

Eschatology
Studies in Biblical Prophecy

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Preface.....	4
Vocabulary	4
The Central Event	9
Brief Sketch of Eschatology in Christian Thought.....	9
Personal Eschatology	11
The Doctrine of Hell	11
Annihilation	13
Universalism	14
Conclusion	15
Basic Eschatological Questions.....	15
About the Kingdom of God	15
About the Rapture.....	16
About the Tribulation.....	17
About the Millennium.....	17
About the Judgments.....	18
Over-arching Theological Approaches to Sacred History.....	18
Dispensationalism	18
Covenant Theology	21
Salvation-History	24
The Book of Daniel.....	27
The Two Visions of the World Empires (Da. 2, 7)	28
The Seventy Weeks (Da. 9:24-27).....	29
The Olivet Discourse	31
Mark's Version.....	32
Luke's Version	33
Matthew's Version	33
Residual Interpretive Problems.....	33

The Book of Revelation.....	36
The Interpretive Systems	36
Preliminary Issues.....	40
The Messages to the Seven Churches (1-3).....	44
The Vision of Heaven's Court (4-5).....	47
The Opening of the Seven Seals (6:1--8:5)	49
The Blowing of the Seven Trumpets (8:6--11:19)	52
The Woman, the Dragon, the Beast and the False Prophet (12:1--13:18).....	57
The Lamb, the 144,000, the Angel Messages, the Harvest of the Earth, and the Seven Last Plagues (14-16)	60
The Reign and Ruin of Babylon (17:1--19:10).....	64
The Consummation (19:11--22:21)	67

Preface

Eschatology is generally one of the first things people want to talk about and one of the last things they ought to talk about. Human fascination with the future drives Christians (and non-Christians) into speculative theology, just as that same fascination fuels the occultic machine. Such a sober warning is only appropriate as a preface to the following studies. Adam Clarke, the friend of the Wesley's and one of the great exegetes of his day, was frank, if anything, in his remarks about his own commentary on the Apocalypse of John. He said, "My readers will naturally expect that I should either give a decided preference to some one of the opinions stated above, or produce one of my own; I can do neither, nor can I pretend to explain the book: I do not understand it; and in the things which concern so sublime and awful a subject, I dare not, as my predecessors, indulge in conjectures."

Having issued the foregoing admonition, it should be pointed out that the following series of studies is not an attempt to indoctrinate the reader in only one school of eschatology. Rather, the attempt has been made to fairly offer a representation of the several major lines of interpretation current within evangelicalism. To be sure, all authors have their own viewpoints, and I shall state mine at the outset. I am an historic premillennialist. Still, my preference is held somewhat loosely, since I deem this subject to be highly speculative in any case. I trust that I may still offer sincere Christian fellowship and tolerance to my brothers and sisters who are dispensational or amillennial or postmillennial. May we all keep the unity of the Spirit until we all come into the unity of the faith!

Vocabulary

Any study of what the Bible says about the future necessarily takes one into the field of eschatology, that is, the doctrine of the last things. Especially in the last two centuries, the field of eschatology has received a tremendous amount of attention, and various theological positions have arisen to capture followers. The following overview of basic vocabulary should be of some assistance in distinguishing the various elements and views.

The word *eschatology* literally means "discourse about the last things." It refers to that part of Christian dogmatics which is concerned with the final end of human history. Traditionally, it has encompassed such matters as the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the immortality of the soul, the final judgment,

and the future states of heaven and hell. In Roman Catholic theology, it also includes the church's teaching about purgatory, limbo and the beatific vision. Some of the most important words associated with the study of eschatology are:

Abomination of Desolation - phrase used by Daniel (9:27; 11:31; 12:11) to denote the defilement of the temple; later referred to by Christ (Mt. 24:15; Mk. 13:14)

Allegorize - to interpret in a figurative manner so that the obvious elements in the writing are symbols of something deeper than what is described at face value

Amillennialism - view that there will be no future utopian age of 1000 years at the end of history; that the present kingdom of God will be immediately superseded by the eternal state without an intervening age

Annihilation - belief that the wicked will be consigned to unconscious existence or non-existence after death; thus, immortality is conditional

Apocalypse - Greek word meaning "revelation;" used in the NT to refer to the second advent of Christ; also appears as the title to the last NT book; used in the titles of many apocalyptic writings (non-canonical)

Apocalyptic - body of intertestamental Jewish writings (later followed by similar Christian writings) which describe the end of the age in cataclysmic, highly symbolic terms

Beatific Vision - Roman Catholic doctrine of the direct, intuitive knowledge of the triune God that perfected souls will enjoy; they will see God as he truly is

Bema - raised judicial platform in the Greco-Roman world; used in the NT to describe the judgment seat of Christ at the end

Chiliasm - from the Greek word for "a thousand"; millenarianism; usually refers to the millennial beliefs of the post-apostolic church

Conditional Immortality - belief that only the righteous will be granted immortality, while the unrighteous will be annihilated

Consistent Eschatology - thorough-going eschatology, especially associated with the thinkers Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer; the belief that Jesus' teachings concerning the kingdom were thoroughly futuristic and apocalyptic in character; according to Schweitzer, Jesus' predictions were mistaken

Cosmic - relating to the whole of the universe

Dispensationalism - conservative theology that stresses the radical difference between two peoples of God, ethnic Israel and the Christian church; pretribulational and premillennial; traditionally divides human history into seven distinct eras, though modern dispensationalists sometimes opt for three distinct eras

Epiphany - from the Greek NT word *epiphaneia*, meaning manifestation; in

eschatology it refers to the manifestation of Christ at the second advent

Ethnic Israel - also called natural Israel, old Israel, national Israel; composed of direct descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and those included by proselytism into the Jewish faith; to be distinguished from mystical Israel or spiritual Israel

Gehenna - the Valley of Hinnom to the southwest of Jerusalem; in Jewish apocalyptic, Gehenna became a symbol of the everlasting punishment of the wicked

Great Parenthesis - time-lapse proposed by dispensationalists and thought to occur between the 69th and 70th week of Daniel's prophecy (Da. 9:27); an era of undetermined length that corresponds with the age of the church

Great Tribulation - time of intense affliction in the world as predicted by Christ (Mt. 24:21 and parallels); interpreted by dispensationalists to coincide with the 70th week of Daniel as the climax of this present age

Heaven - the place of the saved after the final events of the age, usually associated with John's vision of the heavenly Jerusalem (Re. 20-22)

Hell - *hades* (Greek); *sheol* (Hebrew); the place of departed spirits, sometimes thought to be the state of irrevocable damnation and sometimes thought to be the intermediate state of the souls of the dead prior to the great judgment

Historic Premillennialism - belief in a future millennium within history as the consummation of the kingdom of God following the second advent of Christ; post-tribulational; "historic" because it reflects the premillennialism of the post-apostolic church

Historicism - mode of interpreting the Revelation as a symbolic representation of church history, particularly the struggles between the Roman and Protestant churches in the Reformation

Idealism - mode of interpreting the Revelation as an allegory of the struggle between good and evil, God's people against the powers of Satan; nonliteral, allegorical, spiritual interpretation

Imminence - belief that the events of the last times could occur at any moment; for dispensationalists, the word refers specifically to the rapture; for nondispensationalists, the word refers to the complex of events surrounding the second advent (nondispensationalists also used the word "impending" in this same sense)

Inaugurated Eschatology - The view that in the first advent of Christ the kingdom of God broke into the world, though in a partial and hidden way; the consummation of the kingdom of God will be at the second advent.

Intermediate State - the state of the dead between the moment of death and resurrection at the second advent

Israel - see Ethnic Israel and/or Spiritual Israel

Judgment - the doctrine that Christ will call all humans to account at the end; dispensationalists view the judgment as occurring in three different places at different times for different groups; others look for a general judgment of all humans

Limbo - Roman Catholic doctrine regarding the place where the souls of unbaptized infants go upon death; they do not suffer the pains of hell, but they are excluded from the joys of the beatific vision

Midtribulationism - belief in the futurity of the 70th week of Daniel with the rapture of the church occurring after the first 3 1/2 years; especially defended by the late J. Oliver Buswell of Wheaton College

Millenarianism - also millennialism; belief that there will be a future utopia age, usually thought of as 1000 years in length

Non-eschatological - interpretation that the Bible or parts of the Bible do not predict the future in general nor end-time events in particular

Oeconomies - dispensations; eras of time

Pan-eschatological - completely eschatological; fully involved with prophetic interpretation

Parousia - Greek word referring to the coming or presence of Christ in his second advent

Partial Rapture - theory that not all the church will be raptured at the same time; the church will be taken to Christ in groups when each group is ready

Postmillennialism - belief that the second advent of Christ will occur after an age of utopia which will be ushered in by a world-wide conversion to Christianity (sometimes associated with scientific advancement)

Posttribulationism - belief that the rapture of the church will occur after the period of affliction at the end of the present age; sometimes, but not always, associated with the end of the 70th week of Daniel

Premillennialism - belief that the second advent of Christ will occur prior to an age of utopia and that such an era will result directly from the second advent; looks for the consummation of the kingdom of God to occur within history rather than beyond it

Preterism - mode of interpreting the Revelation and/or other parts of the NT as highly apocalyptic in character and as symbolically describing the struggle between the early church and the Roman empire

Pretribulationism - belief that the church will be raptured out of the world prior to the great tribulation, i.e., the 70th week of Daniel; this view is necessary to preserve the dispensational belief that there are two peoples of God; before God can deal with his national people, Israel, whom he has temporarily set aside, he must remove from the world his spiritual people, the church

Prolepsis - the representation of a future act or development as though it already existed or was accomplished

Purgatory - Roman Catholic doctrine of the place for all baptized souls who have died without repentance for venial sins, but who will be saved after their punishment for such sins

Rapture - from the Latin Vulgate of 1 Th. 4:17, meaning "catching up;" refers to the resurrected bodies of believers which rise in the air to meet Christ when he returns

Realized Eschatology - belief that the kingdom of God already has come in its final form and that there is no program for the future except death and union with Christ; especially associated with the theology of C. H. Dodd

Soul Sleep - belief that the dead are unconscious until the resurrection; since they are unconscious, the intervening period between death and resurrection will seem but a moment

Spiritual Israel - also, mystical Israel; belief that the Christian church has become the spiritual heir of all the OT promises to ethnic Israel; views the OT people of God and the NT people of God in continuity rather than discontinuity; sometimes called "replacement theology"

Spiritual Interpretation - approach to interpretation which sees superimposed meanings in scripture that go beyond the face value meanings

Typology - belief that persons, things, or events in the OT prefigure a future truth in the NT; some use typology only where the NT directly confirms it; others apply this principle with or without NT confirmation as a way of Christianizing the OT.

The Central Event

The central event in eschatology is the second advent of Jesus Christ. This event is treated in remarkably different ways by Christian interpreters, but it still remains the touchstone of all eschatology. There are three primary New Testament words that describe Christ's second advent:

Parousia = the presence, arrival or coming of Christ

Epiphaneia = the manifestation or appearing of Christ

Apocalypsis = the revelation or disclosure of Christ

The words seem to be used more or less interchangeably to describe the second advent. Jesus said the *parousia* of the Son of man would be like lightning (Mt. 24:27). Paul speaks of the "*epiphany* of Christ's *parousia*" (2 Th. 2:8). Also, he describes it as the "*parousia* of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (1 Th. 3:13) and the "*epiphany* of the glory of our great God and Savior" (Tit. 2:13). Paul says the church waits for the *apocalypse* of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Co. 1:7) and that at the *apocalypse*, the enemies of God will be paid back and the church will be relieved (2 Th. 1:6-7). He exhorts the church to maintain her Christian lifestyle until the "*epiphany* of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Ti. 6:14; 2 Ti. 4:8). Peter also speaks of the believers' honor and perfection at the "*apocalypse* of Jesus Christ" (1 Pe. 1:7, 13; 4:13).

In general, the evangelical emphasis on the second advent is that it is personal, visible and literal. This emphasis arises especially in contradistinction to the modern theologies of realized and existential eschatology which propose either that the second advent was fulfilled in the descent of the Holy Spirit, is currently fulfilled in an existential encounter, or will be fulfilled in the union of the believer's spirit with Christ at the moment of death.

Brief Sketch of Eschatology in Christian Thought

As a theological discipline, eschatology has been, more or less, in the background of dogmatic studies until the past three centuries. Within these past three centuries, the study of the last things has become a central concern for many Christians, both evangelical and non-evangelical. In general, the dominant ideas in Christian thought have been as follows:

Early Christianity

The earliest Christians embraced chiliasm/premillennialism. The view was

posttribulational and concerned with the struggle between the church and the Roman Empire. References are to be found in the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, and in the writings of Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Lactantius, and Hippolytus.

Medieval Christianity

Origen and Augustine set the stage for the medieval approach. Origen allegorized the millennium and Augustine interpreted it as a symbol of the church. It is often difficult to distinguish between amillennialism and postmillennialism in the Medieval Period. The expectation of a personal antichrist gradually disappeared, while the Book of Revelation was interpreted historically as the history of the church's struggle with evil and/or Islam.

The Reformers

The Reformers adopted the historical eschatology of the Medieval Period and transferred the symbols over to the struggle between Roman and Protestant Christianity. The papacy came to be viewed as the antichrist, and this interpretation became so thorough within Protestantism that it came to be known as the "Protestant view." Eschatology was still largely amillennial. Proponents of this view were Luther, Calvin, Wycliffe, Zwingli, Melancthon, Tyndale, Cranmer, and Wesley.

