aloud to a group not only helped the illiterate (of which there were many at that time); it was a core part of Christian worship, even as it is now. John expects and directs this book of prophecy to be treated the same way as Old Testament books of prophecy were treated—to be read as and accepted as God’s own word of prophecy. Near the

close of the book the same expectation takes on a rather urgent tone and warning: “*I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book*” (22:18-19 NAS). Reading, hearing, heeding the things written—with no additions to or subtractions from what was said—that was and is God’s will for the target audience, namely, His people on earth then and now.

In 1:4 John directly addressed the immediate audience in the form of an epistolary greeting: “*John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come. . . .*” But what begins as epistolary becomes something more in the next verses. A few would point to verses 10-11 as a window into divine inspiration at work: “*I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying ‘Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.’*”¹⁰ In chapters two and three we find the content of what Christ said to each church, with no restriction placed on one church hearing what was said to the other churches. All seven churches received the entire book. Presumably they read it all in the worship assembly, with the Holy Spirit there at work through the words of God being read to bring about repentance, vigilance, perseverance, renewed hope and joy in the hearts of the faithful. These churches must have shared what they had received, perhaps making copies of Revelation for the other congregations in Asia and nearby provinces. The early church of Asia Minor and beyond recognized this book as the Lord addressing them, warning and comforting them too. The truths expressed, the troubles faced, the comfort and wisdom given—all that Revelation held out for the reader/hearers has timely and direct application to all of Christ’s followers wherever and whenever they have lived.

The location and time of writing

With some books of the Bible answering the questions of when and from where the book was written can be a challenge. With Revelation the locale is spelled out in 1:9: “*I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Christ Jesus, was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*” Every word of this verse should be understood literally, for John in narrative form was giving the Asia churches a report of where he was and why he was there. As a fellow Christian under a similar persecution to what they were suffering, he was in exile, banished to the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, southwest of Ephesus. Perhaps this detail shared by John would help them to know that it *was* John their apostolic “elder” who wrote this, if his banishment to Patmos was common knowledge among them. But more important than the locale was the perspective John expressed—as one who knew their distress and suffering because he was feeling it too, and for the same reason: “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”

Pinpointing a time of writing and a point of origin can sound merely like an academic exercise for scholars. From a Christian perspective for us, however, it can underscore two things. First, it’s a reminder that the Bible, in whole or in part, did not drop down ready-made from heaven. Each of its writings—while certainly of heavenly origin and divine inspiration, free of error and full of spiritual truth, containing even supernatural content—has involved a ground-zero starting point on earth. A man chosen by God, at a certain time and place in history, wrote everything God wanted him to write and exactly the way God wanted it written. In this case with Revelation, Apostle John was the man chosen to receive Revelation in its visionary form and record it on that island (which is still there today) while in exile during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, probably in the year 95 or 96.¹¹ Noting these facts helps to underscore a second point: that this book, unlike extra-biblical apocalyptic literature in ancient times, retains the attribute of historicity. A timeline and a geographical location can be established and serve as evidence that the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John the apostle was not a man-made fantasy.

A somewhat finer point could be made about the timing of the visions seen and the writing done. Did John write and then send the book from Patmos, as 1:11 seems to imply? Could the vision seen on Patmos have been written someplace else (Ephesus has been suggested)? Lenski’s argument seems to be a

fairly sound response. The command for John to write is repeated in 1:19, 14:13, and 19:9—apparent prompts from God to record the content immediately. But in 10:4 the command comes as an interruption: “*And when the seven peals of thunder had spoken, I was about to write; and I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Seal up the things which the seven peals of thunder have spoken, and do not write them’*” (NAS). In 22:6-19 the visionary experience is not quite over, since the angel and Jesus are still talking to John. But the existence of the book could be implied in the demonstrative word “this.” What John saw “in the Spirit” he had been writing “in the Spirit” and as directed, so that the perfect tense description in 22:19, “the things which are written in this book” (τῶν γεγραμμένων ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τούτῳ)¹² apparently means that the words were already written when these final statements were made (Lenski 5-6). This may be something of a factor in reckoning with the unique Greek style that Revelation has—that John records what he sees and hears as it is being revealed to him and not at some later time.

Another issue to consider a bit is the sequence of the books John wrote. Was Revelation his last written work, coming after his gospel and three epistles? Was it thereby the last inspired writing of Scripture to be recorded? Its placement at the end of the New Testament by the early church might be due to its content more than anything else. Brighton speaks to this point at the start of his commentary introduction:

The book of Revelation is the last book of the Bible. Whether it was written last or not, the church was led to place it at the end of the canon because she saw in it the completion of God’s revelation. *Nothing further would be revealed* by God until the second coming of Jesus Christ. Revelation is thus the culmination of the entire story of salvation contained in the Bible. It is the end point of all that is written in both the OT and NT. For it draws all of revelation, both prophetic and apostolic, to its final goal: the exalted reign of Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords (19:11-16) and the fulfillment of the promise of the new heaven and earth (21:1). (1)

In his first footnote, page 1, Brighton refers to Revelation 22:18-19 and Hebrews 1:1-4 for apparent Scriptural support. We find agreement with this point from Lillegard (Ylvisaker), who says that Revelation “completes the volume of inspiration. No further revelation remains till Christ shall come, as is implied in 22:18-20. Appropriately the last surviving apostle wrote it” (53).

Yet, while recognizing “The Significance of Revelation” as “The Last Book of the Bible,”¹³ Brighton eventually comes around to offer an interesting hypothesis based on the supposition that John wrote Revelation *before* his gospel. He sees the two as “complementary”; John’s “gospel leads into and finds its goal in Revelation, and Revelation has its foundation in the gospel. Revelation thus is not to be read and understood in isolation, but rather in relationship with John’s gospel” (23).¹⁴ Though he grants that Revelation written before John’s gospel is a matter of conjecture, he poses as “a strong probability” that John viewed the two writings as “two parts of one work,” like Luke did with his two volumes to Theophilus, the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. How intentional this was on John’s part is impossible to say, but Brighton sticks with the idea that after the two writings were done, “they stood out as one grand account of Christ’s humiliation and exaltation” and that “John would have the church receive his gospel and Revelation as one two-part work” (23).

One can question Brighton’s ideas and still recognize a harmony of thoughts and themes and a common Christology in these two writings of the apostle John. Jesus dominates both as “the Word” who is God and “the Lamb” whose sacrifice is our victory. This harmony is to be kept in mind as we next address John’s literary style in Revelation and also how it compares to the style he used in his gospel.

The style (genre) and other literary features of Revelation

Classifying books of the New Testament usually involves three categories. The *historical narrative* books are the four gospels and Acts; the *epistolary* books span from Romans to Jude; only Revelation is classed in the New Testament category of *prophetic*. There is good reason for doing so—in terms of the book’s prophetic content throughout and also its self-description given at the beginning and the end. Revelation refers to itself as “the words of the prophecy” read and heard (1:3), and “the words of the prophecy of this book” (22:7, 10, 18), and also “the words of the book of this prophecy” (22:19). John’s written words as the “revelation” of Christ to His Church would function as “prophecy” in both a

wide and a narrow sense.¹⁵ They would *forth-tell* the Lord's admonition and comfort as His call to repentance, perseverance, and faithfulness given to His people. And these words would also *foretell* events, conditions, conflicts, and victory yet to be in the New Testament era. Thus John would function through this book the same way as the Old Testament prophets had done, even using some of the same images, themes, and vocabulary that they used.

Another element John had in common with some of the prophets was the medium God used to impart the revealing. Like Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah before him, John saw visions that God gave. Like the prophets before him, the images in the visions involved symbols in need of proper understanding. The recorded visions in Revelation and those of certain inter-testamental writings, like the Book of Enoch, have acquired a name that is potentially misleading. While the name *apocalyptic* fits well for Revelation, it does not for those man-made writings that are said to be the same genre. What John, Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and other prophets have recorded as visions from God in the Bible is real and inspired, and their biblical writings serve a divine purpose. Extra-biblical apocalypses, meanwhile, are contrived, speculative, and veiled to the point of concealing the real author's identity under a pseudonym (in other words, it wasn't Enoch who wrote the book named after him).

Pegging the style or genre of Revelation as "apocalypse" or as "prophecy" or as "prophetic apocalypse" effects very little what we do with the book. Agreeing on a label doesn't help us reckon with the visions described, the symbols used, and the meanings expressed. Nor will it be a ready-made answer for those who want to make an issue of how the Greek used in Revelation differs dramatically (it is said) with the Greek used in John's gospel. Those who accept that John is the author of both have resorted to explanations like: John used a secretary for one (his gospel), but not for the other. Or this: Since Revelation is said to have grammatical irregularities, it is suggested that John wrote Revelation at an earlier time in his life when his knowledge of Greek was not as good. This conjecture has been tied to a supposition that the persecution of Nero was the occasion for Revelation and that John wrote it in the 60s rather than the 90s. Neither explanation is compelling, but some kind of response seems in order when some, including those with a high view of Scripture, are saying that it must be two different writers because the Greek of the two writings is so different.

Brighton's introduction is insightful and quite thorough on this question of the differences between John's gospel and the book of Revelation. One place to start in sorting out the differences is the very different natures of the two writings. John's gospel must have had quite a reservoir of information to utilize, not the least of which was the eyewitness perspective that John himself had—all that he heard and saw during his time with Jesus. In addition, all the proclamation of his own ministry about the Lord Jesus must have played a role in shaping his writing, not to mention his awareness of all that was recorded previously in the synoptic gospels. A study of John's gospel leads to the conclusion that John put thought and planning into what he wrote; he followed a discernible structure in arranging content, and he developed theological themes about Jesus, the Son of God and Savior of the world. Such observations do not run counter to the fact that the Holy Spirit moved, controlled, and provided all that John would need to record the fourth gospel exactly as the Lord wanted it. That same miracle of inspiration happened with Revelation too, but the content recorded is quite unique—the content of Revelation came upon him as visions he had while he was "in the Spirit." Brighton describes further: "As he was in the Spirit, he evidently not only saw the visions but also was caught up into them so as to experience them more immediately as well (see 4:1-2). This is beyond our ability to analyze. Perhaps even John himself, like Paul (2 Cor. 12:1-4), could not tell whether he was in the body or out of the body when he saw and heard what he relates. What matters is that he was 'in the Spirit,' and he truly was given this Revelation by God" (15).

For more reasons than one the style and language comparisons between Revelation and the fourth gospel are "inconclusive." There are similarities to be noted, which "point to some connection between the two" writings (Brighton 15).¹⁶ Likewise, there are differences to be explained. For example, the Greek text of Revelation has a higher degree of grammatical irregularities than other books, including John's gospel. The Greek text is also deemed to be very Semitic. Careful analysis, however, shows that Revelation is not a translated text of Aramaic to Koine Greek. "Rather the author wrote and thought in a

Greek that was influenced by Semitic idioms and expression. It appears that he *wrote* in Greek while he was *thinking* in Semitic idioms and thought patterns” (Brighton 16, ital. orig.).¹⁷ This observation is combined with another: that Revelation was “written more quickly and with great urgency.” This, it is said, led to more Semiticisms in the text. John’s gospel, on the other hand, has the markings of a “carefully planned theological narrative,” and as a result of such planning and the writer’s use of narrative, there are fewer Semiticisms. Revelation, it would seem, was not the product of drafts written with revisions made. John “left his written Revelation in the language in which he first described what he had seen—composed from the immediate impressions that were made on his mind by the visions and experiences he encountered” (Brighton 17).¹⁸ On the aspect of Semiticisms Brighton states in conclusion: “The quantity and kind of Semiticisms in Revelation, then, account for much of the difference between the language of John’s gospel and Revelation. But one can detect the same mind, with similar Semitic influence, behind the Greek of both the gospel and Revelation” (17).

The grammatical irregularities of Revelation, also called solecisms, have caught the notice of Bible scholars for quite some time. Some see in them evidence of a writer who was poor at Greek or was caught up in his Semitic way of thought. But upon closer consideration the irregularities do not appear to be mistakes.¹⁹ Brighton and others before him have argued convincingly for the notion that John was intentional and repetitious with the grammatical irregularity so as “to make a point, either for emphasis or for theological impact” (Brighton 17). When the irregularities are repeated, “it becomes clear that . . . the author is creating literary thought patterns that aid him in giving full expression and meaning to the subject matter at hand” (17).

Thus the writer’s grammar serves the purpose of painting pictures with words rather than making a logical progression of thought or argumentation. Also, the Semitic influence on his grammar in Revelation includes the use of antithetic parallelism and parataxis—the joining of elements that are not coordinate using the coordinating conjunction *καί* (Brighton 23-24).²⁰ Other Semitic traits could be pointed out, but I will focus on one that plays a role in the exegesis of Revelation 20. Brighton says that in Revelation the “future is sometimes used for a present action, most likely in analogy to the Hebraic imperfect sense.” In a footnote he gives two examples: 5:10 and 20:6. In respect to the future tense in 5:10 he states that it “most likely means ‘they rule now [during the NT church age] and will continue to rule [in eternity]’” (24, fn 82).

The dominance of symbolic language and Old Testament connections in Revelation

The images that John saw in the visions on Patmos are the basis for the symbols recorded in the book. These symbols are not the same as similes, metaphors, and other literary devices commonly used, which communicate something unknown by means of something known. These symbols require “insider” knowledge to understand properly (Franzmann *Rev.* 24-5). But even for the intended Christian audience “this type of literary presentation poses certain questions. What do the various symbols mean? What do they represent? Once those questions have been answered for John’s original historical context, we still must ask, What significance do they have for the reader and the church today?” (Brighton 24).

To this writer symbolic imagery seems another step removed from the audience’s reference point than a literary metaphor would be. Metaphors, when properly used, are obvious because the point of comparison is readily perceived by the audience. Symbols, on the other hand, while having a point of comparison with the intended meaning, require careful thought on the part of the audience to avoid an overextension or misapplication of what the symbol means at a given point in the text. Another challenge readers of Revelation face is to interpret the meaning John expresses by symbolic use of numbers, which include 4, 7, 10, 12, 24, 1000, and 144,000. Brighton explains in his treatment of the matter: “Symbolic imagery is usually patterned after some known entity. Something served the creator of the symbol as a model. It could be a historical person, a historical event, or a noted geographical place. Once the symbol is created, it is then used by the author to suggest and evoke a meaning without any explicit explanation of it.” Brighton continues on the same page: “Much of the symbolic imagery in Revelation is taken from the OT. . . . [K]nowledge of the OT plays an important role in interpreting Revelation” (25).

Although John does not quote Old Testament passages in a formulaic way, his use of the Old Testament in Revelation exceeds that of any other New Testament writer.²¹ Brighton says that “John constantly uses OT imagery, phrases, thought patterns, and theological motifs. The OT furnishes the vocabulary, mode of expression, and theological mindset with which Revelation was written” (26). Quotations, while not done formally, do occur in the book.²² These and also “allusions to the OT are primarily from the LXX” (Brighton 26). Brighton and others are of the opinion that John makes use of the Septuagint “as a skilled artist, for it is the palette which he employs to depict the images he saw in his visions. Often John will use the words and phrases and thought patterns of the LXX as an artist would inlay small pieces of various colored glass or tile to form a mosaic” (26). No doubt, more intensive study would be required to assess this claim made that Revelation is literary art on a very high order. Nevertheless, the connections it has to the Old Testament certainly permeate its chapters. The exegete will do well to note and track them along the way, with the cross references in the margin of the Greek edition as a helpful guide.

The transmission of the Greek text of Revelation

At present the number of extant Greek manuscripts containing Revelation, in whole or in part, is less than 300.²³ Its earliest manuscript is Papyrus 98, containing only eight verses of chapter 1 and dating back probably to the late 100s.²⁴ Of the six total papyri Papyrus 47 is the next oldest, dating back to the 200s and containing less than half of Revelation—its readable verses (along with lacunae) are from 9:10 to 17:2. Of the eleven uncials having Revelation, only four are complete; these are Aleph, A, 046, and 052.²⁵ About 275 minuscules, ranging from the 10th to the 15th centuries, contain Revelation. These comprise the Majority text as it applies to Revelation. Of this Majority text the introduction to the newer Nestle-Aland editions points to a “division . . . into two distinct textual traditions.” One “represents the large number of manuscripts with the commentary on Revelation by Andreas of Caesarea,” and the other “represents the Koine tradition proper” (N-A 66-67*). These two divisions have their own symbols in the critical apparatus, with the usual Majority symbol used only when the two traditions agree.

Uncial A, though not as old as Aleph, is regarded as the “most important witness to the Greek text of Revelation.” Among text-critical scholars it has this distinction because “it retains many Semiticisms not found in other manuscripts.”²⁶ Uncials A and C are considered better than Aleph because Aleph “tends to alter the Semitic Greek so as to make it conform more closely to typical Koine usage” (Brighton 27).²⁷ This is also a tendency of Papyrus 47 (Brighton 27).