Protestant Scholasticism

During the post-Reformation period, Protestant theologians began to diverge in eschatological thinking. Some historicists became premillennial (Isaac Newton, William Whiston, J. A. Bengel, Henry Alford). Some developed further the ideas of postmillennialism (Daniel Whitby, David Brown, Jonathan Edwards). The others continued to embrace amillennialism.

Modern Period

In the last two centuries, premillennialism has made a striking comeback. Of particular note for conservatives is the rise of a new form of premillennialism called dispensationalism. Arising in the 1830s under the Plymouth Brethren minister John Nelson Darby, dispensationalism became widely known in America through the Scofield Reference Bible. Other significant proponents were A. C. Gaebelein, H. A. Ironside and R. A. Torrey. Today, the diversity of eschatological views is wide. Non-evangelical views include the systems of consistent eschatology (Weiss and Schweitzer), realized eschatology (Dodd), existential eschatology (Bultmann), and the theology of hope as a response to the death of God movement (Moltmann). Evangelical views include:

Dispensational Premillennialism (Lewis Sperry Chafer, John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, Hal Lindsey, Dwight Pentecost, Tim LaHaye)

Historic Premillennialism (G. Campbell Morgan, Oswald J. Smith, Harold J. Ockenga, G. E. Ladd, G. R. Beasley-Murray, Millard Erickson, Oscar Cullmann)

Amillennialism (Phillip Mauro, Anthony Hoekema, Louis Berkhof, E. J. Fortman, Leon Morris, Michael Wilcock, G. C. Berkouwer)

Postmillennialism (Loraine Boettner, James Orr, B. B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, A. H. Strong, Hendrikus Berkhof, R. C. Sproul, Kenneth Gentry)

Personal Eschatology

Personal eschatology revolves around the questions relating to physical death and the intermediate state. Most evangelicals hold to the conscious and blessed state of the believer with Christ between death and resurrection. Alternative views are purgatory (Roman Catholic and Orthodox), soul-sleep, conditional immortality and annihilation. Here we will briefly survey the three major positions within Christendom concerning the final destiny of men and women.

The orthodox position, which has been held by most branches of the Christian church through the centuries, is that human souls will eternally endure and that their destiny is irrevocably sealed at death. Those who are unsaved will be banished from the active presence of God, and they will suffer unending sorrow and punishment. This position is usually called the doctrine of hell. Other positions have been developed, however. It is probably fair to say that the traditional doctrine of hell is driven more by the exegesis of various biblical passages, while the alternatives to the traditional doctrine are driven more by ethical and philosophical considerations.

The Doctrine of Hell

The Old Testament seems uniform in the teaching that the dead, though they have ended an earthly existence, do not relinquish existence *per se*. Somewhere, they are still accessible to God (Job 26:6; Ps. 139:8; Am. 9:2). Still, this existence is only a shadow of their earthly life, and the dead are bereft of mundane passions (Ecc. 9:3-6), free from the sorrows of life (Ecc. 4:2; Job 3:17), and divorced from actively responding to God (Ps. 6:5; 30:9; 88:10-12; 115:17-18; 38:18). The region of death usually was conceived as being below the surface of the earth (Nu. 16:30, 33). Both the righteous and the unrighteous descended into it (Ge. 37:35; Ps. 55:15; Pro. 9:18). Several words are associated with this concept in the Old Testament, but the most important one, which appears some sixty-six times, is *sheol*. It is variously translated as "hell," "grave," and "the pit" in English Bibles.¹

¹T. Gaster, "Dead, Abode of the," *IDB* (1962) 1.787-788.

In the New Testament, the word corresponding to *sheol* is *hades*.² New Testament writers quote Old Testament passages which seem to view hell as the abode of the dead, whether righteous or unrighteous (Ac. 2:27, 31). Since both righteous Jacob and rebellious Korah went to *sheol*, the idea is sometimes put forth that hell had two compartments, an upper and a lower level. The story of Lazarus and Dives may imply that these realms were adjacent, though a great chasm separated them (Lk. 16:22-26). It is thought that Christ delivered the righteous who were in the upper level of hell at the time of his resurrection (Ep. 4:8-10; 1 Pe. 3:19; cf. Lk. 23:43).³ Others reject this idea and offer alternative interpretations to the various passages.⁴ In any case, while the Old Testament does not generally picture hell as a place of fiery torment (though see Dt. 32:22; Is. 33:14; Da. 7:11), by the intertestamental period, such a concept had clearly developed and was used by Jesus in the story of Lazarus and Dives.⁵

Strictly speaking, the word "hell" in the Bible is used to describe the place of the dead prior to the end of the ages. Another word, *gehenna*, is used to describe the place of eternal punishment, but since the words are so closely related, they have come to be used as synonyms in popular Christian vernacular, particularly since *gehenna* was translated as "hell" and "hellfire" in the older English versions. Literally, the word *gehenna* was a Hellenized form of the Hebrew "Valley of Hinnom," a ravine south of Jerusalem where human sacrifices were offered to the god Molech in the days of Ahaz and Manasseh (2 Chr. 28:3; 33:6; Je. 7:30-31; 32:35). However, this word became a powerful symbol of the place of unending punishment, a place to which God would consign the wicked (Mt. 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:33//Lk. 12:5). It was a dreadful place, depicted by Jesus as a region where "the worm does not die" and "the fire never goes out" (Mk. 9:44-48; cf. Mt. 3:12; 18:8). Furthermore, the New Testament teaches that at the final judgment, the wicked will be banished to a place of fiery torment (Mt. 25:41; Rv. 20:14-15; 21:8), where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 13:41-42, 49-50) and spiritual darkness (Jude 13). Here, they will be abandoned by God forever (2 Th. 1:8-9).

²Also, in the LXX, the word *sheol* usually is translated by the Greek word *hades*.

³This action, known as the "harrowing of hell" from the Middle English *harwen* (= to harry, rob), has been held by various Christians since the Medieval Period.

⁴R. Lightner, "Hell," *EDT* (1984), p. 506.

⁵T. Gaster, "Gehenna," *IDB* (1962) II.361-362. There is considerable controversy concerning this story as to whether it is a parable or a real event. Those who use the story as a theological resource for describing the real nature of hell stoutly maintain that it is a real event, cf. *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, loc. cit.; R. Summers, *Commentary on Luke* (Waco, TX: Word, 1972), p. 194. They argue that since the story is not directly called a parable and because it directly names an individual, Lazarus, it cannot be a parable. Instead, it must be an historical account. Others counter with the response that these factors are inconsequential, and in most respects, the story still fits with Jesus' parabolic pattern. Most scholars treat the story as a parable.

In Christian history, the above doctrine was assumed by most of the early fathers, such as, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Jerome, Augustine, Basil and Chrysostom. There were exceptions, however, such as Origen, who advocated that hell might be remedial. After punishment, the unrighteous and possibly even Satan himself along with the demons might be reclaimed. The medieval imagination was stirred by artistic conceptions of hell as well as by literature, such as, Dante's *Inferno*, but the Reformers, while they agreed that hell was a place of retribution, did not try to describe it, and in fact, rejected many of the popular opinions about it. In the modern period, evangelical churches continue to affirm the orthodox position to greater or lesser degrees. Some of them use the vision of hell as an evangelistic tool, threatening the unrepentant with damnable destruction. Most, however, distance themselves from the more gruesome speculations about its nature. Non-evangelicals, for their part, have relegated the vision of hell to not much more than the dispensable mythology of a by-gone age.⁶

Annihilation

Annihilation is an alternative position to the traditional doctrine of hell. Advocates of annihilation hold that the souls of the wicked will cease to exist, either after death or after the judgment or after a limited period of punishment. The corollary to this position is that immortality is conditional. It is awarded only to the righteous. Either humans are not created as immortal beings in the first place, or else if they are, this quality will be stripped from them as a punishment for their rejection of faith. This viewpoint gives rise to the expression "conditional immortality."⁷

Ethically and philosophically, it is argued that a God of love and the notion of unending torment are incompatible. Furthermore, unending misery and torment seem unjust compensations for the wickedness of a mere seventy years or so of earthly life, however terrible any given earthly life may have been. Above all, God is just. It would be antithetical to his nature to devise a system of retribution which is not commensurate with the crimes. Furthermore, the continuance of a dark corner of existence which is eternally alienated from God's redeeming love seems to threaten both God's sovereignty as well as his nature.⁸

Along with this ethical and philosophical challenge, those advocating annihilation of the wicked look to several biblical passages for support. First, Paul states that God alone is immortal in himself (1 Ti. 6:16; 1:17). Immortality, then, must be a gift which he confers, not a created condition which is resident in every

⁶G. Bromiley, "Hell, History of the Doctrine of," *ISBE* (1982) II.677-679.

⁷A. Johnson, "Conditional Immortality," *EDT* (1984), p. 261; L. Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1933), pp. 340-341.

⁸R. Nicole, "Annihilationism," *EDT* (1984), pp. 50-51.

human person. In fact, the writings in the New Testament do speak of immortality as a divine gift conferred through faith in the gospel (Jn. 10:27-28; Ro. 2:7; 6:22-23; 1 Co. 15:53-54; Ga. 6:8; 2 Ti. 1:10). Furthermore, cessation of existence may be implied in terms like *death* (Ro. 6:23; Ja. 5:20; Rv. 20:14), *destruction* (Mt. 7:13-14; 10:28; 2 Th. 1:9) and *perishing* (Jn. 3:16). Thus, the annihilationist rejects the literalistic interpretations of *Gehenna*, preferring instead to read these biblical passages as symbolic and parabolic. While some within mainline Christianity embrace annihilationism, the primary advocates have been sectarian groups, such as, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh Day Adventists and the Christadelphians.

Universalism

Universalism is also an alternative to the traditional doctrine of hell. It may be traced to the early Christian period and was espoused by Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa. Others throughout church history also have embraced it, such as, some of the Anabaptists in the radical reformation, some branches of Puritanism, some Baptists, virtually all unitarians, and many, if not most, liberal Protestants. Two of the most influential universalists in the 20th century have been Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian,⁹ and Jacques Ellul, the French historian and sociologist.¹⁰ A relatively recent approach which tends toward universalism is the work of Neal Punt in his *Unconditional Good News* (1980). Punt reverses the Calvinist doctrine that all are lost except those whom God elects, and presents a case that all are saved except those whom the Bible directly declares to be lost.¹¹

Universalism is the belief that final salvation is the end for all women and men. In general, it does not deny evil in the manner of the Christian Science religion, but it does hold that all souls will be reclaimed by God's redemptive love, though some will be reclaimed only after a period of discipline and purgation.¹² Thus, the traditional vision of hell is not viewed as ultimate, but penultimate. Universalists use essentially the same ethical and philosophical arguments against the traditional doctrine of hell as do the annihilationists. Various biblical passages, also, are called upon to validate this claim. Peter speaks of a time when God will restore "all things" (Ac. 3:21), a statement which gives rise to an alternative title for universalism, *apokatastasis*.¹³ Paul teaches that just as sin passed to all humans through Adam (Ro. 5:12), so also redemption was effective for all through Christ (Ro. 5:18-21). Furthermore, he

⁹D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) II.220-224.

¹⁰J. Ellul, *What I Believe*, trans. G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 188-209.

¹¹D. Eller, "Universalism," *EDT* (1984), p. 1130.

¹²H. Lockyear, *All the Doctrines of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), p. 287.

¹³The noun *apokatastasis* appears only in Ac. 3:21 in the New Testament, but it has become traditional to apply the word to the theological position of universalism, cf. B. Demarest, "Apokatastasis," *EDT* (1984), p. 67.

speaks of the redemption of the whole creation (Ro. 8:20-23; cf. 15:24-28). Since God's desire is that all will be saved (1 Ti. 2:4; 2 Pe. 3:9; Jn. 12:31-32), all humankind will, in fact, see God's salvation (Lk. 3:6; Tit. 2:11; 1 Ti. 4:10; 1 Jn. 2:2). In the end, all things will be reconciled to the lordship of Jesus Christ, both heavenly and earthly (Ep. 1:9-10).

Conclusion

While the ethical and philosophical arguments concerning God's nature are not to be passed over lightly, still there does not seem to be sufficient evidence to overthrow the orthodox position. While we all may entertain some uncertainties about how God will pronounce final judgment, and while Paul counsels us to avoid speculation in this area (cf. 1 Co. 4:3-5), and furthermore, while the exact nature of final reward and punishment may be debated, the fact remains that Jesus and the apostles clearly taught that not all would be saved (Mt. 7:13-14; 25:46; 26:24; Ro. 2:7-8; 2 Th. 1:5-10; Phil. 3:18-21; He. 2:2-3; Rv. 22:14-15). Some Christians, such as C. S. Lewis, have remained steadfast in their defense of the traditional doctrine of hell while at the same time not following the more literalistic interpretations of fiery punishment.¹⁴ Others, of course, take all the biblical descriptions in the most literalistic fashion. Nevertheless, while we may not be able to furnish a complete answer to the ethical and philosophical discussion about divine justice, at least in the present state of our knowledge, the substantial weight of biblical evidence is that there is an eternal afterlife, that there is a twofold outcome based upon God's final judgment of all men and women, and that this decision is irrevocable. God's love must not be allowed to cancel out his holiness, but rather, God must be seen as a God of holy-love. The evangelical preacher G. Campbell Morgan has made the interesting suggestion that the fires of heaven and hell might very well be the same, since the love of God is consuming fire. Fire is a metaphor for both God's love as well as God's wrath (cf. Is. 33:14-15).¹⁵ Yet, however one conceives of the reward and punishment of the afterlife, the orthodox doctrine of hell cannot be discarded. Otherwise, the stern warnings of Holy Scripture are meaningless, and one risks the ambivalence against which all the prophets and apostles have warned.