It is encouraging to hear from Brighton, the author of *Concordia Commentary: Revelation*, that “there are no major problems in ascertaining the text of Revelation.” Variant readings in Revelation certainly exist, some of “which, if adopted, could alter slightly the meaning of a given verse. . .” (27).

The occasion and purpose of Revelation

The occasion and purpose of a biblical book are known in answering the question why. Why was the book written to the initial audience at that point in time? Were there circumstances going on that served as the occasion for the book? Were there needs to be met that serve as its underlying purpose? In the case of Revelation the occasion seems to be the turbulent times emerging and the direct persecution that the early church was facing or about to face. Evidence of this comes through in certain passages. In addition to John’s exile to Patmos, 1:9, there is the warning to the church in Smyrna of things they were “about to suffer” (2:10) and also the martyrdom of Antipas mentioned in 2:13. Martyrdom is also in view in 6:9-11 and 20:4. The tone of the book in chapters 4-19 leaves the impression that Christ’s people on earth will be embattled and harassed, under duress and in need of His help, His victory to overcome—not only at the time of John and the seven churches in Asia, but throughout the New Testament era until the Lord’s return.

Under these circumstances, then, “John wrote to comfort the infant church, to remind God’s people that they could expect to experience such things and to assure the church of final victory” (Becker 12). But instead of addressing them and their needs through apostolic letter, John by inspiration would give persecuted Christians then and now an unusually illustrated view of two realities at work for the

Lord's Church, which are conveyed in these two passages: "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22) and "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).²⁸

Other introductions in regard to occasion and purpose are similar to what Becker writes. Louis Brighton, however, offers something a bit different when he says about "The Purpose of Revelation":

John would have his readers take to heart the words of the prophecy for the time is near (1:3). The time is near for the fulfillment of what is described, because the Lord Christ is coming quickly (22:6-7). The purpose of the message of Revelation is therefore best summed up in this word: preparation. The hearer and reader are to be ready for what is to come to pass. . . . Revelation ends with the promise that the Lord Jesus is coming quickly, and with John's prayerful response, 'Amen, come now, Lord Jesus' (22:20). This prayer is not only the conclusion to the whole of Revelation, but it is also the specific end at which it is aimed. Thus the explicit goal of Revelation is to lift up to God this prayer. The Spirit (through the message of Revelation) leads God's people to voice this prayer now and until it is answered. (6-7)²⁹

The Lord's overarching purpose in giving Revelation to His Church was in all likelihood multifaceted—divinely intended to achieve more than one end and so live up to Paul's description of "all Scripture" as "*profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The Christological content of Revelation

It's no secret that Luther struggled with his acceptance of Revelation, primarily at an earlier time in his career. In his preface to Revelation in 1522, he said: "For me it is reason enough for not esteeming it highly that in it Christ is neither taught nor recognized, which is, above all, an apostle's business. . . . Therefore I stay with the books which proffer Christ to me clearly and purely" (qtd. in Franzmann *Rev.* 7). Luther, it would seem, took issue with how the Lord Jesus was presented in the book rather than with how much. While Christ appears frequently in Revelation throughout, it is not in the form of historical narrative or apostolic address. The style appears to have bothered Luther (and others) as much as anything.

Nevertheless, Jesus is preeminently there—at the beginning of *His* Revelation, throughout the middle of its contents, and also at the end with His promise. Revelation has a Christology that beckons our attention. Lutheran commentators long after Luther have noted as much, pointing to Revelation as "a profound theological work whose heart and center is *Christology*" (Brighton 1, ital. orig.) and whose "proclamation of Christ is in the mainstream of the New Testament proclamation of Him as the Crucified" (Franzmann *Rev.* 9).

The Christology of Revelation assumes the saving work of Christ's death and resurrection as mission accomplished and places an overarching emphasis on His ascended, exalted state as "Lord over all" (Brighton 2). John can capture and portray this truth in one image, the Lamb on His throne. Of the 34 occurrences of "lamb" in the New Testament, Revelation has 29—all of which refer to Christ, "one of many indications of the centrality of Christ's cross in the Christology of Revelation" (Brighton 2, fn 7). Brighton sums up in his introduction the Christological content of Revelation as a sustained focus on the Lord's exalted reign:

While the four gospels narrate the incarnation, humiliation, and resurrection of Jesus, Revelation pictures the exaltation of Christ and what this exalted reign of Christ means for the church. Where the gospels end at the resurrection and ascension of Christ, Revelation picks up and continues the story from the ascension to the second coming of the Lord—and into eternity. . . . This Christology is expanded in Revelation to include the thoughts that the exalted Christ is the Lord of the cosmos, the Lord of history, the Lord of the living and the dead, the Lord of the angels, and the Lord of the world and of all creation (22:13). Revelation presents a rich lode, the mining of which extends and deepens the Christology of the NT, and in particular that of John's gospel. (2-3)

Interpreting Revelation: Approaches taken

Knowing that all Scripture is devoted to the task of proclaiming Christ, the exegete would do well to watch for Jesus in the content of Revelation. Where does He appear? What does He do and say? How does it affect His enemies on earth? How does it benefit His people on earth? Tenney's approach appears to be along these lines. To interpret the book, he writes, look to its structure "as it presents the person of Christ," for "the central theme is the person of Christ as He reveals the future" (392). His outline for Revelation is clearly Christo-centric, as he gives the following for the main parts of the book: I. "Prologue: Christ Communicating"; II. "Christ in the Church"; III. "Christ in the Cosmos"; IV. "Christ in Conquest"; V. "Christ in Consummation"; and VI. "Christ Challenging"—an Epilogue (393-395).

Other outlines attempted for Revelation are varied, and so are the interpretational approaches taken. Tenney gives his description of the "four main schools of interpretation" of Revelation, which Prof. Clifford Kuehne incorporated in his seminary course material for New Testament Isagogics at Immanuel Lutheran Seminary. These are summarized below:

The *Preterist* approach, preferred by liberal interpreters, connects the content of Revelation only to the experience and events going on at the time it was written; "it makes no allowance for any element of predictive prophecy" (Tenney 387).³⁰

The *Idealist* approach considers Revelation to be a symbolic portrayal of the continuing clash between "good and evil," between Christianity and those who oppose it. In the Idealist approach, as Tenney sees it, the symbols in Revelation "cannot be identified as historic events either in the past or in the future; they are simply trends or ideals." Predictive prophecy is not given its due, as the focus is placed "upon the ethical and spiritual truth of Revelation rather than upon the debatable aspects of its symbolism" (387-88). In the way that Tenney has defined it, the Idealist view may have some appeal to liberal exegetes.³¹

The *Historicist* approach maintains "that Revelation outlines in symbolic form the entire course of history of the church from Pentecost to" Christ's parousia. "Each major event in the history of Christendom was thus broadly foreshadowed, so that Revelation becomes a calendar of events written in advance. . . . The Historicist view is more literal than the Idealist view, but its advocates have never achieved unanimity on what the individual symbols mean . . . [with] nearly as many interpretations as there are commentators" (388-89). Tenney concludes about this approach that since they all can't be right, something about the approach itself seems to be off.³²

The *Futurist* approach has its greatest impact in the interpretation of Revelation 4-21. The content of these chapters are viewed as "events that will take place in a period called the 'Great Tribulation,' just preceding the return of Christ. . . . The events of the Apocalypse, relegated to this period, are interpreted as literally as possible and thus regarded as wholly future to the existing era" (Tenney 389). This approach is widely used by millennialists and dispensationalists.³³

Becker has an interesting take on the four approaches noted above. Much like Tenney, he sees the Preterist view as the favorite of historical-critical scholars—interpreting the events portrayed in the symbols as being in the past or present at the time of writing. This approach should be refuted, along with the Futurist approach. He is more sympathetic toward the Historicist approach, which he has termed "church-historical," although his assessment comes with a few disclaimers. About this method Becker writes:

The proponents of this method . . . , which seeks a specific personage or event in each symbolic detail in the book, generally have their heart in the right place and understand the basic message very well. . . . Nevertheless, this method . . . has perhaps contributed a great deal to the hesitation with which the book is often approached. Many things that are said by Lutheran commentators who use this method must be labeled as pure guesswork that always leaves the hearer in doubt unless he is willing to accept human opinion as authoritative. (14)

In turning to the "idealistic" interpretation as preferred, Becker outlines an approach that isn't quite the same as Tenney's description of "Idealist" above. Instead of giving a summary description of it, he offers a few interpretive examples. "In this view," he writes, "the red horse of chapter six is not a symbol for any specific war, but a symbolic portrayal of every war that has brought great tribulation to men. . . . The smoke from the bottomless pit which obscures the sun in chapter nine is not one specific

heresy, but every false doctrine that obscures the light of the gospel” (15). His endorsement of this approach continues: “The idealistic interpretation enables us to read the book of Revelation as a clear book. The broad outlines of this book and its basic teachings are generally very clear” (15). Next he cautions against the attempt to interpret every detail and to press the symbols “beyond the point of comparison.” Rather, one should read Revelation the way that one should read parables, while seeking to be more familiar with the symbols and other elements expressed in the Old Testament (15-16).

Becker sees “the seven distinct sections of Revelation” as “seven grand paintings depicting in broad outline the whole history of the church in this present evil world during the whole period of the New Testament.” Common elements in the seven sections are the “everlasting gospel” proclaimed “in the midst of great tribulation” and “the church victorious in spite of all the trials” that come at it from the “anti-Christian forces.” Becker then indicates what he means by “‘idealistic’ interpretation” when he says that it is “only a variation of the ‘church-historical’ interpretation of Revelation” (16). Next comes a defense of this approach as “the grammatical-historical method of interpretation applied to this particular form of literature. . . .” as “the words of the text itself tell us that we are dealing with symbols that stand for something else” (17).

In accord with the hermeneutical rule that Scripture interprets Scripture, his advice on the interpretation of the symbols appears to be fairly sound:

Sometimes we are told exactly what the symbols mean. . . .

Sometimes the immediate context makes the symbol clear. . . . Sometimes the whole context of Revelation makes the symbolism clear. . . . Sometimes other books of the Bible leave no doubt about the meaning of the symbols used by John in the Apocalypse. (17-18)

In closing his commentary introduction, Becker contends that his “idealistic” approach to Revelation (as described above) is a “literal” reading of the book and more so than millennialists who misinterpret the book. Thus he writes: “The literal truth is that Revelation is a vision, and it is literally true that John saw the things described here, and the things he saw were symbols which pictured the future history of the church. This is the literal meaning of the plain words of the text” (20). This is not the same as reading Revelation “literalistically,” which seems to be his way of referring to the Futurist/millennialist approach of being only selectively literal—an inconsistency noted in the examples he gives of “wooden, literalistic interpretation” (20).

Finally, we return once more to Brighton, whose section on “Interpreting Revelation” is relatively brief. There he closes his introduction with these words:

In the final analysis, the variety of methods can be reduced to two basic ways of interpreting and understanding the book. One places the book on a linear scale, a straight line, so that each item related in the book follows or succeeds that which was related before, and the events unfold in an orderly, chronological way. . . .³⁴ The other method is cyclic, today more commonly called the *recapitulation approach*. This method understands the prophecy of the book to be repetitive, so that the events are described several times, with each description covering the same time period. (28-29)

Brighton then concludes with his assessment of the two:

At first glance, the linear way of understanding Revelation might seem more rational and plausible, but the repetition of many of the events makes it difficult to view the book as linear. . . . The visions of the seven seals (6:1-17, 8:1-5), the seven trumpet-angels (Rev. 8:6-9:21; 11:15-19), and the seven angels with censers (15:1-16:21) are all parallel and cover the same time period, namely, events on earth from Christ’s ascension to his parousia. This suggests that the proper method of interpretation is that of the cyclic or recapitulation approach. It is with this method of interpreting and understanding the structure of Revelation that the present commentary is written. (29)

The recapitulation approach appears to work well with a prominent text from chapter 20. It will be applied in the exegetical study of Revelation 20:1-6 that appears later in this issue.

Endnotes

¹ Understanding the Greek genitive as *subjective*.

² Understanding the Greek genitive as *objective*.

³ By “author,” of course, we mean the human writer. Well said by a former Immanuel Lutheran College professor is this distinction: The One who verbally inspired the writing is the *Author*; the one who wrote the words on paper is the *writer*.

Note: This section on the author of Revelation will also address the issue of the book’s *canonicity*.

⁴ An opinion growing in some popularity posits that the writer of Revelation is “a John never mentioned in the New Testament.” M. Hengel, for example, contends that he was a contemporary of Apostle John and a disciple of Jesus. At a later time, so the theory goes, he was known as the “Elder” and wrote the gospel of John, the three epistles of John, and Revelation (Brighton, p. 12, fn 33).

⁵ Some, like Brighton, speak of a “Johannine tradition” along these lines (p. 13): In Ephesus John taught Polycarp, who taught Irenaeus, who taught Hippolytus, who quoted Revelation 17-18 and attested to these chapters as written by “John, the apostle and disciple of the Lord” (qtd. in Thiessen 317). Because Irenaeus is only two steps removed from John, his testimony carries considerable weight.

⁶ According to Irenaeus in his *Against Heresies*: John “remained in Ephesus after his return until the times of Trajan” (qtd. in Thiessen 319).

⁷ Second century dissent also came from the Alogi and from Marcion, whose claims did not sway the early church.

⁸ Becker’s analysis seems to agree with an editor’s footnote on the same points found on page 151 of the Williamson translation of *The History of the Church* by Eusebius. Lenski draws similar conclusions in his commentary introduction.

⁹ Thiessen characterizes Dionysius as viewing Revelation “with a strong anti-chiliastic bias” (318). He and Brighton both make their assessments based on a reading of Dionysius through Eusebius. Also, the confusion regarding two men named John might have been compounded by the existence in Ephesus of two graves associated with John.

¹⁰ These seven cities were in the Roman province of Asia, located in western Asia Minor. They were “important trade and communication centers . . . connected by major roads” at that time. The order of their listing in 1:11 and in chapters 2-3 could have matched a route of sorts: north from Ephesus to Smyrna to Pergamos, then southeast to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (*Nelson’s* 486-7). Could this have been the route taken by the courier, the one dispatched with the book and the task of bringing it to these seven churches?

¹¹ Pinpointing a year in this instance, though not definitive, is much more than guesswork, since the testimony of Irenaeus mentioned earlier, if we accept it, specifies to the decade when John wrote Revelation. Earlier scholars, including John Schaller, have argued for a time during the reign of Nero (AD 64-65). But this does not reckon well with the statement of Irenaeus and also the record of Eusebius.

¹² The perfect tense forms typically express completed action with abiding result.

¹³ These are the first two headings Brighton has in his commentary introduction.

¹⁴ In building up his hypothesis, Brighton surmises along these lines: Why doesn’t John have a transfiguration account in his gospel (after all, John was there!)? Well, he does in Revelation. Why doesn’t John record the Lord’s ascension in his gospel? Well, he does—from heaven’s point of view—in Revelation. Likewise, we could add, the relative lack of eschatology in John (compared to Matthew, for instance) is counter-balanced by its abundance in Revelation.

¹⁵ “Forth-tell” and “fore-tell” are very literal renderings of the compound verb προφητεύω, with the prefix προ meaning either “forth” from God to the people or “beforehand,” a predicting of something before it happens.

¹⁶ Both refer to Jesus as “the Lamb”—Revelation in particular. Both refer to Jesus as “the Word”—a manner of expression that appears to be unique to the apostle John. Also, in footnote 54 on page 16 Brighton offers the following: “John and Revelation have similar literary structures, with a sevenfold pattern of seven signs in John and in Revelation the seven churches, seals, angels, trumpets, and censers. Both books have a prologue, central message, and epilogue.”

¹⁷ Like the other apostles John was a Jew “who probably spoke Aramaic in the home and among fellow Jews. . . , even if Greek was their preferred tongue in business and public life in the Hellenized Mediterranean world” (Brighton 16, fn 57).

¹⁸ Though a precise calculation is not possible, the difference in time lapse between seeing the content and writing it down must have been considerable. With John’s gospel the time lapse was 50-65 years; with Revelation it was arguably the same day.

¹⁹ One can see an example of this in 1:4-5 in which the writer uses the preposition ἀπό three times, but only the last two have the expected genitive (ablative) case; the first has a nominative, which is said to be incorrect grammatically. However, it is quite reasonable to assume that John knows the grammatical norm and follows it many times in the book of Revelation, but in this instance and others he switches from the genitive (ablative) to the nominative case for literary effect.

²⁰ The norm in Greek is hypotaxis: joining a subordinate element to the main element with a subordinating conjunction.

²¹ Revelation, according to Tenney, has “no less than four hundred allusions to the Old Testament” (387).

²² As an example of formulaic quotation compare the use of γέγραπται (“it is written”) by Paul and other New Testament writers, including John in his gospel.