Basic Eschatological Questions

About the Kingdom of God

The primary question is whether the kingdom of God is present, future or in

¹⁴Lewis depicts hell as a rather dingy town where the inhabitants wish to stay in the isolation of their self-love, since they would be distinctly uncomfortable in heaven, cf. *The Great Divorce* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946).

¹⁵Bloesch, p. 226.

some sense both.

Dispensationalists often see the kingdom of God (the theocratic rule of God in a utopian era) as having been genuinely offered to ethnic Israel at Christ's first advent but withdrawn and postponed until the end of the age due to Israel's rejection of it. The church was born out of Israel's rejection of the kingdom. According to this schematic, the kingdom of God once more will be proclaimed by Jewish evangelists during the Great Tribulation (after the church is gone from the earth) and will be instituted at the second advent (the second phase of the second coming). All the land promises of the Old Testament and their associated blessings will be fulfilled literally in the millennium. The kingdom of God and the millennium thus have a highly Jewish flavor. Teachings about the kingdom, such as the Sermon on the Mount, are sometimes viewed as being for the kingdom age in the future rather than for the ethical behavior of the church in the present.

Non-dispensationalists see the kingdom of God as God's rule which already has been inaugurated in the world in the person of Jesus Christ. It is even now present and active in the world, though it will not reach its consummation until the second advent.

About the Rapture

This question is largely one of timing in relationship to the Great Tribulation. Is the rapture before, in the middle, or at the end of the period of affliction?

For dispensationalists, a pretribulation rapture is a theological necessity to preserve the separate identities of the two peoples of God, Israel and the church. It arises out of a theological construct rather than out of exegesis, which explains why it occurs relatively late in the history of Christian thought. The second advent of Christ is divided into two major phases, the coming of Christ *for* his saints (the rapture) and the coming of Christ *with* his saints some seven years later (the coming in glory).

Midtribulationism is a direct result of exegesis, but exegesis that begins from the starting point of dispensationalism. The term "elect" in the Olivet Discourse is taken to be the church, and therefore, the church passes through the first part of the time of affliction. Generally, this view is careful to distinguish between tribulation and wrath. The church will experience the Great Tribulation (the first half of Daniel's 70th week), but the church will not experience the wrath of God (the last half of Daniel's 70th week).

Posttribulationism holds that the second advent of Christ will be a unitary event (as opposed to an event with two stages). The church will face the time of great affliction at the close of the age. Furthermore, while posttribulationists may be premillennial or amillennial, they do not emphasize the Jewish character of the millennium. Rather, there is a unity between the people of God in the Old Testament

and the people of God in the New Testament. Posttribulationists do not believe that the wrath of God will fall upon the church, but neither do they interpret the wrath of God in terms of a future 70th week of Daniel.

About the Tribulation

The tribulation question has to do with the length and nature of the closing time of affliction. If one adopts the great parenthesis interpretation of Daniel's 70th week, that is, the belief that the entire church age lies in a gap between the end of the 69th week and the beginning of the 70th week, then the tribulation will be exactly seven years in length. If, on the other hand, one interprets the 70 weeks of Daniel in a continuity and as fulfilled in history, the affliction is of an undetermined length, though it is usually thought to be short (about 3 1/2 years). For the dispensationalist, the tribulation has a highly Jewish character, since it is the time when God turns back to his first people, ethnic Israel. The church will be with Christ in heaven. A new Jewish temple will be built on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, Old Testament sacrificial worship under a Jewish priesthood will be revived, and 144,000 Jews will evangelize the world. Here, the beginning of the great tribulation has a precisely determined starting point -- the rapture.

For the non-dispensationalist, the tribulation will not have a Jewish character. It will be a time when the forces of evil will collectively assault the people of God. The church will persevere as it awaits the blessed hope of the second advent. Here, a precisely determined starting point is not possible.

About the Millennium

The millennial question has to do with the exegesis of a particular passage in Re. 20:1-6 as well as with the nature and purpose of a utopian age. The 1000 years of Re. 20:1-6 has been interpreted both literally and symbolically (see the commentaries). The nature and purpose of the millennium is a broader theological question.

For the dispensationalist, the millennium is specifically the time when all the land promises will be fulfilled to ethnic Israel. David (or a son of David) will literally reign in Jerusalem over the Jews in Palestine. Temple worship once more will be conducted with literal blood sacrifices and a legitimate priesthood with clear lines of descent.

For non-dispensationalists, who look forward to a literal millennium, the millennium does not have this Jewish character. Rather, it is a time when the triumph of the kingdom of God will be consummated within history. Human life on earth will take the form for which it was intended in God's creative excellence but which purpose was marred by the fall.

For the non-dispensationalists who interpret the 1000 years figuratively (both amillennialists and postmillennialists), the millennium is a symbol of the church age or the final stages of the church age.

About the Judgments

This question concerns the number of judgments and the groups associated with these judgments.

The dispensationalist sees primarily three great judgments. First, there is the judgment of the church at the *bema* of Christ, a judgment that will not determine salvation but only the rewards of believers. All who appear at this judgment in heaven after the rapture will be saved, though their status will vary according to their works. Second, there is the judgment of the nations and Israel at the second phase of the second advent. Here, the nations will be judged primarily with regard to how they treated the Jews during the tribulation period (Mt. 25:31-46). Righteous, ethnic Israel is usually thought to be resurrected at this time in order to share in the millennial blessings. Third and last, the wicked will be resurrected and judged after the 1000 years.

The historic premillennialist sees two great judgments, the resurrection and reward of God's people at the second advent and the resurrection and damnation of the wicked after the millennium. Righteous ethnic Israel and the church, because they are united in the cross, will both be accountable at the same judgment seat.

Amillennialists and Postmillennialists see one great judgment that will encompass all the living and dead, righteous and unrighteous.

Over-arching Theological Approaches to Sacred History

There are primarily three evangelical schematics for eschatology, dispensationalism, covenant theology, and salvation-history. "Evangelicals," Luther's designation for those in the Reformation, are a diverse group in this regard and have remained so throughout Protestant history. Until the 19th century, covenant theology was clearly dominant. Dispensationalism, at least in its modern form, was unknown. By the early 20th century in American Protestantism, dispensationalism had become dominant and remains so today. Less well known, except among scholars, is salvation-history, a broader interpretive approach that has arisen directly in association with the modern revival of biblical theology.

Dispensationalism

Historical Origin

Toward the beginning of the 19th century, a conservative reaction began in

England against the relatively new but popular postmillennialism of Daniel Whitby that de-emphasized the doctrine of the second advent. This reaction was fueled by prophetic periodicals and prophetic conferences. While still holding to the historicism of the reformation (papacy = antichrist), the premillennial and personal return of Christ was brought into focus once again.

In the prophetic conferences of the times, two futuristic interpretations began to make inroads into the traditional territory of historicism. Both models were in debt to previous Roman Catholic expositors, especially works of the Spanish Jesuit Lacunza in 1827 (a premillennialist) and the Spanish Jesuit Ribera (1590). Ribera interpreted the Book of Revelation as referring to the end-time era rather than European Christian history, an attempt to refute the popular Protestant view of Revelation.

One of these interpretations, historic premillennialism, was a return to the general viewpoint of the post-apostolic fathers (hence, historic). It asserted a personal antichrist at the end of the age, a severe tribulation followed by the second advent of Christ, and the establishment of Christ's millennial kingdom on earth. The other interpretation, dispensationalism, developed from the theological studies of John N. Darby of the Plymouth Brethren. It was a modification of historic premillennialism that depicted the second advent of Christ in two stages, the first before the tribulation, at which time Christ would rapture his church, and the second at the end of the tribulation, at which time Christ would come in glory to establish his millennial kingdom. Most of the early premillennialists were either historicists (such as, William Cuninghame, Joshua Brooks, Edward Bickersteth, T. R. Birks, E. B. Elliott) or historic premillennialists (such as, S. R. Maitland, James Todd, William Burgh). However, dispensationalism began to gain adherents.

Whitby's postmillennialism was also popular in America in the early 19th century. (It had been adopted by Jonathan Edwards of colonial fame, not to mention Adam Clarke, a friend of the Wesleys, and Matthew Henry.) The reaction in America was similar to that of England. Prophetic periodicals were published, and prophetic conferences were convened. John Darby himself visited America to preach six times between 1859 and 1874. His dispensationalism was eagerly adopted by many. A direct line of dispensational teaching can be traced through the prophetic teachers and leaders since the time of Darby through J. H. Brookes, A. T. Pierson, C. I. Scofield, A. C. Gaebelein, H. A. Ironside, Lewis Sperry Chafer, L. T. Tabot, J. F. Walvoord, Charles C. Ryrie, and J. Dwight Pentecost.

Alongside the growing popularity of dispensationalism there continued a dissent among those who espoused historic premillennialism and/or historicism. Some of them had disavowed dispensationalism from the beginning, such as, B. W. Newton and S. P. Tregelles (both Brethren leaders contemporary with Darby) as well as later figures, such as, N. West, A. J. Gordan, H. W. Frost, James Orr, B. B.

Warfield and Frank Houghton. Some had embraced dispensationalism in the early days only to reject it later, such as, R. Cameron, W. G. Moorehead, W. J. Eerdman, C. R. Eerdman, Philip Mauro, R. V. Bingham, G. C. Morgan, Oswald J. Smith, and Harold J. Ockenga.

Tenets of Dispensationalism

No system of thought is completely uniform among its various adherents, but the primary theological emphases of the dispensational system, with some variations, can be summarized as follows. A dispensation (according to Scofield, whose definition is the most popular) is a "period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God." Each period is marked by some change in God's redemptive action; each dispensation is a new test of the "natural man" and ends in judgment. Literalism is the basic hermeneutic. One of the primary implications of the dispensational hermeneutic has to do with interpreting literally and applying futuristically the fulfillment of the prophetic land promises made to Abraham and David. Scripture should be read and interpreted according to some very important divisions under the rubric "righting dividing the word of truth" (Scofield). The schematic of the ages usually entails seven distinct dispensations, though later dispensationalists sometimes opt for only three (Ryrie), of which the most important are law, grace, and the millennial kingdom.

Most important, there exists a dichotomy between Israel and the Church. God has two redemptive programs. These programs are always kept separate in biblical history. Israel was removed from God's redemptive program before the Church could be formed. Similarly, the church must be raptured prior to God returning redemptively to Israel. Consequently, the Christian church is viewed as a mystery. It is an interruption in God's redemptive program for Israel, and it was an institution not revealed in previous ages. The period of the church is a parenthesis. The key to prophetic interpretation is primarily Israel and secondarily the church. The redemptive promises were made to Israel, and the church participates by virtue of Israel's rejection of Christ.

The millennium has a marked Jewish character according to the dispensationalist. It will be a restoration of the Davidic monarchy of the Old Testament, and it includes the literal fulfillment of the land promises to Abraham and David. A millennial temple will be built in which the Old Testament system of blood sacrifice will be revived, though it should be noted that this sacrificial system is believed to be commemorative rather than atoning. Saved Gentiles will enjoy the millennial blessings under the universal rule of the Davidic monarchy. This millennial kingdom was fully offered to Israel in the first advent of Christ. Upon Israel's rejection, the kingdom was postponed to the future when God shall again redemptively return to the Jewish people. The redemptive program of the church

became a possibility through Israel's rejection of the first millennial offer, at which time Israel was temporarily suspended from God's redemptive action.

The Book of Daniel, and especially, his prophecy of the 70 weeks (of years, i.e., 490 years) is the key to prophetic interpretation for the dispensationalist. The first 69 weeks occurred between the return of the Jews from Babylonian exile and the ministry of Christ. After the 69th week, the church age occurs as a parenthesis. Finally, the 70th week, which is the period of the Great Tribulation, will transpire in the future after the rapture of the church.

Easily the most recognizable feature of dispensationalism is a commitment to a pretribulation rapture. A pretribulation rapture is a theological necessity in order to maintain the soteriological distinction between Israel and the church. In certain key passages, the phrase "wrath of God" in the New Testament is interpreted in terms of the great tribulation, and this in turn indicates that the church, which is promised exemption from God's wrath, will not undergo such a time of affliction. The imminence of the second advent is interpreted, not in a general way as a reference to the impending second coming and its surrounding events, but in the specific sense of an "any moment" secret rapture. The next redemptive act by God will be the rapture of the church. The second coming of Christ will occur in two phases separated by a seven year period (Daniel's 70th week). The first phase will be Christ's coming "for" his saints (the secret rapture of the church). The second phase will be Christ's coming "with" his saints (the visible return of Christ in glory accompanied by his raptured church). The closing period of terrible affliction has a special relationship to God's first people, Israel. It is a seven year period in which, after the church is removed from the world, God once more will turn redemptively to Israel. The Book of Revelation (chapters 6-19) are interpreted in terms of Israel, not the church. The gospel of the kingdom (not necessarily the gospel of grace) is preached by 144,000 Jewish evangelists to the entire world.

In the end, the New Jerusalem will be the home of the Christian church. The holy city of Revelation 21 is a literal, physical place to be inhabited by the people of God eternally. From the time of Darby, the view has been held by various dispensationalists that Christendom at large is apostate. Adherence to dispensationalism sometimes is used as a test of theological orthodoxy.

Covenant Theology

Historical Origin

Covenant theology has roots in Reformation and post-Reformation theology.

It was first espoused by Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger (Zwingli's successor), was embraced by John Calvin, and later was embraced by other Reformers. The tenets of covenant theology were developed and refined throughout the next several generations of Protestants so that Covenant Theology became dominant in the Calvinist and Reformed churches. Though opposed by Lutherans (because in their view it failed to take account of the law-gospel structure of Scripture), and later by dispensationalists (because in their view it confused the various dispensations and the Israel/Church dichotomy), Covenant Theology continued to spread from Switzerland to Germany to the Netherlands to the British Isles and on to America. It reached its highest fruition in English Puritanism in the last half of the 17th century, and it was taken up into the Westminster Confession.

Tenets of Covenant Theology

The thrust of Covenant Theology is that all biblical theology is to be systematically arranged around the notion of covenant, particularly with respect to *redemption, works and grace*.

The covenant of redemption is the foundational covenant to covenant theologians. It was entered into by God with Jesus Christ, who as the second Adam (as opposed to the created Adam) is a spiritual representative of the human race. In consideration of Jesus' perfect obedience and sacrificial death, God resolved to grant forgiveness and give eternal life to humans. Before the foundation of the world, the covenant of redemption was made between God the Father and God the Son, the Father appointing the Son to be the mediator/second Adam and the Son accepting this commission. Thus, God guaranteed that his creation would not be destroyed by sin and that human rebellion would be overcome by grace. Christ would be the new head of humanity, the Savior of the world, and God would be glorified. By its very nature, this covenant foresaw the inevitability of human sin and established a counter-measure.

The covenant of works, also called the old covenant, was entered into by God with Adam, the federal head of the human race who was created as a free creature with knowledge, righteousness and holiness. It was a covenant that emphasized absolute obedience for a probationary period. If the conditions of the covenant were met regarding the stipulations laid down in Eden about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then God promised to grant eternal life to the human race through Adam. Adam and the race then would have passed into a state where they would have been unable to sin, whereas before, although Adam was righteous, he was free to sin. If the conditions were not met, then the threat of death remained. Adam, of course, failed to keep the conditions, a failure that resulted in the fall of humans. Adam acted representatively for the human race. The penalty of death was executed upon all of Adam's race, and all who are generated in Adam's race are now born in

sin. Apart from God's special intervention, there would be no hope at all; all would be lost forever.

The covenant of works continues to play a role in God's redemptive plan even after the fall of Adam. Mosaic law and especially the ten commandments are an expression of this covenant in order to continually convince humans of the necessity of obedience, the sinfulness of sin, the depravity of the race, and the essential need for Christ.

The covenant of grace, also called the new covenant, was made between God and the elect. In it God offers life and salvation through Jesus Christ to all who believe the gospel. All the covenants of the Old Testament are various forms of the one covenant of grace inasmuch as apart from God's intervention, humans are hopelessly estranged from God. All were lost, but by God's grace, some were chosen to be saved. Faith is the sole condition of the covenant of grace, whether Old Testament or New Testament, and even faith itself is God's gift to the elect.

Covenant theology is obviously compatible with the "five points" of Calvinism, i.e., total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance. While the people of God have lived in various eras of history, they yet remain the elect. Covenant theologians frequently divide history into distinctive eras, in some ways similar to dispensationalists, such as:

- ♦ Adam to Abraham
- ♦ Abraham to Moses
- ♦ Moses to Christ
- ♦ Jesus' birth to resurrection
- ♦ Jesus' resurrection to his parousia
- ♦ Jesus' parousia to the consummation of God's eternal purpose

Distinctive eras notwithstanding, covenant theologians do not accept the dispensational dichotomy of Israel and the Church. Covenant theologians see unity and continuity in the covenant of grace, even though in Jesus Christ there are gifts available which were unknown in earlier periods.

Covenant theologians have a great deal of flexibility in eschatology. They may be either premillennial, amillennial or postmillennial without upsetting the basic covenantal system, though most are amillennial or postmillennial. If covenant theologians are premillennial, they do not view the millennium as having the Jewish character typical of dispensationalists. Similarly, covenant theologians have no theological mandate for a pretribulation rapture since Israel and the Church are not viewed as two separate redemptive programs.

Covenant theologians usually view the Old Testament covenants as being largely fulfilled in a spiritual way to the church. As such, they tend not to look for a

future redemptive program for national Israel apart from the church.

Salvation-History

Historical Origin

Salvation-History, also called *heilsgeschichte* (two combined German words meaning "salvation history" or "holy history"), is a relatively modern phenomenon, at least in name. However, the idea played an important role in early Christian theology, especially in the writings of Irenaeus (c. AD 130-200) and Augustine (AD 354-430), because it provided an important philosophy of history. If the Greeks tended to view history as meaningless and the Romans tended to see it only in terms of their own civilization, Christian thinkers argued that history had a theological meaning, though it could not be exclusively identified with any particular human civilization. Although largely lost in medieval theology, this emphasis was revived by the Reformers, especially in connection with their interest in biblical theology. J. A. Bengel (1687-1752) is regarded as the modern father of the approach, and it was adopted in the posthumously published *History of Redemption* by Jonathan Edwards.

Biblical theology, and with it salvation-history, was largely overshadowed by the study of dogmatics in post-Reformation scholarship. The theology of the Reformers was analyzed and systematized in the less flexible categories of systematic theology. The highest study of Scripture was largely conducted under the rubric of various philosophical categories as theologians synthesized the information of the Bible under Prolegomena (revelation), Theology (proper), Bibliology, Anthropology, Hermeneutology, Christology, Pneumatology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, Angelology, Demonology, and Eschatology. However, with the renewed interest in biblical theology in the early twentieth century, salvation-history came into its own. It is held today by many evangelicals, both in America, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, and seems to be generally characteristic of the works of such evangelical scholars as L. C. Allen, J. G. Baldwin, G. R. Beasley-Murray, F. F. Bruce, P. C. Craigie, W. Dyrness, E. E. Ellis, J. Goldingay, L. Goppelt, R. Gundry, D. Guthrie, E. F. Harrison, R. K. Harrison, A. M. Hunter, D. Kidner, G. E. Ladd, I. H. Marshall, R. Martin, L. Morris, J. A. Motyer, R. Mounce, G. Vos, and G. J. Wenham, among others.

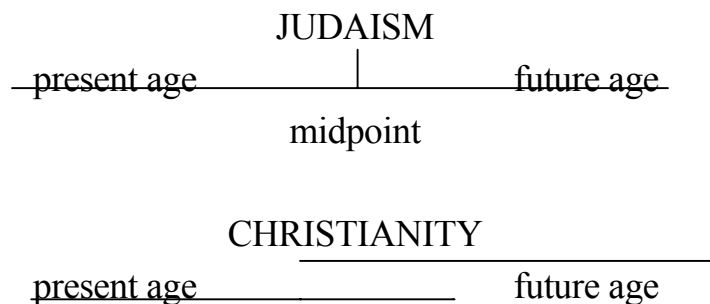
Tenets of Salvation-History

The thrust of salvation-history, as might be expected with its emphasis on biblical theology, is toward a more organic approach to the Bible than is thought to be found in either dispensationalism or covenant theology. It is at once both harder and easier to analyze than the previous schematics, harder in that because of its fluidity it is more difficult to categorize, and easier in that because its ideas arise out of biblical

theology it is less dependent on philosophical categories and Greek logic. In general, those who embrace salvation-history tend to view both dispensationalism and covenant theology as systems that are somewhat artificial and superimposed upon the text. The concern of those who embrace salvation-history is to allow the text to speak for itself so that what is central for the biblical text becomes central for the schematic, and what is secondary to the biblical text becomes secondary for the schematic. Usually, those who embrace salvation-history react negatively to what is perceived as the proof-texting abuse of Scripture when used as the raw data for systematic theology.

The centrality of history is a keystone of the salvation-history school. Biblical faith is first of all an historical faith. The salvation-history theologian emphasizes the mighty acts of God in history. As such, sacred history contains events that are both a part of history and at the same time also acts of God. In turn, this means that scientific historiography is unable to discern the meaning of history without the Bible's authoritative interpretation. The sacredness of an historical event is not necessarily self-evident, but it is proclaimed to be such by the Word of God. To make history central also means that the salvation-history theologian stands opposed to the theological methodologies of existentialism, mysticism, and platonism. It is in sacred history that God has revealed himself, and the Bible is the divine record and divine interpretation of that history.

The theological midpoint of history is the Christ event. All biblical history flows toward or from this center. Biblical history is linear, not cyclical. Unlike Judaism, which placed the midpoint of time between the present age and the coming age so that the midpoint was always future, salvation-history, as a Christian theology, places the midpoint in the past, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Still, the old dividing point of Judaism retains a validity. As such, the future age has already impinged upon the present age before the present age has run its course. The future age has in some sense begun in the first advent of Christ. The present age will not end until the second advent of Christ. Thus, there is a tension between the present and the future.



Generally speaking, those who hold to salvation-history are more open to historical-critical studies than either dispensationalists or covenant theologians.¹⁶ Archaeology, the study of the history and culture surrounding the biblical narratives, and the use of literary criticism (under the authority and infallibility of Scripture) are primary tools used in the work of biblical theology. Because the Greek notions of formal logic from Thales to Aristotle (i.e., definition of concepts, logical classification of data, deductive reasoning) were relatively late in reaching the Jewish world, the Bible is written in a Hebrew mindset which does not flinch at paradox. The tensions between divine sovereignty and human freedom, the precise nature of anthropology (whether dichotomous, trichotomous or holistic), and other such tasks that systematic theologians have taken upon themselves, are allowed to remain in tension in salvation-history. If such tensions were not problematic for the original authors of Scripture, they need not be resolved today, only described.

Great emphasis is given in salvation-history toward placing each biblical document, as closely as possible, in its historical-cultural setting and exploring how this setting may have shaped the document. Also, the literary genre of the document is accorded great significance in interpretation so that the document is read sympathetically, as closely as possible, in the way it was intended to be read by its first readers. Reading the Bible in a "flat" way, that is, without regard for literary style, is to be avoided.

Grace and faith are the central realities of God's redemptive action in history, whether Old Testament or New Testament. Salvation-history sees history as much less categorical than either dispensationalism or covenant theology. It affirms progressive revelation, but not in such distinct time categories. Also, salvation-history sees the people of God in both continuity and discontinuity between the Testaments. There is discontinuity in that Christians are not in a covenant relationship to Yahweh in the same way as was national Israel. There is continuity in that both the Old Testament and New Testament people of faith are redemptively joined together in the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. The remnant concept embraces both the Old Testament and New Testament people of faith.

Because of the greater fluidity of the schematic, those embracing salvation-history have a wide range of eschatological options. In general, those of the salvation-history school affirm inaugurated eschatology, that is, that the reign of God began in the person and work of Jesus Christ at his first advent though it will not be consummated until his second advent. However, within this general stance, premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism are all possible. Because

¹⁶In fact, the term *heilsgeschichte* is broad enough to include many non-evangelical scholars, such as, O. Cullmann and J. Jeremias, as well as evangelical scholars, although our treatment here will be confined to the way salvation-history is conceived by evangelicals.

prophetic literature (not to mention apocalyptic literature) is by its very nature cryptic, dogmatism regarding an eschatological scheme is rare. It is sufficient for salvation-history evangelicals to affirm that Christ's second advent will be personal and visible, and that all the people of faith will share in resurrection, transformation and eternal life with God.

The heart of salvation-history's biblical approach is exegesis. Exegesis is controlled by linguistics, archaeology, history, culture, genre, literary form, literary sources, redaction, literary structure and textual history. For evangelicals, these exegetical disciplines are used under the authority of Holy Scripture and within the framework of biblical infallibility. However, it is recognized that exegesis alone does not give rise to faith. Faith arises as a work of the Holy Spirit. Exegesis can describe the content and theological meaning of Scripture; only the Holy Spirit can convince a person that such content and theological meaning is the truth.

The Book of Daniel

Generally speaking, when one raises the subject of prophecy, two biblical books come to mind, the Book of Daniel and the Apocalypse of John. The first of these, the Book of Daniel, long has been recognized as eschatologically important, since it contains schematics of history, notably the two visions of the world empires (chapters 2, 7) and the vision of the Seventy Weeks (9). The Book of Daniel has even been termed "the key to prophetic revelation,"¹⁷ and while such a conclusion is an overstatement, the fact remains that any treatment of eschatology must surely take into account the remarkable predictions which are found within it. As might be expected, the different systems of prophetic interpretation have varied approaches to these historical schematics.

It should be pointed out at the beginning that the predictions of Daniel are presented against the backdrop of disillusionment. The book begins with a reference to the exile (Da. 1:1-2), describes the fall of Babylon which created the opportunity for the repatriation of the exiles back to Palestine (Da. 5), and predicts the coming of several great world powers that the Jews would face during their future (Da. 2, 7, 8, 11). It closes with a vision of the resurrection and exaltation of God's people at the close of history (Da. 12). However, all these predictions appear before the face of a disillusioned company of people who had expected the exile to end with a glorious restoration of the Jewish nation to world prominence (cf. Je. 29:10-14; Is. 40-55). In fact, Daniel 9 contains a haunting prayer of national repentance in the hope of forgiveness and restoration. To be sure, the exiled Jews, in fact, were allowed to return. Nevertheless, many of the Jews did not return and continued to live in

¹⁷J. Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1971).