²³ This total does not account for Greek lectionaries that may contain Revelation texts.

Note: All the information contained in the section on textual transmission comes from Brighton’s commentary introduction.

²⁴ About this papyrus Brighton notes: “It is too brief to be of much significance for establishing the text of Revelation. Its importance lies rather in the fact that it is dated so close to the autograph of Revelation” (26-27).

²⁵ Of note here from a text critical point of view is the fact that uncial B does not have Revelation. It is thus silent on all variant reading issues pertaining to the book.

²⁶ This evaluation is based on the idea that a later scribe would alter the text to eliminate the Semiticisms, not the other way around. Thus the presence of Semiticisms in a manuscript is regarded as internal evidence of authenticity.

²⁷ I find it a bit ironic that the two highly touted manuscripts, B and Aleph, are either of no value (B) or of less value than manuscripts that are not as old.

²⁸ These two passages are referred to and quoted by Siegbert Becker on page 12 of his commentary introduction.

²⁹ Brighton has the last two sentences quoted in italics.

³⁰ Without using the names associated with the interpretational schools, Franzmann in *The Word of the Lord Grows* takes issue with each of the four as a usually “one-sided” attempt to be “more precise” in interpretation “than the book itself by its very nature can be.” The Preterist approach, for example, “ignores the prophetic claim of the book itself” (273).

³¹ Cf. Franzmann’s critique of the Idealist approach: “Still others renounce all attempts to relate the message of the book directly to history and see in the visions rather the enunciation of general principles which will hold good throughout history. But the book itself, with its life-and-death involvement in the crisis of A. D. 95, is anything but the enunciation of abstract principles” (*The Word of the Lord Grows*, p. 273).

³² Of the Historicist approach Franzmann raises the question “how such a series of predictions was to be of any aid and comfort to the troubled churches of Asia A. D. 95” (273).

³³ Like his criticism of the Historicist approach, Franzmann says of the Futurist model: “This ignores the fact that for the author himself all time since the ascension of Christ is the time immediately preceding the advent of Christ and makes the book largely irrelevant for the very people for whom it was first written” (273).

³⁴ According to Brighton: “This method is sometimes called the *millenarian* method” (29).

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An Exegetical Study of Revelation 20:1-6

Steve Sippert

* The following exegetical study makes use of both endnotes and parenthetical citation per MLA guidelines. For more information on the sources quoted, see Works Cited on page 46. Unless noted otherwise, Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

Attempting exegesis of a text near the end of Revelation has a significant disadvantage—the lack of previously established exegesis of the preceding chapters, as one would have in an exegetical commentary. In place of such we shall keep in mind the input of a few key passages in which the persons or beings in Revelation 20:1-6 have been introduced or described prior to this text. The passages below are not a complete list, but hopefully they will provide some important background, with key thoughts or details highlighted in italics.

The Lord's people, for one, are portrayed as follows in 1:5-6: "To Him who loved us and released us from our sins by His own blood, and has made us to be a *kingdom, priests* to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (NAS). The content expressed in the italicized words are connected to Revelation 20:6. Another pertinent description of believers in their conflict with Satan comes in 12:11: "And *they overcame him* [the dragon] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death."¹

Descriptions of Jesus in Revelation are prevalent. With some connection in thought to Revelation 20:1, we point to the description in 1:18: "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the *keys of Hades and of Death*."

Satan as the dragon appears in chapter 12, not only cast down from heaven, but seeking to destroy the male Child (Christ incarnate on earth), then the woman (the Church), and also her offspring (believers). The full description that is given to him in 12:9 appears again in 20:2. Satan's allies/agents, the two beasts that appear in chapter 13, are put into the lake of fire in chapter 19, which is the second death. Also, chapter 13 introduces the image of the beast (cf. Rev. 20:4) and the imposed mark on the

hand or forehead of those who worship the beast. In 13:15 we read: “He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as *would not worship the image of the beast* to be killed.” The words in italics appear again in 20:4.

One could point to other significant or parallel verses found in Revelation and elsewhere in Scripture. Connections to these will be made as warranted in the exegesis given below.

20:1 Καὶ εἶδον ἄγγελον καταβαίνοντα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἔχοντα τὴν κλεῖν τῆς ἀβύσσου καὶ ἄλυσιν μεγάλην ἐπὶ τὴν χεῖρα αὐτοῦ.

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand.

As noted above, the first beast and the false prophet (related to the second beast) were captured and consigned to the lake of fire at the end of chapter 19. Those who follow the linear (millenarian) model of interpretation see the beginning of chapter 20 as sequential, the next thing to happen chronologically after the events of chapter 19. However, the events portrayed in chapter 19, especially verses 11 and following, conform well to what transpires on the Last Day. They need not precede chronologically what is shown in chapter 20. There is no occurrence of μετὰ ταῦτα in verse 1 to point us in that direction. In fact, the scenes of 20:1-6 can be understood as starting from an earlier time. This view is in line with the recapitulation approach mentioned at the end of the Introduction essay. We can think of this next vision given to John in 20:1-6 as two related scenes introduced with a re-occurring καὶ εἶδον.

The “angel coming down out of heaven” with the “key to the abyss and a great chain” has been understood in one of two ways. Some (Lenski, Brighton) see this angel as similar to the other angels appearing earlier in Revelation. Others (Becker, W. Mueller) see this angel in verse 1 as Christ Himself. This interpretation has appeal in view of other passages that show the power Christ extends decisively over Satan (cf. 1 John 3:8, Hebrews 2:14-15, Luke 11:14-22). Also, the possessing of the key is, in Revelation’s own portrayal, a Christ-like thing to do. Grammatically, however, the anarthrous ἄγγελον (which is not explicitly said to be the “angel of the Lord”) seems to pale in comparison to all other clear images of and clear references to Jesus in this book. If the “angel” in 20:1 is truly Jesus, it would be a rare instance in which Revelation has referred to Him merely as “an angel.”²

That being said, the authority that the angel has over Satan is truly divine (“out of heaven”) and absolute and what he does to Satan must be tied to Christ and His mission of redemption—His life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Even if the angel in verse 1 is not Christ Himself, the key used to lock Satan up certainly came from Christ and is Christ’s own key. Compare also what’s said in chapter 12, where angels in heaven led by Michael prevail over the dragon and his angels. There John reports: “They did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out. . . ; he was cast to the earth. . . . Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, ‘Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down’” (12:8-10). While angels were involved in the fight, it was “salvation” and “the power of Christ” at stake and at work. Likewise, in John 12 we hear Jesus saying just days before His death and in view of His death: “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself” (John 12:31-32).

One faces with Revelation and its images a challenge similar to handling parables: what to do with the various details. Should something be recognized with the “great chain,” as Siegbert Becker does in his commentary, equating it more or less with the preaching of the gospel worldwide and the fulfillment of the Great Commission? What he lays out on pages 297-302 is in agreement with the rest of Scripture certainly; but is it what the Spirit intended for us to understand by this brief detail, which has no earlier occurrence in Revelation? Other expositors do not make this connection, but tie the “great” or strong chain to the Luke 11 narrative of the “stronger man” (Christ) binding the “strong man” (Satan), and especially to 2 Peter 2:4: “God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment.” What unfolds in the next two verses

lines up well, image-wise, with the event of Satan locked up as an arrested criminal awaiting trial. But as we see in the purpose/result clause of verse 3, there is more to it than that.

20:2 καὶ ἐκράτησεν τὸν δράκοντα, ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος, ὅς ἐστιν Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς, καὶ ἔδησεν αὐτὸν χίλια ἔτη

And he seized the dragon—the ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan—and bound him for a thousand years.

In verses 2 and 3 the active verbs seem to pile up: The angel *seized* and *bound*; he *cast*, *locked*, and *sealed*. The dragon, meanwhile, is powerless to stop any of it. Whether it's Christ Himself at work or the angel acting as the extension of Christ, the devil can't get away from the one-on-one manhunt that puts him out of commission for a very, very long time.

At this point in the scene John revisits or reinserts an earlier description of Satan in 12:9, and he switches from the expected accusative case (used in apposition) to the nominative, combined with a relative clause. This appears to be emphatic; perhaps John is even acting as a narrator at this point in the scene that unfolds. Let's take the emphasis here written as a cue to stop and consider what each element in the expanded description has to offer. "The dragon" reference takes the reader back to chapter 12, where we encounter for the first time the dragon, who is "great, fiery, red," having "seven heads and ten horns." To us—and against us—he's a monster, who would surely devour us in short order if we had to face him alone. The next description, "the ancient serpent," may have some emphasis based on the second article.³ It takes us back to Genesis 3 and the fall into sin—the first time when the devil through the serpent became the father of lies who deceived the people God had made to be His own. What Satan has had to say ever since includes not only lies upon lies, but accusations aimed at discrediting us before God. Such is implied in the meaning of διάβολος as "slandering" or "falsely accusing." The other well-known name, which may have some emphasis because of the article (ὁ Σατανᾶς), means "adversary"—that is, in the words of Friberg's lexicon: "the constant enemy of God and man."⁴ Well, as we hear in verse 2, that monstrous, deceiving, slandering enemy of ours has been captured and bound (presumably with the "great chain") for 1,000 years.

The accusative of time (χίλια ἔτη), used here to show duration, is the first of six occurrences in Revelation 20; and in the sense of a prophetic event foretold in the Bible, it occurs only in this chapter. It, like other numerical descriptions in Revelation, is symbolic in meaning. Possible help from other Scripture usage is rather limited. There is 2 Peter 3:8: "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day," which is parallel to Psalm 90:4. Neither of these will define for us the meaning of "a thousand years" in Revelation 20:2. That it suggests a long time, from our point of view and in contrast to "the little time" of verse 3, seems likely. That it especially means a complete time is supported by the verb used in verses 3 and 7, τελεσθῆ, which as a passive means "to be finished" or "completed."⁵ God has marked out a period of time, which seems lengthy to us but not to Him, and when it reaches its end (as determined by Him), it is complete.

Many who subscribe to millennialism insist on taking this detail of the "thousand years" literally,⁶ that is, as an actual millennium (thousand-year length) of time during which the devil is gone, no longer a problem on earth, and believers rule on earth with Christ visibly here during that same time. Those whose eschatology is termed amillennial generally view John's wording in all six places as referring to the New Testament era that spans from the first coming of Christ to His second coming on the Last Day. During that entire time Satan is bound. Turning to verse 3, we see a result that follows as the Lord's intent for the binding that takes place.

20:3 καὶ ἔβαλεν αὐτὸν εἰς τὴν ἄβυσσον καὶ ἔκλεισεν καὶ ἔσφράγισεν ἐπάνω αὐτοῦ, ἵνα μὴ πλανήσῃ ἔτι τὰ ἔθνη ἄχρι τελεσθῆ τὰ χίλια ἔτη. μετὰ ταῦτα δεῖ λυθῆναι αὐτὸν μικρὸν χρόνον.

And he threw him into the abyss and locked it and set a seal over him, so that he would no longer deceive the nations (Gentiles) until the thousand years were completed. After these things it is necessary that he be loosed for a little time.

After giving the temporal description of “a thousand years,” John finishes his record of the scene portrayed in verses 1-3. The dragon-serpent-Devil-Satan is not only bound with the great chain; he is cast into the bottomless pit (literal meaning of ἄβυσσος). This is the hellish abode from which he cannot escape, since the angel has locked it with the key and sealed it. The piling up of the aorist active verbs in this verse would suggest a thorough-going outcome. The ἵνα clause explains the expected result of it. Satan is locked up so that he can no longer deceive people the world over. Prior to this, however, he had had his way with Gentile cultures and societies, leading them wholesale into paganism, hedonism, barbarism, etc., with nothing like the Gospel of Christ proclaimed to counteract his deception of human hearts and minds during the time that preceded the coming of Christ. But with the mission-accomplished success of Christ crucified, risen, and ascended into glory, the power Satan had over all people was decisively broken. The power of Christ’s blood atonement and God’s forgiveness through that blood are supreme in dispelling the influence Satan once had—a reversal that would be realized worldwide throughout the entire New Testament era, which (as mentioned earlier) is represented by the second accusative of time occurrence, τὰ χίλια ἔτη. The use of the article is probably anaphoric (previous reference), pointing to the same thousand-year designation in verse 2.

Verse 3 ends with a clause introduced by μετὰ ταῦτα. At the end of the thousand years, i.e., at or near the end of the New Testament era, Satan will be released for a short while. In other Bible contexts the indicative verb δεῖ denotes divine necessity. A classic example is Matthew 16:21: “From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must [δεῖ] go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.” God had determined in His gracious will and counsel that His Son would go forth to His suffering and death in Jerusalem. Therefore it “must” happen. The same holds true for the event foretold at the end of Revelation 20:3. God has decreed it, thus it will happen. Though we cannot reckon why it must be, this statement, like others in Revelation and throughout Scripture, points to the absolute authority God has over where Satan is and what he can do at any given point.

What Satan does during the short time of his release from the abyss is described in verses 7-10, which include what is said in verse 8: that he goes out “to deceive the nations.” Perhaps it is verse 9, Satan’s army surrounding the camp of the saints, that has led some to interpret the “short time” as Mueller does in *The People’s Bible*:

Near the end of the New Testament age, the devil will be “set free for a short time” (verse 3). This relatively short time will mark a period of great distress for believers. During those last days “false prophets will appear and deceive many people” and the “love of most will grow cold” (Matthew 24:11, 12). Jesus said, “If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:22). (194-5)

20:4 Καὶ εἶδον θρόνους καὶ ἐκάθισαν ἐπ’ αὐτοὺς καὶ κρίμα ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς, καὶ τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν πεπελεκισμένων διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ καὶ διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ οἵτινες οὐ προσεκύνησαν τὸ θηρίον οὐδὲ τὴν εἰκόνα αὐτοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἔλαβον τὸ χάραγμα ἐπὶ τὸ μέτωπον καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν χεῖρα αὐτῶν.
καὶ ἔζησαν καὶ ἐβασίλευσαν μετὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ χίλια ἔτη.

And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them; and (I saw) the souls of those beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the Word of God, and (those) who did not worship the beast or its image and did not receive the mark upon the forehead and upon their hand.

And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

John introduces a second related scene with another Καὶ εἶδον. The beginning and the end of verse 4 convey the idea of ruling by believers—that is, the Lord’s people ruling with the Lord. They have thrones on which they sit. From the Lord they have also received, as part of the co-ruling, “judgment” (κρίμα). Further description of what the “judgment” entails is not provided here. Passages outside of

Revelation, however, may give a partial description. Jesus said to the disciples in Matthew 19:28: “Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” To the church at Corinth Paul wrote: “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?” (1 Cor. 6:2-3). Could John’s brief statement that “judgment was given to them” also include the preaching, teaching, and application of Law and Gospel done in Christ’s stead as His judgment extended to and through the Church?⁷

Up to this point the occupants of the thrones, to whom judgment was given, have not been specified. John’s vision continues with something to identify who these enthroned people are (accusative direct object with εἶδον implied): “and (I saw) the souls of those beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the Word of God.” This is not the first time in Revelation that John has seen “souls.” In 6:9 we read John’s report that he “saw under the altar the *souls of those who had been slain* for the word of God and for the testimony which they held.” His use of “beheaded” (a perfect passive participle) seems parallel to, if not interchangeable with, his use of “slain” (another perfect passive participle). At this point several expositors offer the conclusion that John’s use of “beheaded ones” encompasses all those martyred for their Christian confession, regardless of how they were executed or killed. The key thought to recognize is that they (namely, their souls) lived on past their earthly point of death. This part of the vision might have been especially comforting to the original audience, who had lost or would lose brethren to martyrdom in Asia Minor. They were not to lose heart, but rather see victory behind the scenes, victory for the departed saints in the face of apparent loss.

Those who had been martyred were not the only ones alive and ruling with Christ in the scene of verse 4. All the faithful are included in the next detail: “and (those) who did not worship the beast or its image and did not receive the mark upon the forehead or their hand.” The description repeats what was brought up in chapter 13 and applies to every true believer, whether martyred or not. What gives me a bit of pause is the connective word καί. This is not the normal way to attach a relative clause (cf. as an example the relative clause in v. 1). Does it therefore imply a second group of people? Or a larger group of which the martyrs are a sub-set? Becker takes the καί as explanatory and translates it as “namely” (304), whereas Lenski sees the attached indefinite relative clause as pointing to “two groups; for if οὔτινες referred to the beheaded ones, καί could not precede” (579).⁸ At this point I will not attempt to interpret in detail what is meant by worshipping the beast and its image or what is meant by receiving the mark, other than to say that the faithful (martyred or otherwise) did not conform to the antichristian influence and mandates that these agents of Satan had imposed on the world in which they lived. Their faithfulness to God and His Word, as evident in their Christian confession and Christian life, would be the visible sign of who they were spiritually and to whom they belonged by faith.