Babylonia and Egypt. Furthermore, for those who did return, times were especially difficult. Far from becoming the capital of the world, Jerusalem floundered as the pawn of first one political power broker and then another. The city and its environs continued as a vassal of Persia, then Greece, then Egypt, then Syria, and finally Rome. The prophecies in the Book of Daniel sought to help the Jewish people prepare themselves for this bleak future.

The Two Visions of the World Empires (Da. 2, 7)

In two separate but parallel visions, Daniel surveyed the future of world politics. In the first vision, stemming from a dream by Nebuchadnezzar, he saw the future world empires depicted as metal layers in a huge statue (Da. 2). In the second vision, through a dream which Daniel himself dreamed, he saw the same future world empires depicted as ravenous beasts (7).

Daniel 2	Daniel 7
<i>Gold</i>	<i>Lion</i>
<i>Silver</i>	<i>Bear</i>
<i>Bronze</i>	<i>Leopard</i>
<i>Iron</i>	<i>Terrible Beast</i>

The interpretations of these visions have provided considerable grist for the mills of the interpreters. The traditional opinion in the Christian church, dating back to the ante-Nicene fathers, has been generally uniform with respect to these four empires. Babylon was the first. Persia was the second. Alexander the Great's empire, the Grecian, was the third, while Rome was the fourth.¹⁸ For most conservatives, it is the detail associated with the fourth empire that becomes controversial. There are two critical questions at this point. First, is there a fifth empire? And second, what is the nature of the kingdom of God that overcomes all of the previous world empires?

The first question arises because of the detail given about the feet and toes in the first vision and the ten horns in the second. Daniel does not say that there is a fifth empire, though he certainly describes four (2:40; 7:23). Dispensationalists usually understand that a fifth empire is implied which, after the gap of the church age, is the last great empire of world history to be ruled by the antichrist. As such, the toes of

¹⁸To be sure, in more modern times the suggestion has been offered that the schematic should culminate with the Seleucids of the fragmented empire of Alexander. This viewpoint has not won the support of many evangelicals, since it is largely based on the historical-critical theory that the Book of Daniel was written in the second century rather than the sixth by someone other than Daniel, and further, that the book is not prophetic at all but recasts history as prophecy "after the fact".

the statue and the horns of the fourth beast actually represent this fifth world empire. A current popular interpretation of this fifth empire is that it is even now being formulated in the European Union nations. Non-dispensationalists, for their part, usually do not assume that there is a fifth empire. Rather, the details associated with the fourth kingdom, Rome, are believed to have been historically fulfilled. The ten kings (ten horns) are the Caesars from the time of Julius to Vespasian, and the little horn who was said to "wear out the saints" is Titus, who destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70.

The second question is closely related to the first. In both of Daniel's schematics, the climax is the establishment of the kingdom of God in the world. In the first vision, God's kingdom is viewed as a stone that crushes all earthly powers. In the second vision, God's kingdom is established by the authoritative descent from heaven of the Son of Man who destroys the fourth world empire and hands the authority of all world powers over to God's people. Since dispensationalists argue for a fifth world empire at the close of history, the kingdom of God is interpreted in terms of the millennial reign of Jesus Christ. At his second coming, Christ will destroy the empire of the anti-christ and turn over all political power to his people, who will rule and reign with him a thousand years. Non-dispensationalists, on the other hand, usually interpret the kingdom of God to have been inaugurated during the ministry of Jesus, since Jesus directly identified himself with the figure of the Son of Man. The kingdom of God, then, already has been inaugurated in the world. Ultimately, it will destroy all worldly powers when Christ shall return the second time. However, the power of the kingdom of God is not merely reserved for a future unknown time. It is already active and working in the world through God's people. Still, though God's kingdom has already been inaugurated, it will not reach its full consummation until Christ returns.

The Seventy Weeks (Da. 9:24-27)

Another schematic given by Daniel begins with a decree that the exiled Jews could return to their homeland and rebuild their city. It is generally agreed that this schematic, which is cryptically described as "seventy sevens," refers to a period of 490 years, that is, seventy periods of seven years each. The 490 year span is further divided into three increments, the first 49 years long, during which Jerusalem would be restored, the second an additional 434 years after which the Messiah would be "cut off," and a final seven years during which a horrible desecration would be perpetrated upon the temple. So much, evangelical scholars generally agree upon. Here, their agreement ends, however. Some of them view the schematic as symbolic or as having been given in round figures. Thus, they escape the difficulty of trying to create precise historical harmonization. Others try to keep intact the idea that the numbers should be harmonized with known history, but in doing so, they diverge

considerably in making their applications. Following are the two most popular of the latter approaches.

The dispensational approach to the 490 years details the time increments and events as follows:

49 Years = Period from the third decree to restore Jerusalem (cf. Ne. 1:3; 2:3-8); this decree was given by Artaxerxes in 445 B.C.¹⁹

434 Years = Period from the rebuilding of Jerusalem until the beginning of Messiah's ministry in about AD 26

Great gap of undetermined length; this gap includes the crucifixion of Jesus and Titus' destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70

7 Years = Period of the great tribulation at the end of human history; this period is further divided into two 3 1/2 year periods. At the beginning of this final week, the anti-christ will covenant with the Jews that they may reinstate temple worship. After the first half of the week, he will break his agreement with them and turn against them. He will use the newly constructed Jewish temple as his throne and will set himself up within it as a demigod to be worshiped by the world.

The non-dispensational approach to the 490 years is quite different.

49 Years = Period from the decree to restore Jerusalem (either the second or third one) until the completion of Jerusalem's restoration

434 Years = Period from the rebuilding of Jerusalem until the time of the Messiah (late 20s A.D.)

7 Years = Period from the beginning of Messiah's public ministry through the early Jewish period of the Christian church. In the middle of this week, the Messiah was cut off (crucified), and because of his once-for-all atonement, the Old Testament sacrificial system ended. Sometime after the seventy weeks had ended, Titus would

¹⁹Dispensationalists are careful to use the third decree as their starting point in order to make the calculations work correctly. There were two earlier decrees regarding the restoration of Jerusalem, i.e., one by Cyrus in 538 B.C. (Ezr. 1:2-4), and one by Artaxerxes in 458 B.C., (Ezr. 7:11-26). It is also critical to their calculations to use lunar years rather than solar years.

destroy Jerusalem.

It is apparent that there are several critical points of disagreement between these two interpretations. Dispensationalists break the 490 years with a huge gap of at least two millennia between the 69th and 70th week. While the pronoun "he" in 9:27 has no uncontested antecedent, dispensationalists are certain it refers to the anti-Christ. The cessation of sacrifice and oblation are interpreted to mean that the anti-christ will no longer allow Jewish worship in a newly rebuilt temple. Two events occur in the gap between the 69th and 70th week, the crucifixion of the Messiah and the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. The idea that the 70th week is still in the future is the primary reason that dispensationalists teach that there will be seven years of tribulation at the close of history, since there is no biblical passage that actually says so.

Non-dispensationalists have the advantage that they do not break up the total period with hidden gaps. For them, the cessation of sacrifice and oblation is a statement of spiritual truth about the finality of Christ's atonement, which in the eyes of God brought to a close the period of Jewish temple worship. The eventual destruction of the temple by Titus in AD 70 was only an historical conclusion to what had already occurred in the spiritual realm. However, if the crucifixion of the Messiah was after 69 1/2 weeks, as this interpretation holds, then the final 3 1/2 weeks do not seem to have any determinative ending in the history of the early church. In the Book of Acts, the transition from the Jewish church to the Jewish/Gentile church seems gradual rather than abrupt. As to a tribulation period at the end of history, non-dispensationalists address this subject outside the schematic of the seventy weeks. In the end, neither interpretation is without its interpretive difficulties.

The Olivet Discourse

In the Synoptic Gospels during Jesus' last days in Jerusalem, there appears a discourse that Jesus gave while sitting with his disciples on the Mt. of Olives (Mt. 24:3//Mk. 13:3). From this vantage point, they could look over the Kidron Valley into the Second Temple precincts, and as they sat, Jesus predicted the coming destruction of the temple in which it would be demolished stone by stone (Mt. 24:2//Mk. 13:2//Lk. 21:6). The disciples then posed the question about when this destruction would occur, and in Matthew's account, it is apparent from the way in which they framed the question that they assumed the temple would not be destroyed until the end of the age (Mt. 24:3). As a matter of fact, Jesus would correct this mistaken assumption, and as we now know, the temple was indeed destroyed, not at the end of the age, but rather, by the Roman general Titus in AD 70. The sermon that follows this question, then, is what is known as the Olivet Discourse.

While the three parallel accounts have much in common, it should also be noted that they are not identical. Both Matthew and Luke agree in giving details that are not found in Mark. Also, both Matthew and Luke have material that is unique to them. It can at least be said that, whereas elsewhere in the Synoptics the kingdom of God is generally described as being hidden in the present age, stress is given here to the cosmic events of the last days leading up to the revelation and triumph of the kingdom of God at the close of history. The sermon is apocalyptic in character, and it draws directly from the Book of Daniel as well as other Old Testament prophetic material.

Mark's Version

In Mark's version, it is unclear whether or not Jesus directly answers the disciples' question about the destruction of Jerusalem. His description of what he calls "the end" is taken by some to refer to the end of Jerusalem and by others as the end of the world (13:5-23). In favor of the former is the fact that he describes indictments of his followers by local councils and synagogues, a situation that is particularly relevant to the first century (13:9). The prediction that some of the disciples would give their witness before magistrates and kings also lends itself easily to a first century context. The "abomination of desolation," a desecration of the temple described by Daniel (Da. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11), may well fit into the events surrounding Titus' seige of Jerusalem. Against this, however, is the problem that the affliction of the period is described as the worst in the past or future history of the world, and it is at least debatable that however horrible Titus' seige may have been, it could not have been worse than the holocaust in World War II.

Those who take the passage as referring to the woes at the end of the world have the difficulty of fitting into their scheme such things as the persecution of Christians by local synagogues. Furthermore, they must postulate the construction of yet a third Jewish temple, something that neither Jesus nor anyone else in the Bible ever clearly predicted.

Jesus climaxed the discourse with a description of his return at the close of the age (13:26-27). William Hendriksen is probably correct in concluding, along with a considerable number of other scholars, that in Mark's account the seige of Titus and the woes at the end of the age have been conflated into a single account.²⁰ These two events seem to be inextricably woven together in the sermon, and such a conflation was probably made because the near historical event so appropriately foreshadowed the eschatological one.²¹

²⁰ W. Hendriksen, *Mark [NTC]* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), pp. 526-528.

²¹ G. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp.196-199.

In Mark's version, it is also clear that Jesus intended to suppress speculation. This restraint is to be seen in the parenetic phrases of 13:5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 21, 23, 33, 35 and 37. Though the discourse certainly describes a number of future events as precursors to the end of history, the primary purpose of the discourse is not to be a set of points by which one plots the end, but rather, a strong warning against misunderstanding intermediate events as though they were final ones. Jesus urged his followers toward perseverance during bad times. He warned against deceptive and false religion (13:5-6), 21-22), undue alarm because of world catastrophes (13:7-8, 19-20), and the surrender of faith in the face of persecution (13:9-13).

Luke's Version

In Luke's version, as in Mark's, the near historical event and the distant eschatological event also are interwoven; however, in Luke there is a much stronger focus on the near event. Luke's account, alone, contains the passage in 21:20-24 which, by all interpreters, is taken to refer to the siege by Titus in AD 70. As in Mark's version, Jesus warns against speculation and the attempt to plot the end of the world by the traumatic events which occur during the course of the age (21:8-11). His comments about persecution, as in Mark, seem most appropriate for a first century context (21:12-19). However, also as in Mark, Luke brings the sermon to a climax with a description of the return of Christ at the very end (21:25-28). The language of the second advent is drawn directly from Daniel's vision of the future world empires (cf. Da. 7:13-14).

Matthew's Version

While Luke's version of the discourse stresses the siege by Titus, Matthew's version stresses the *parousia* of Christ at the end of the age. As before, there are warnings against speculation (24:4-8). However, while Mark and Luke seem to address the persecution of Christians by local councils and synagogues, Matthew predicts the persecution of Christians by the nations of the world (24:9). In Mark's version it is unclear whether the abomination of desolation refers to the near historical event or the far eschatological one, and Matthew's version contains this same ambiguity (24:15-25). However, also like Mark, Matthew climaxes the discourse with the return of Christ at the end of the age (24:26-31).

Residual Interpretive Problems

There remain several interpretive problems unique to the Olivet Discourse that never have been resolved among Christians. One is the specific reference to the abomination originally predicted by Daniel. Does this sacrilege refer to the siege by Titus or to some action of the antichrist near the end of the age. Also, there is the problem of identifying the persecutions instigated by the synagogues and local

councils. Do these persecutions refer to what we already know of early Christian history, as recorded in Acts, or might this allude to something yet future?

Another problem concerns the reference to the temple. The prediction of a desolating sacrilege by Daniel certainly referred to the temple, and Jesus repeats this prediction. But what is this temple? Is it the Jewish second temple which was destroyed by Titus in AD 70? (This position seems to have the least difficulties in the discourse itself.) Is there yet a third Jewish temple, one still to be built in the holy land? (This is the conclusion of dispensationalists.) Could the reference to the temple be a symbolic allusion to the church, which is the temple of God in a figurative sense? (This is the conclusion of some based upon Paul's metaphor of the church as the temple of God.) How do these references to the temple correlate with Paul's prediction that the man of sin will set himself up in God's temple (cf. 2 Th. 2:4)? All of these questions and interpretations have been posed and adopted by serious Christian interpreters.