What is said next would surely apply to these faithful, even after their death: “And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.” With the first occurrence of ἔζησαν (aor. act. ind. 3 pl. of ζάω) some translations and exegetes have opted for an ingressive sense, translating as “they came to life” (cf. ESV, NIV, NAS). Implied, it would seem, is the idea of a change from the dead (“beheaded”) state to a living one, in the body. But the attached accusative of time to show duration lends contextual support to the more frequent constative sense for the aorist. The aorist here can simply sum up their state as living (and also ruling with Christ) for that same thousand-year period, which would have the same meaning as the earlier (and later) occurrences—referring to the entire New Testament age.

This last clause of verse 4 thus applies to the souls of the Christian martyrs. Those souls, during the time of the New Testament era, live in heaven and rule with Christ in heaven as well. The same applies to those not conforming to Satan’s earthly agents, if these are viewed as a separate group. The Lord’s faithful (those with saving faith), whether martyred or dying in some other way, fit the description Jesus gives as recorded by John in his gospel: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die” (John 11:25-26).

In turning to the content of verse 5, however, we reckon also with the likelihood that ἔζησαν implies more than a continued living of the Christian soul in heaven.

20:5 οἱ λοιποὶ τῶν νεκρῶν οὐκ ἔζησαν ἄχρι τελεσθῆ τὰ χίλια ἔτη. Αὕτη ἡ ἀνάστασις ἡ πρώτη.
The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years were completed. This (is) the first resurrection.

The only significant variant reading in these six verses occurs at this point, and it involves the omission of the first sentence. Uncial Aleph, part of the Majority Text, and a few ancient commentaries omit these words—having only the last five as a verb-less clause. Uncial A, a different part of the Majority Text, and the Latin tradition include them. Omitting these words (to remove perceived difficulty) is easier to explain than someone intentionally adding them. Their inclusion is fairly well supported; they are here regarded as most likely to be original.

At this point in the vision John is inspired by the Spirit to state the ongoing spiritual condition of the “rest of the dead,” namely, the unbelievers who have died. Their souls, though certainly in existence, are not in a state of life. Not in the sense meant by verse 4—life with God in the heavenly rest afforded to those who are His. During their time on earth also, unbelievers, by way of their ongoing spiritual death, do not live with God at that point either, as believers certainly do by faith. Thus before and after their physical death (the implied “first death”) they “did not live” during the same thousand-year span, i.e., the entire New Testament era. On the basis of the ἄχρι clause some, including Brighton, go with the ingressive sense, “came to life,” and view this as the resurrection of unbelievers on the last day. Millennialistic interpreters take both occurrences of ἔζησαν as ingressive and use it as the basis for two bodily resurrections, one at the beginning and one at the end of the 1,000 years. I prefer taking both as constative: verse 4 pointing to the ongoing spiritual life, before death and beyond, of the believers, and verse 5 pointing to the opposite—unbelievers having no spiritual life during the same time span. I believe this fits better with what is expressed by the verb-less statement at the end of verse 5.

Though the demonstrative pronoun Αὕτη must be pointing back to verse 4, the intervening words help to shape what is meant by “the first resurrection.”⁹ It’s something the unbelievers don’t experience. It most likely fits what Jesus said in John 5: “Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live” (v. 25). This refers to the spiritual resurrection that every believer experiences at conversion; he is raised from spiritual death (unbelief) to spiritual life (faith) through the Savior’s voice heard in the gospel. This spiritual life, as Jesus states also in John, is eternal life possessed even now: “He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (John 5:24). A few verses later Jesus describes the bodily resurrection of all people in these words: “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth— those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28-29). This is the implied second resurrection, which in Revelation 20 is described in verses 12-13.

As for the first resurrection in verses 5-6, one can think of conversion as the starting point and the resulting spiritual life as having no end. This resurrection to spiritual life, taught by Jesus through John, is re-affirmed by Paul in Ephesians: “God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. . .” (Eph. 2:4-6). What Paul does with a few verbs John refers to with a noun. Either way, believers in the New Testament era can find great comfort in the same truth expressed in both epistle and apocalyptic form.

20:6 μακάριος καὶ ἅγιος ὁ ἔχων μέρος ἐν τῇ ἀναστάσει τῇ πρώτῃ· ἐπὶ τούτων ὁ δεύτερος θάνατος οὐκ ἔχει ἐξουσίαν, ἀλλ’ ἔσονται ἱερεῖς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ βασιλεύσουσιν μετ’ αὐτοῦ [τὰ] χίλια ἔτη.

Blessed and holy is he who has a part in the first resurrection. Upon these the second death does not have authority, but rather they will (continue to) be priests of God and of Christ and will (continue to) rule with Him for the same thousand years.

Verse 6 is one of seven beatitudes that occur in Revelation. It engages the believing reader/hearer to include himself. In this instance, though, the blessedness includes the status of also being holy, set apart for God and belonging to God. When one believes in Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the certainty of salvation, he is holy, with his faith as the share he has in the “first resurrection.”

He and all others like him (all believers) have the status of not being subject to the “second death.”¹⁰ John’s definition of the second death comes near the end of chapter 20: being “cast into the lake of fire” (20:14-15). Faith in Christ, as taught elsewhere in Scripture, spares the person from eternal death in hell.

In the linking of clauses so far, John has used the connective *καί*. In verse 6 he employs the adversative *ἀλλά*. This shows a strong contrast; rather than be subject to the second death, believers will continue to be what God has made them to be: “a kingdom” of His “priests” (Rev. 1:6). At this point Brighton argues for the two future verbs acting like Hebrew imperfects, leading to the thought that God’s people “are and will be” priests and that they “rule and will continue to rule” (542).¹¹ The span of their serving as priests and ruling with Christ is the same as said before (article of previous reference): it’s “the thousand years,” which again symbolizes the entire New Testament era. Our service as priests to God on earth is described elsewhere in Scripture. One thinks of 1 Peter 2:4-5 and 9, in which believers in Christ as a “royal priesthood . . . offer up spiritual sacrifices” to God and “proclaim His praises.” John points to this priestly service as given to both God the Father and to Christ,¹² and it will apparently continue even after death.

The ruling/reign that believers have with Christ is also taught elsewhere in the Bible. Though the description given may leave us wondering what it all entails, we can rest assured that nothing has stopped it from coming to pass—not Satan and his constant threats against us, nor death and the time our bodies spend in the grave. Like all other spiritual gifts from God, our participation in the reign of Christ depends entirely on His grace and promise—neither of which can fail us.

Endnotes

¹ The verb “overcame” is the same in Greek as passages found in the Seven Letters section of Revelation 2-3; these are 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26, 3:5, 3:12, and 3:21. With some connection to Revelation 20:1-6 are these two especially:

2:11: “He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.”

3:21: “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”

² A notable passage that is similar to 20:1 (i.e., a possible description of Jesus) is Revelation 10:1: “I saw still another mighty angel coming down from heaven, clothed with a cloud. And a rainbow was on his head, his face was like the sun, and his feet like pillars of fire.”

³ I attempt to show the emphasis by underling “ancient” in the translation.

⁴ Friberg’s lexicon is available electronically on BibleWorks.

⁵ Another clue that 1,000 can mean a complete amount may come from Psalm 50:10-11: “For every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains, and the wild beasts of the field are Mine.”

⁶ This term of Becker and Brighton seems apt and better than “literal.”

⁷ The preaching of the Gospel would extend the Lord’s own judgment of acquittal; the preaching of the Law would extend His judgment of condemnation.

⁸ According to several grammars the indefinite relative clause can have a descriptive force, which can be rendered: “such as who”—a thought that would work well in this context.

⁹ The article in front of the adjective πρώτη may be emphatic, which is reflected in the translation with underlining.

¹⁰ The implied first death is probably physical death, which believers do experience along with unbelievers.

¹¹ Brighton's "Textual Note" on verse 6 reads as follows: "The future tense of the verb ('to be') could reflect the Hebrew Qal imperfect, which can have a durative or continuing force through the present time and into the future" (546).

¹² The article in front of Χριστοῦ distinguishes "Christ" from θεοῦ, which also has the article. This, then, is not Sharp's Rule of two personal nouns referring to one person. The second genitive θεοῦ should be understood as referring to God the Father.

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Messages and Exhortations for Today's Christians from the Prophet Joel

James J. Naumann

The book of Joel is about God seeking to turn His people back to Himself. He employs what our world would call "natural disasters." This is very timely, as we today try to figure out if earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and floods have been getting worse lately, or if the media is merely sensationalizing them more. Many are the times when believers wonder: Is this God's judgment; or is this also a sign of the end times? We answer confidently: Yes. Bad things are the result of sin. In the garden God planted for Adam and Eve, there were no prophecies of all-consuming armies of locusts that would devour everything so that God's other creatures would have nothing to eat. The double punishment of drought was unheard of then, when mist arose from the earth to water the vegetation. Along with sin came a distortion of creation, which twisted it into a force often bent on man's suffering and destruction.

Creation was not only bent by sin, but in the case of the events of this little book of Joel, it was bent by God for His own purpose—to restore His people to Himself.

Summary of Joel

Outline:

1. The locusts and their various effects; Repent! (1:1-14)
2. The coming Day of the Lord; Repent! (1:15-2:17)
 - a. The Lord will show mercy

- b. Restoring material needs in plenty (2:18-27)
- 3. His Holy Spirit is poured out unto eternal life (2:28-32)
- 4. God will judge the nations; they will not stop Him (3:1-16)
- 5. Zion's eternal glory will come (3:17-21)

Joel's message is for everybody. He calls out the old men, the children, the bride and bridegroom, the drunkards, the priests, the farmers, the ranchers, and ultimately even the livestock and the land itself, to witness the destruction and take notice of what is no more and what it means to each of them specifically.

The destruction in this case consists of armies of locusts, the likes of which were not yet seen. We turn to excerpts from Joel, quoting from the English Standard Version.

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

Curiously, the cause of God's anger is not mentioned specifically, but it is easily inferred by what God expects of His people after chastising them:

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

God's people were to cry out to Him, not to rely upon themselves or upon pagan gods, or look to other nations, seeking help from some alliance. God also warned that repentance should be from the heart, not merely through outward form and words:

Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster (2:13).

Back in MY Day

All Scripture is profitable, and so we find ourselves asking what God would have us know from each verse, selection, chapter, and book we encounter. This rightly supposes that these words from almost 900 BC have relevance today.

Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation (1:2-3).

The Lord wants the elders to observe, remember, and tell the next generation. Our elders delight in reminiscing and are quick to point out what in our day is different from what they experienced in their youth. The younger generation does well to listen. Our own elders have seen a world transformed like no other time in history. One imagines that living in Europe during the 1200s wasn't so different from living there in the 1300s. Compare, though, the different kinds of lives people born in the early 20th century had with what lays before an infant today. He is born to automation, globalization, and perhaps most

strikingly, instant access to incredible amounts of information.

“That’s not how it was in my day,” we’ve heard our elders say. But what especially do we hear from the previous generation of our fellow Christians? We hear about the moral degradation of our world and especially our nation. A lack of respect, little or no work ethic, a sense of entitlement on display with a “me first” attitude, sexual promiscuity and deviancy, a breakdown of the family, a turning away from God and the church, and the open mocking of Him and His Word.

Are things worse than ever? Civic righteousness and the fear of God seem cyclical. The ancient Greeks hold a place of honor in history for their contributions to literature, philosophy, art, and science. To praise them, though, we must overlook not just their pagan religion, but also many things that drag even their civic righteousness down quite low. We may heap praise at the beauty of a pastoral scene depicted on a graceful ancient urn in the museum, but we should know that many in the basement are probably unfit for public display—or *were* unfit until recent times. Perhaps a debate over whether “things are worse than ever” isn’t really all that fruitful.

Yes, the elders are telling us how easy we have it and how far downhill our society has gone. So they said in the prophet Joel’s time. So it has been said throughout the ages. But before us is the **“word of the LORD that came to Joel”** (1:1), not the word of old men. And the word is not about how good the good, old days were or about how bad things are now. The word is about the coming Day of the Lord. The burden given to Joel was to sound a klaxon, an attention-getting slap in the face to the inhabitants of the land, a wake-up call that says: “Dreamers! Break above the surface of your slimy mire, take a breath, and look around at reality! See clearly where you are and what is coming!” Or, more perfectly from God’s mouth:

Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes (1:15).

And:

Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near (2:1).

These words warn of the armies of locusts, the drought, and the wildfires that will come. It is a warning of temporal judgment, but also one that seems to foreshadow the final judgment. Indeed, the chastisements and afflictions God sends cannot be divorced from eternity, for while He is just, His overwhelming attribute is love and mercy. The inhabitants of the land were yet in their time of grace, and grace is what God wishes to dispense:

Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster (2:13).

God’s purpose is ever, only, always pleading to His highest creation, “Please, repent. Turn away from that and turn to Me. My Son has endured My final judgment and turned My wrath away forever. He has covered your sin with His precious blood. Exchange that filth for the white garment I freely give.”

The topic before us is in the title: Exhortations for *Today’s Christians*. We have said much about the world today and the parallels to Joel’s day, but what of us? Natural disasters, terrible crimes, and war should all speak loudly to the heathen. Yet we are weak, and we struggle with mighty powers who want us to share in their eternal misery. The sinful flesh clings to us believers and fights against the spirit of truth created in us at our baptisms. What our fathers say is true; we are in danger of succumbing to the easy path, of forgetting who our provider is, and that only by His grace do we draw each breath, and only through His Son is there salvation from the great day of the Lord.

Frequently pastors are asked if this event is God’s judgment for that sin. Was Hurricane Katrina God’s judgment on the sin of New Orleans? Are the record number of tornadoes God’s judgment on our nation? The difference to note in Joel is that God specifically told the people that He was sending *His* armies. Yet all evil is to serve as a preaching of the Law to the flesh. Every tragedy, disaster, and coffin reminds us of the fate of this world, and each would turn our face to the One who won for us a crown of life in the next.

Relief

Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people. The LORD answered and said to his people, “Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations” (2:18-19).

Temporal relief from the locust army has come. The locust army is destroyed; the fires go out; the rain returns. All the best of good things would come back to the children of Zion in great measure. Interestingly, the relief is reported in a sort of reverse order to the way the destruction was outlined:

Joel 2:21—“Fear not, O land”;

Joel 2:22—“Fear not, you beasts of the field”;

Joel 2:23—“Be glad, O children of Zion.”

We too should rejoice and be aware always of the wonderful things our God has given us. His Word is everywhere, that is, close at hand; this was not always so. Our nation, while at war on several fronts, is not bleeding out her sons as at other times. We are free to associate and worship and gather as we do today. Niggling fears of the destruction of the dollar and soaring deficit worries aside, our larder is full and our day-to-day lives are blessed with earthly peace and safety.

So far the temporal. What of eternal relief?

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit” (2:28-29).

The Son who paid our debt on the cross sent the Holy Spirit and fulfilled this prophecy on Pentecost. It was fulfilled also when the Spirit was poured out on you in your baptism and you were sealed to eternal life. This relief would be not just to the children of Zion, but to all flesh, young and old, male and female. Let us prophesy to the world of this eternal relief so that the heathen may know that God is not only righteous and just, but also merciful and loving. Let us call on the name of Jesus and watch for that final day of the Lord, trusting that He has saved us.

Sticking up for God

What about God’s reputation? You know—His name, which is everything we know to be true about God from His Word. Is He not concerned with it? Yes, He is. Throughout Joel the reputation of God and His people is important. This is not vanity, for there is no other God, and He will not have His name taken in vain. Joel’s prayer has the reputation of God in view when he says:

Spare your people, O LORD, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, “Where is their God?” (2:17).

Likewise, God defends His reputation in these words:

You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame (2:27).

We worry about this. We may have plenty to eat, but has there ever been LESS respect for God’s name than in our time and place? Science has crowded out even the natural knowledge of God in so many. Recent failed predictions of the end of the world are just another in a long string of reasons people use to mock God, His religion, and the very idea of life after death. We should be ready to give an answer for the hope that is us. We should keep God’s name holy among us also. But let us remember that God’s name is holy all by itself, and He will see to it that every knee bows to that name.

For tempting God’s people away from Him, for defiling, ignoring, and mocking His Word and His name, the nations will be judged.

I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. And I will enter into judgment with them there, on behalf of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations and have divided up my land (3:2).

In fact, God charges the heathen to be ready for a fight. He fairly dares them to stop Him in His plan to grant eternal life to the faithful:

Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations (3:12).

We honor the name of God, but He will ensure His own eternal honor in the day of judgment. Leave the vengeance to Him. There will be no more mocking from the heathen in heaven, our eternal home:

So you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who dwells in Zion, my holy mountain. And Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall never again pass through it. And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the streambeds of Judah shall flow with water, and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD. . .
(3:17-18).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus! Amen.