A third problem concerns the *parousia*. Clearly, Jesus describes his coming at the end of the age. He will come upon the clouds of heaven with great power and glory accompanied by angels who shall gather together his elect from the heavens and the earth (Mk. 13:26-27//Mt. 30-31//Lk. 21:27-28). Does this description also include what is commonly called the rapture of the church (cf. 1 Co. 15:51-55; 1 Th. 4:15-17; 2 Th. 2:1)? In the Olivet Discourse, there is no mention of a coming of Christ prior to his return at the end of the age, and certainly no hint of his coming prior to the tribulation. Rather, there is envisioned a single coming of Christ when all of his elect will be gathered to himself. Dispensationalists stress either that the elect of God in the discourse refers only to the Jewish people, or else, that the gathering of God's elect will include the church (from heaven) and the Jews (from the earth). The fact remains that in no place does Jesus envision a rapture of the church as separated from his coming at the end of the age.

Then there is the question about the persecuted people of God. Who are they? Obviously, Jesus spoke directly to the Twelve when he predicted persecution, but was he speaking to them as the future leaders of the Christian church or as believers in the Jewish community? Dispensationalists tend to say that the disciples were being addressed as Jews because the subject at hand was the Jewish temple and the Jewish system. As such, then, the term "the elect" must refer to Jews during the great tribulation. Nondispensationalists, on the other hand, remained firmly convinced that Christians are in view throughout the whole discourse. Jesus addressed his disciples as the Twelve Apostles who represent his church.

The analogy of the fig tree seems clearly to refer to the climactic events just prior to the end (Mk. 13:28-29//Mt. 24:32-33//Lk. 21:29-31). Dispensationalists, however, often see an even deeper symbolism. To them, the fig tree is a symbol of

the 20th century revival of the nation Israel, and it is not unusual for them to identify the emergence of the State of Israel in 1948 as the "blossoming of the fig tree."²² However, this interpretation is oblique, at best. Furthermore, in Luke's version Jesus refers to "the fig tree and all the trees," a phrase that is much harder to apply so specifically to the nation of Israel.

In Matthew and Luke, Jesus compared the last days to the time of Noah and Sodom. In both these Genesis events, normal life was being carried on when the judgment of God was meted out abruptly. So it will be at the end of the age, and "one will be taken, the other left." But who will be "taken," and who will be "left?" One interpretation says that the passage describes the rapture of the church--and the saints will be taken up into the heavens while the wicked will be left to suffer God's wrath. Another interpretation says that the notion of being "taken" refers to being taken in the judgment of God, just as the wicked in Noah's taken were "taken" by the flood (cf. Mt. 24:39). In this view, the "one left" represents those righteous who remain to enjoy the millennial reign of Christ.

Finally, Jesus said, "This generation will not pass until all these things have happened" (Mk. 13:30//Mt. 24:34//Lk. 21:32). If "these things" include the coming of Christ at the end, then how does one define "this generation?" Bypassing Albert Schweitzer and the liberal viewpoint that Jesus was simply badly mistaken, there are still several possibilities. Dispensationalists once eagerly followed the idea that "this generation" was the generation that saw the sign of the fig tree, which they interpreted as the emergence of Israel as a nation. To plot the nearness of the rapture, they offered varying ideas about the length of a generation, whether 25 years or 30 years or 40 years. Now that over 40 years has passed since 1948, this interpretation is increasingly untenable. Others simply say that "this generation" refers to the Jewish race, or even more generally, to the human race. Probably the most reasonable interpretation is that Jesus simply referred to the final generation of history, that is, his statement should be taken to mean that the end would come quickly and not be drawn out. All the final signs and events would be completed within a single generation.

Matthew, alone, contains the parable of the sheep and goats. Dispensationalists usually see this parable as describing God's judgment of the nations after the tribulation period. They assert that the church will not be involved at all, since it previously has been raptured and judged. Nondispensationalists usually understand this judgment to include all peoples, Christians as well.

²² Hal Lindsey may be taken as typical of this viewpoint, when he says, "When the Jewish people, after nearly 2,000 years of exile, under relentless persecution, became a nation on 14 May 1948 the 'fig tree' put forth its first leaves," cf. *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), p. 53.

The Book of Revelation

Doubtless the most famous of all prophetic books in the Bible is the Apocalypse of John. The document is written in the style of Jewish apocalyptic, a literary genre that thrived during the stressful days of the intertestamental period. The general character of apocalyptic writing was established long before the writing of Revelation. Such literature abounded with esoteric and cryptic disclosures about the end of the world. Apocalyptic works sought to explain the ultimate triumph of God's people over the powers of evil, climaxing with the establishment of God's kingdom on earth at the end of the age. This kind of literature is replete with symbolism, particularly animal symbolism and numerology. It describes cosmic disturbances and allows the reader to look behind the veil of the spirit world to view the activities of angels and demons. In particular, it describes the conflict between the powers of evil, which dominate this present age, and the purposes of God, which shall be accomplished in the age to come.

The Interpretive Systems

For the one who studies eschatology, the primary question is one of hermeneutics. Given the cryptic and esoteric nature of the literature, the reader faces a formidable task in trying to discern the message of the book for its first readers, which is the first goal of all interpretation. Although various details of the Revelation bear many potential meanings, there are five general approaches to the book among Christian interpreters. Of course, if one knew for certain how the earliest Christians read the book, he would be a long way toward establishing a valid meaning for the church today. However, all that is known for sure is that in the post-apostolic church, the early Christians expected that the Christian community would see the whole complex of events described in the book, including the antichrist, the tribulation and the return of Jesus to judge the world. They understood the book to predict the end of the world and the suffering of the church at the hands of antichrist before that end.²³ Here, then, are the five general approaches.

Idealism

The idealist leaves the symbolism of Revelation in the most general of terms and largely separates it from any particular historical situation. Idealism sees the book as describing the spiritual conflict between God's people and the powers of evil. The Satanic activities in the book do not refer to any particular outbreak against the church as much as they describe any and every such outbreak in a timeless way. As such, the book is concerned with ideas and principles, not with events and historical

²³G. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), pp. 19-31.

figures. It is poetic in the most abstract sense of the word.²⁴ A form of idealism dominated the Medieval Period of the church when the allegorical method of interpretation was in vogue. Since that time, the idealist approach has had greater or lesser degrees of popularity, though at present, it is less popular than the others.

The greatest advantage of idealism is at the same time its greatest liability. Though the rejection of any specific historical content saves the interpreter from quibbling over details, it also prevents the interpreter from treating seriously the apocalyptic character of the book. Jewish apocalyptic is especially concerned with the events that lead to the end of the age in the context of concrete events of contemporary history that threaten to overwhelm God's people. One would expect the Book of Revelation to do the same.

Historicism

Historicism is the view that the symbols of Revelation refer to major events in the history of Christian Europe. The historicist generally sees the book as addressing the interval between Christ's first and second comings. The beast of chapter 13, for instance, has been identified, according to the interpreter's own time, with Mohammed, the Pope, Luther, Napoleon and Hitler. Particularly in the Protestant Reformation, the historicist view became increasingly concerned with identifying the symbolism of the book with the anti-papal struggles of the Reformers. The beast was interpreted to be the papacy, and the false prophet was the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, this view became so widely held by Protestants that for a long time it was simply called "the Protestant view." Thus, the historicists held that the Revelation described the struggle between true and false religion in the western world.²⁵

Historicism's first weakness is that it ends up being largely irrelevant to its first readers. It is difficult to see why a group of churches in Asia Minor should be informed of events a thousand years away and in another part of the globe. Second, this approach almost completely ignores the nature of apocalypticism, preferring instead to devise its interpretations without reference to the normative elements of apocalyptic literature. Finally, it suffers from subjectivism and major disagreements about historical fulfillments between those who propound it.

²⁴Two evangelical idealist interpretations to Revelation may be found in W. Milligan, *The Book of Revelation [The Expositor's Bible]* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), and more recently, in M. Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened: The Message of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1975).

²⁵Two proponents of the historicist view may be seen in M. Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.) and A. Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, n.d.). Though not a commentary on the Book of Revelation, the popular *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, ed. W. Forbush (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1927) often becomes a favorite source for historicist interpretation as well as Alexander Hislop's *The Two Babylons*.

Preterism

Preterism is the prevailing interpretation of historical-critical scholars and a minority of conservatives.²⁶ They see the Revelation as especially addressing the situation of the early churches who faced overwhelming opposition from imperial Rome. The beast was one of the Roman Emperors, and the false prophet was the cult of emperor worship. Revelation, like other apocalyptic writings, was a "tract for bad times." It was written for a concrete historical situation at the end of the first century, not as a prediction of far-flung history. It assured the church that her present tribulation would be short and that God was in control. The Lord would soon intervene to vindicate his people.

The major weakness of the preterist view is that it does not take seriously that Revelation is both apocalyptic and prophetic. While preterism recognizes the importance of treating the apocalyptic genre as relevant to the historical situation of the first readers, it largely ignores the prophetic element, or else, devalues it as speculation which failed to materialize or as prophecy "after the fact".

Dispensationalism

If allegoricalism dominated the Medieval Period and historicism dominated the Reformation and Post-Reformation Periods, futurism came to dominate Protestantism in the 19th century. It is still the most popular approach in many conservative churches. A particular kind of futurism, dispensationalism, views the Book of Revelation as largely concerned with what will happen on the earth after the rapture has already occurred. Some dispensationalists, particularly the older ones, tend to view the letters to the seven churches as a symbolic representation of seven eras of church history. The bulk of the book, however, describes the struggle between the Jews and the antichrist during the seven year period that corresponds to the 70th week of Daniel.

The major weakness of dispensationalism is that while it takes seriously the prophetic character of the book, it does not do justice to its apocalyptic character. If the Revelation is primarily about the struggle between the Jews and the antichrist in a century far removed from the early church, it is hard to see why such a book would have been written to seven local congregations in Asia Minor. A not uncommon approach among dispensationalists is to interpret passages from the Revelation quite specifically in terms of current political events or trends, and when this is done, it often results in subjectivism and the manipulation of Scripture to fit a particular theory. Many of such interpretations already have proved false.

²⁶A very readable example of preterist interpretation is in W. Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976). Though not a commentary on Revelation, R. C. Sproul's *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) is a good example of preterism by a well-known evangelical.

Historic Premillennialism

This final approach attempts to hold together both the prophetic and the apocalyptic character of the Book of Revelation, thus making it relevant to the first congregations who read it as well as to the church at large that awaits Christ's return. It seeks to return to the general position of the post-apostolic church, hence it is "historic." Like dispensationalism, this position is premillennial, but unlike dispensationalism, it is post-tribulational. It views the Book of Revelation as an extended double entendre, that is, as describing the struggle between the early church and imperial Rome, yet at the same time, foreshadowing the struggle between the church and the powers of evil at the end of the age. It agrees with the futuristic perspective that the book primarily describes the consummation of God's redemptive purpose and the end of the age.

In spite of these markedly different approaches, most interpreters of the Revelation agree that the basic theology of the book is threefold. First, it addresses the problem of evil. Like Jesus and Paul (cf. Mt. 24:15-31; 2 Th. 2:3-12), the book anticipates a brief period of terrible evil. Society will be overwhelmed by satanically inspired agents who will openly defy God and seek to divert all worship toward Satan, themselves and the state. Terrible martyrdom will result for those who do not conform. With unrelenting enmity, the powers of evil will be unleashed upon the people of God.

However, evil is not the only force at work. God shall unleash upon the world judgments of his own, not unlike those he leveled against Egypt in the exodus. Just as Pharaoh set himself against Yahweh, so the Beast and his kingdom shall oppose Christ and his people.

In the end, God's people shall be delivered when the Lord Jesus Christ comes in glory at his second advent. All the earthly kingdoms and their power then will be passed over to Christ Jesus and his followers, who will rule and reign with him in righteous triumph.

Commentaries on the Book of Revelation are not wanting. From conservatives to liberals, from dispensationalists to amillennialists, from historicists to futurists, theologians and scholars have produced works on this fascinating and perplexing book. Most treatments are exegetical and expositional, but a common failure is to provide a dialogical format for assessing the theological problems and perspectives that arise in the interpretation of the book. The following approach, then, will not offer a traditional commentary. Rather, it will be a theological dialogue about the meaning and interpretation of each major section of the book. In the end, it is hoped that the reader will have a better grasp of the meaning and potential of the book instead of only a confusing mass of interpretive schemes.

Preliminary Issues

Possibly more than any other book in the New Testament, the Revelation of John calls for a discussion of significant preliminary questions.

Is it important to know when was the book written?

The question of dating is more than just an issue of historical data. The time of writing figures significantly in what one takes the book to mean. For instance, if the book was written in the late 60s A.D. (as some scholars think), then much of the content of the book must be read against the background of Caesar Nero's mad persecution of the Christians in Rome. Furthermore, Jerusalem had not yet fallen. If, on the other hand, the book was written in the late 90s A.D. (as the majority of scholars think), then the book must be read against the background of the imperial cult in which the Caesar was to be worshiped as a god. The first Jewish revolt and the fall of Jerusalem would have been two decades in the past.

These two features, the relationship of the Christians to Rome and the status of the city of Jerusalem bear upon several critical passages in the book. There is little doubt that the "seven hills" refers to Rome (17:9), since it was a common designation from antiquity, but who is the sixth potentate who "now is" (17:10)? Is it Nero, Domitian, or who? What about references to the "temple of God" (11:1)? Does this refer to a temple in Jerusalem still standing in the lifetime of the author? Does it refer to something else, either a spiritual metaphor or else yet a third temple to be built sometime in the future? The same kind of questions attend the reference to the "holy city" (11:2). Does this refer to ancient Jerusalem or something else? As one can see, the academic question of dating directly connects with certain features of interpreting the book. The early church considered the book to have been written in the late 90s A.D.²⁷ While this date cannot be accepted with absolute certainty, it has won the majority of scholars.²⁸

How important is it to know who the author was?

For interpretative reasons, it matters little whether the John who wrote the book was the Apostle John or some other Christian by that name. Nothing in the content of the book demands that it be written by an apostle, and the writer simply designates himself as "John, your brother and companion in suffering" (1:9). From the mid-2nd century on, it was assumed by many, perhaps most, to have been the Apostle John. However, authorship of the book was disputed even in this early period. Apparently

²⁷Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.xxx.3. His works date from the last quarter of the 2nd century.

²⁸ For a sustained defense of the early date for Revelation, see A. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation: An Exegetical and Historical Argument for a Pre-A.D. 70 Composition* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

its credibility was not endangered by the question of authorship, for it had been widely accepted in Asia, the place of its origin, almost since it appeared.²⁹

The book claims to be a letter, a prophecy and an apocalypse. What is the significance of these three designations?

As a letter, the Revelation was addressed to seven congregations in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodecia (1:4). It was intended to be read aloud in public (1:3),³⁰ just as were other New Testament letters (cf. Col. 4:6). We should assume, then, that the contents of the Revelation had an historical significance for its first readers. It could hardly be otherwise. Any group of Christians to whom a letter was addressed and which was then read to them publicly could hardly fail to apply the contents of the letter to themselves in their own times. Otherwise, what would be the point?

As a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19), the book also contains predictions for the future. While as a letter it addresses its first readers and their times, as a prophecy it addresses what still lies ahead. This future is described as "what must soon take place," as "near," and as "soon" (1:1, 3; 22:6, 10, 20). Since it is directly connected with the second coming of Christ (1:7; 2:25; 3:3, 11; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20), most interpreters take this future to be imminent. As such, it is "soon" in the sense that it is always impending. Such a sophisticated reading seems necessary in light of the last two millennia of Christian history, though it is not clear that the first readers understood it in this way. It seems more likely that they took the references to refer to the return of Christ in their own lifetimes (cf. Jn. 21:22-23). Thus, to read the book as a letter and to read it as a prophecy produces a tension. How much of it refers to the readers' own times, and how much refers to the indeterminate future? It is possible, of course, that the Revelation refers both to the late first century struggle between Christians and imperial Rome and also, by foreshadowing, to the struggle between the people of God and the last great outbreak of evil at the end of the age. The balance between these two eras varies with the interpreter. The dispensationalist sees very little of the book relating to the first century and most of it relating to the end of the age. The preterist sees most of it as relating to the first century and little of it as foreshadowing the end of history.

The book is also an apocalypse (1:1). The apocalyptic style was well-known in the first century, since quite a number of such works had been produced in the

²⁹For further discussion on the traditions of the early church concerning authorship, see R. Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), pp. 257-260; F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988), pp. 161, 177, 195-196, 199-200.

³⁰The verb *anaginosko* (1:3; cf. 22:18) means to read aloud in public, cf. *BAG* (1979), p. 51. Moffat's translation is entirely appropriate, "Blessed is he who reads aloud..." (cf. RSV).

intertestamental period and later.³¹ Apocalyptic, as a literary genre, aimed at providing answers to the secrets of the hidden world. Apocalypses were especially intended to offer behind-the-scenes insight into the struggle between God and the powers of evil that raged in human history. One scholar aptly called them "tracts for bad times." They assured God's people that while evil might seem to prevail in the present, the triumph of God was assured in the end. For the time being, however, the faithful had to contend with the forces arrayed against them and the work of demons.

Why are there so many radically different interpretations to this book?

The short answer to this question is that the various interpreters throughout Christian history have tended to view their own era and circumstances as the primary focus of the book. This tendency stemmed from the fact that the book is a prophecy. If the book in some sense describes the future, then readers throughout Christian history have readily seen in John's visions elements that seemed to describe their own times.

Thus, in the early centuries of Christianity, readers saw the book as describing the struggle between Christians and pagan Rome. In later times, it was the struggle between Christians and Muslims. The Reformers thought that the book described the struggle between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Europe. Still later, readers saw in the book the rise of Napoleon, the German Kaiser, the Bolsheviks, the Third Reich, the Cold War, and the European Economic Community (now the European Union). Each felt their own era could be the final chapter in human history. If Christ was coming soon, and if current events seemed to parallel the visions of John, then the book could be read directly in the context of their own times.

Is the structure of the book significant?

The general structure of the book is not hard to follow. In brief, it is:

- ♦ John's commission (1)
- ♦ Divine Assessments of the Seven Churches (2-3)
- ♦ Vision of Heaven's Court (4-5)
- ♦ Judgments of Seven Seals (6-8)
- ♦ Judgments of Seven Trumpets (9-11)
- ♦ The Woman, the Dragon, the Beast and the False Prophet (12-13)
- ♦ The Lamb, the 144,000, the Angel Messages, and the Harvest (14)
- ♦ Judgments of the Seven Bowls (15-16)

³¹For actual examples, see J. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983, 1985) 2 vols.

- ♦ Reign and Ruin of Babylon (17-18)
- ♦ The Consummation and the City of God (19-22)

This structure is important. Because there are three series of seven judgments, the question naturally arises as to whether these series should be taken as linear or cyclical. Some interpret them as occurring in sequence. Others see them as symbolic descriptions of the same seven judgments described three different times. Still others see them as an intensifying recapitulation so that the seventh seal becomes the seven trumpets while the seventh trumpet becomes the seven bowls.

Amillennialists offer yet another structural analysis in which the book is interpreted to be a series of seven progressive parallelisms, each with different symbols, but each describing the church from its beginning to its climax at the return of Christ. The seven parallel "stories" are:

<i>Chapters 1-3</i>	<i>Vision of the Seven Churches</i>
<i>Chapters 4-7</i>	<i>Vision of the Redeemed and the Seven seals</i>
<i>Chapters 8-11</i>	<i>Vision of the Seven Trumpets and Two Witnesses</i>
<i>Chapters 12-14</i>	<i>Vision of the Woman, the Dragon, the Beast and the Lamb</i>
<i>Chapters 15-16</i>	<i>Vision of the Seven Last Plagues</i>
<i>Chapters 17-19</i>	<i>Vision of Babylon</i>
<i>Chapters 20-22</i>	<i>Vision of the Holy City</i>

How important are the numbers in the book?

It is generally agreed upon by all schools of interpretation that the numbers in the book are highly suggestive. Apocalyptic literature in general demonstrates a fondness for numerical symbolism. The number seven is found throughout the Revelation. There are seven congregations, seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls, as mentioned previously. There are also seven spirits (1:4), seven lampstands (1:12), seven stars (1:16), seven angels (1:20), seven horns (5:6), seven eyes (5:7), seven trumpeters (8:2, 6), seven thunders (10:3-4), a seven-headed dragon with seven crowns (12:3), a seven-headed sea monster (13:1), seven destroying angels with seven final plagues (15:1), seven hills (17:9), and seven kings (17:9). In addition to these explicitly numbered septets, there are places where the number seven is implicit within the text, such as, the seven words of praise to the Lamb (5:12). Over the span of several chapters, the reader encounters seven symbolic personages, the woman, the manchild, the beast, the dragon, the false prophet, the whore and the horseman (12-19). All these series can hardly be accidental. It is usual for interpreters to see the

number seven as symbolizing fullness.

Other important numbers in the book are three, four, ten, twelve, a thousand and their multiples. There are three woes (8:13; 9:12), three plagues (9:18), a division of humankind into three parts (9:18), three evil spirits like frogs (16:13), and the division of Babylon into three parts (16:19). There are four living creatures (4:6), four angels standing on the four corners of the earth controlling the four winds (7:1), four horns of the altar (9:13), four angels bound in the Euphrates River (9:14), and four time designations of an hour, day, month and year (9:15). Twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel (7:5-8), the number of the apostles (21:14), and the gates of the holy city (21:21). The tree of life will bear twelve crops of fruit during the twelve-month season (22:2). The woman clothed with the sun has a crown of twelve stars (12:1). The number of elders are figured at 12×2 , and the number of God's people at $12 \times 12 \times 1000$ (7:4; 14:1). The dimensions of the holy city are given as multiples of $12 \times 1000 \times 4$ (21:16). The thickness of the walls are given as 12×12 (21:17). The gates of the holy city are reckoned as 3×4 (21:12-13). The reign of peace is a thousand years (20:4). Finally, the binary polarities of opposing figures in the book should be mentioned. There are two lords, the Lamb and the beast. There are two women, the bride and the whore. There are two seals, the name of the Father and the mark of the beast. There are two cities, heavenly Jerusalem and Babylon the Great.

This repetition of numbers suggests that they have symbolic significance. It raises the question as to whether they always should be taken literally. For instance, are there only 144,000 people of God, or does this represent the entire body of God's people in a symbolic way? Is the thousand-year reign of Christ and his saints an exact length, or does it refer to a very long period of time?

The Messages to the Seven Churches (1-3)

At the outset, John addressed his apocalypse to seven congregations in the Roman province of Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodecia (1:4). Then, he described his opening vision of the resurrected and glorified Jesus, who commissioned him to write on a scroll the divine revelation contained in the book (1:10-11).

How important is the opening vision?

The opening vision is doubly important. It not only targets the recipients of the visionary material, but it also initiates the reader to the task of apocalyptic interpretation.

Of the seven churches, two are known elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul visited Ephesus on his second and third missionary journeys (Ac. 18:19ff; 19:1), and

one of his letters became attached to this congregation by name.³² Laodecia was a sister-city to Colossae, where another of Paul's letters was addressed (Col. 4:15). The seven cities apparently served as postal centers for the Christian churches in Asia. From Patmos, any correspondence would begin at Ephesus and, by a circular route, would reach them all. From the seven churches, copies of the Revelation could then be made for other Christian congregations in neighboring cities or villages.³³

The opening vision also orients the reader to the genre of the book. Not only does John call it an apocalypse (1:1), he begins almost immediately with a series of symbolisms that call for apocalyptic interpretation. The numeric symbolism of "seven spirits before God's throne" (1:4) seem to symbolize the Holy Spirit in his fullness (cf. 3:1; 4:5; 5:6). The alphabetic symbolism of "Alpha and Omega" (1:8), stressing God's eternal being, is yet another apocalyptic characteristic. The "seven golden lampstands" (1:12) are interpreted for the reader as the seven churches, while the "seven stars" (1:16) are interpreted as the messengers to the seven churches (1:20). The priestly yet surrealistic "Son of Man" with blazing eyes, a sword for a tongue and glowing feet recall Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days (1: 13-16; Da. 7:13). He is obviously Jesus Christ, yet strangely unlike the portrait of him in the four gospels. This is no longer the humble carpenter, but the Jesus who was raised on Easter, triumphant over all the powers of death and hell, who ascended up on high and now reigns as Lord of the entire universe (1:17-18). The apocalyptic symbolisms express this transcendent reality far more graphically than a theological statement in standard prose could ever do (1:5)! Furthermore, this awe-inspiring figure is the one who soon will come again in the clouds in full view of the entire world population (1:7).

How should one interpret the seven churches?

There are two issues here. One is the fact that there were, in fact, seven local congregations in Asia where this revelation was sent. This factor ties the revelation firmly to the era of the late first century. The revelation must have had some meaning for them and their times, else it loses all relevance. To say that the revelation was arbitrarily given to seven local congregations, but that it had nothing to say to them since it was about events still a couple of millennia into the future, seems to fly in the face of reasonableness.

The other issue is in the symbolic value of the number seven. Already in the "seven spirits," and throughout the book in an endless parade of septets, John seems

³²The Ephesian letter may have been a circular letter intended for a broader audience than merely Ephesus, but this issue cannot be addressed here. See the commentaries.

³³C. Hemer, *ISBE* (1988) IV.424. This idea is most fully developed in W. Ramsey, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

consistently to use the number seven to symbolize completeness or fullness. If so, then the seven churches should have a significance larger than simply the seven local congregations. The message is to them, to be sure, but it is also to the whole church. If one takes seriously the statements to each church, "he who has an ear let him hear" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), then he is bound to say that the message has a relevancy for all Christians of all times. In particular, in view of the imminent return of Christ (1:1, 3, 7; 2:25; 3:3, 11; 16:15; 22:6-7, 10, 12, 20), it has a relevance for those Christians who would live at the end of the age.

This sort of double entendre in prophecy is not unusual. It was a marked feature of the Old Testament prophets, who demonstrated a fluidity between the near future (the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities and the return from exile) and the far future (the end of the world). Often, the images of the end of the world are superimposed upon predictions that would take place in the historical vicissitudes of the eighth, seventh and sixth centuries before Christ. Predictions of Cyrus the Persian are found intermingled with predictions about the coming Servant of the Lord (Isa. 42-53), and beyond that, to the new heavens and new earth (Isa. 63-66), even though these events are widely separated. Thus, it should come as no surprise to find John using language that addresses circumstances in the late first century while at the same time using symbolism that envisions the very end of the age.

At the same time, however, one should reserve caution about trying to over-interpret the seven churches. The problems addressed in the individual letters were real in the context of the late first century. There seems little warrant for trying to see in them seven church ages, nor does John give any hint that the reader should attempt such a construction. On the other hand, there seems to be considerable merit in viewing the local problems in these churches as potential dangers for any generation. So, whatever the congregation in whatever era of history, the dangers of passivity, persecution, Satanic deception, pagan compromise, hypocrisy, trial, and apathy are real. The warnings to the back-sliders and the rewards promised to the overcomers are universally valid.

What insights can be gleaned from the letters to the seven churches about Christian life in the late first century?

At several points, there are indications that Christians in the late first century addressed serious challenges. Apparently some people were making false claims to apostleship and prophethood (2:2, 20; cf. 2 Co. 11:13-15).³⁴ Persecution (2:10) and even martyrdom (2:13) were to be expected. The mixing of Christianity with paganism was always a threat (2:14, 20, 24-25), as was doctrinal distortion of the

³⁴We also know from a Christian document written in approximately AD 100 that certain self-acclaimed "apostles" and "prophets" went from church to church asking for money, cf. *Didache* 11.

Christian message (2:6, 15).³⁵ Christians came from both the rich and poor sectors of society (2:9; 3:17). The tension between Christians and Jews had heightened, especially after the first Jewish revolt and the institution of the *birkat ha-minim* in the synagogue service, a liturgical statement that amounted to a curse upon Christians.³⁶ Christians, because of their faith in Christ, claimed to be "true Jews," while ethnic Jews who persecuted Christians were considered to be "false Jews" (2:9; 3:9).

The Vision of Heaven's Court (4-5)

If the seven churches of Asia reflect conditions of the Christian congregations on earth, John is abruptly transported into the heavens where he is privileged to view the court surrounding God's throne. This pattern of shifting back and forth between heaven and earth is repeated several times in the Revelation.

Heaven's court is depicted in a state of celestial, liturgical worship. The worshippers are arranged in concentric circles. The throne of God and the Lamb are in the center, encircled by a rainbow (4:2-3; 5:6). In front of the throne, seven burning lamps represent the seven Spirits of God (4:5; cf. 1:4; 3:1). On each side of the throne were living creatures, apparently cherubim if one judges from Ezekiel's description in the Old Testament (4:6b-7; Eze. 1:5-24; 10:15). Surrounding the throne and cherubim were enthroned twenty-four priestly elders (4:4). Then, still further back were the hosts of innumerable angels encircling the figures in the center (5:11). Finally, surrounding them all were the multitudes of all creatures in the universe (5:13).

Five hymns are sung in this heavenly liturgy. It begins with a praise to God by the cherubim (4:8). Their praise prompts an antiphony by the twenty-four priestly elders (4:9-11). The high point in the liturgy, which in earthly Christian worship would have been the celebration of the eucharist, is the declaration of the triumph of the Lamb slain who is worthy to open the sealed scroll (5:6-7). At the taking of the scroll, bowls of incense are offered which depict the prayers of God's people. Now, the cherubim and the priestly elders sing the third hymn celebrating the Lamb as the Redeemer (5:9-10). The antiphony to the cherubim and elders constitutes the fourth hymn, sung to the Lamb by myriads of angels (5:11-12). At last, the final hymn is a crescendo of all the voices in the whole universe giving praise to God and the Lamb forever and ever (5:13). The liturgy closes with the familiar, "Amen" (5:14).

What is the significance of the expression, "I will show you what is necessary to occur

³⁵There is no consensus on the precise identification of the deviant Christian group called "the Nicolaitans." They may have been a proto-Gnostic group or antinomians or some group tracing its origin to a Nicolas of Antioch (cf. Ac. 6:1-6), cf. T. Donaldson, *ISBE* (1986) III.533-534.

³⁶R. Brown, *Antioch and Rome* (New York: Paulist, 1983), p. 48.

in the future" (4:1b)?

At the outset, this statement surely must connect with Isaiah's and Paul's promise that, in the end, every knee will bow and every tongue confess the sovereignty of God--in Pauline terms, that "Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Is. 45:22-25; Phil. 2:9-11). This is the most obvious significance.

Dispensationalism, with its commitment to a pretribulation rapture, sees yet a further significance. Dispensationalists often view the twenty-four elders as symbolizing the Christian church in heaven (priesthood of believers) after the rapture of the church and during the seven years of tribulation on earth. While the world below is convulsed in distress, the raptured church is enthralled in worship. Exegetically, however, there is little to recommend this view. The elders in heaven always seem to be distinguished from "the saints" rather than identical to them (5:8; 11:17-18; 19:1-4). The more common view among expositors is that the priestly elders represent a special group of spirit-beings belonging to the general class of angels. Positioned as they are between the cherubim and the general host of angels, this interpretation seems compelling.

What is the meaning of the seven-sealed scroll?

The seven seals on the scroll clearly signify events to occur on the earth (6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12; 8:1). However, the contents of the scroll are not revealed. The fact that the scroll had writing on both sides is unusual, for unlike a codex, where pages could be turned with the back sides visible, scrolls were readable on one side only as the scroll was unrolled. The opisthograph³⁷ may represent a double deed such as was used in ancient Near Eastern practice.³⁸ In such documents, the deed was written, rolled up and sealed. An abstract of the deed, or possibly, if it were a piece of property, the terms for purchase, were written and left open for public viewing. Thus, a double deed had both a sealed text and an open one, and such documents were used up into Roman times.³⁹ This would seem to fit John's description quite closely (cf. Je. 32:6-14).

If the seven-sealed scroll is such a document, it likely represents the title deed to the world. God intends to reclaim a world which has been infiltrated by evil, and the final stage of this reclamation will come in the climactic events at the end of the age. The Lamb who was slain, who already has procured salvation for all humans

³⁷*Opisthograph* is the technical term for a scroll written on both sides.

³⁸Various such scrolls have been unearthed by archaeologists containing letters, deeds of sale, marriage deeds and financial documents. In a cave in the Wadi Daliyeh near Jericho, a scroll with seven seals (called *bullae*) was discovered from the 4th century B.C., cf. H. Shanks, "Jeremiah's Scribe and Confidant Speaks from a Hoard of Clay Bullae," *BAR* (Sep/Oct 1987), p. 64.

³⁹Shanks, pp. 64-65.

through the cross and resurrection, is worthy to open the seals heralding the consummation. In the end, the foremost plea in the Lord's prayer will be answered. His kingdom will come--his will shall be done (Mt. 6:10; Rv. 11:15)!

The Opening of the Seven Seals (6:1--8:5)

What do the seven seals represent?

If the seven-sealed scroll represents the title deed to the world, a world which God intends to reclaim, then the opening of the seven seals represents the precursors of the end. The idea that judgments would be poured out upon the world before the end is strongly rooted in the Hebrew prophets and Jewish apocalyptic. Some of the passages describing the opening of the seals directly allude to Old Testament passages, such as, people hiding in the caves of the earth for fear (Is. 2:19//Rv. 6:15), the darkening of the sun and the moon turning to blood (Is. 13:10; 24:23; Eze. 32:7; Jl. 2:10, 30-31; 3:15//Rv. 6:12), the rolling up of the sky like a scroll and the falling of the stars like figs (Is. 34:4//Rv. 6:13-14), and the giving of the nations over to slaughter (Is. 13:15-18; 34:2-3; Eze. 32:3-6; Jl. 2:1-9//Rv. 6:4). Non-canonical Jewish works like 2 Baruch, 2 Esdras and 1 Enoch describe similar things, such as, great terror, blood dripping from wood, chaos and fire, famine and drought, earthquakes, tribulation and affliction, war and slaughter, the confusion of celestial bodies and demonic invasion. The Book of Daniel, while not listing such stereotypical woes, generalizes that prior to the end there would occur "a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of the nations until then" (Da. 12:1), and Jesus reiterated this statement (Mt. 24:21//Mk. 13:19). Such trauma, sometimes referred to as the "woes of messiah," was a well-established literary tradition long before the Book of Revelation was composed. Lists of disasters and cosmic disruptions describe the darkening of the sun, the turning of the moon to blood, the shaking of the mountains,⁴⁰ plagues of pestilence, famine, earthquakes, war, and hail.⁴¹

In the Apocalypse of John, the opening of each seal calls forth a precursor to the end. The first four seals are depicted as horsemen. This imagery is taken from the Book of Zechariah, where four horsemen, patterned after the imperial patrols of the Persian Empire, report to the Lord about the conditions upon earth (Zec. 1:7-11). The horsemen in Revelation, however, are not merely reporting patrols. They symbolize the trauma of conquest, war, famine and plague (6:2-8).⁴² The other seals depict

⁴⁰Testament of Moses, 10.

⁴¹Apocalypse of Abraham, 30; cf. 2 Baruch, 70.

⁴²While some interpreters take the first horseman to be Jesus Christ because of the similarity between Rv. 6:2 and Rv. 19:11, this explanation is doubtful. All the other seals are tragedies, and it seems more consistent to view the first horseman as earthly trauma produced by worldly attempts at conquest.

martyrdom (6:9-11), cosmic disruption (6:12-17) and the preparation for yet seven other terrible judgments (8:1-5).

When will the seals be opened?

The crucial question, of course, is when shall these things happen? There are three schools of thought. One is that they actually did happen in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Josephus' description of the fall of Jerusalem under the Roman general Titus is coupled with passages in Luke's version of Jesus' Olivet discourse (Lk. 21:20-26) to suggest that the entire scope of the seals are locked within the first century.⁴³ Another viewpoint is that all these woes will occur just prior to the second advent of Christ.⁴⁴ The language in the Olivet discourse describes many of the same cosmic disturbances (Mt. 24:29//Mk. 13:24-25//Lk. 21:25-26) that precede Christ's second coming (Mt. 24:30//Mk. 13:26//Lk. 21:27). For those who view the final chapter of human history as the 70th week of Daniel, the seals fall within this seven year period. Yet a third viewpoint is that these woes characterize the general course of the age, though they escalate as the end approaches. The third viewpoint merits some further explanation.

It seems likely that Jesus' Olivet discourse bears directly upon the interpretation of the seven seals with their predictions of catastrophic events and cosmic disturbances, such as, war, famine, earthquakes, persecution, and so forth. In the Olivet discourse, Jesus responded to his disciples' question about what "sign" was to be expected before the end. He warned them against speculation (Mk. 13:5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 21, 23, 33, 35, 37). Certainly there would be precursors during the course of the age, but the disciples must not mistake intermediate events for final ones. These precursors always warn the righteous that "the time is near" (Mk. 13:29), but its nearness is not so much a date to be calculated as an expectation to be constantly affirmed and watched for (Mk. 13:32-37).

Of these three interpretations, the first two attempt to pinpoint the specific time of fulfillment (either AD 70 or the period following the rapture of the church). The third one does not attempt to be precise. In the opinion of this writer, the third approach most satisfactorily seems to correlate with the Olivet discourse, the Old Testament prophets, and the vision of John. If true, it means that the opening of the seals has already begun in the course of the present age. The escalation of conquests, wars, famines, earthquakes, and martyrdoms characterize the whole of Christian history from the time of Jesus until the present. If, as some interpreters think, the cataclysms of the sun, moon and stars are taken as symbols of social and political

⁴³ See especially the discussion on the Olivet Discourse in Sproul, pp. 111-127.

⁴⁴In the dispensational position, these woes occur after the church has already been taken to heaven but before the Lord returns to judge the earth at the end.

disruption, then such disruptions are already in process during the age. However, one should not be too quick to dismiss the possibility of a literal disruption of the cosmic bodies. If these passage are to have a literal fulfillment, then they still await a future time.

Who are the two groups of God's people?

The interlude between the 6th and 7th seal (and its parallel interlude between the 6th and 7th trumpet, cf. 10:1--11:14) heighten the suspense. Both interludes describe the people of God during the tumultuous woes of messiah. In the interlude of chapter 7, the people of God are depicted in two ways, first as 144,000 servants of God from the twelve tribes who are sealed for protection during the great afflictions before the end (7:1-8), and second as the triumphant multitude of the redeemed from among the nations who survive the great tribulation (7:9-17). The two depictions have deliberate differences. The first uses the Israelite model (7:4), the second the international model (7:9).

Most interpreters agree that these depictions of the people of God describe believers who live through the woes of the seal judgments, both because their description is sandwiched between the 6th and 7th seal and because the latter group is described as having passed through "great tribulation" (7:14). Nevertheless, there are two related questions which divide interpreters. First, do the two depictions refer to the same group by different metaphors, or are there, in fact, two different groups. Second, depending upon how one answers the first question, who are these people of God?

Typical dispensational interpretations hold that the two groups are different, the first being Israelites (because God has returned to his Jewish people during the 70th week of Daniel after the church is raptured) and the second being the non-Jewish multitudes who come to faith because of the Jewish testimony during the 70th week of Daniel. As such, then, neither group represents the church *per se*. However, there is nothing in the passage to indicate that the 144,000 are evangelists or that the international multitude are their converts. Furthermore, against a literal interpretation of the first group as being Jewish is the precise number (144,000) and the precise multiples from each tribe (12,000).⁴⁵ These numbers clearly fall within the range of symbolic numbers typical of apocalyptic, and it seems more likely that they represent the whole elect people of God. The number 144,000 may be directly related to the vision of the holy city, the Lamb's wife, which is depicted as a cube and measured at 12,000 stadia on each of its 12 edges (21:16). 12,000 stadia times the 12 edges of the cubed city equals 144,000. The 144,000 are described as "Israel" because the church

⁴⁵Also against a literal interpretation is the unusual nature of the listing, which omits Dan and Ephraim but includes both Joseph and Joseph's son, Manasseh.

is, in fact, the new Israel, headed by the twelve apostles (cf. Ga. 6:16). This interpretation is especially plausible in light of 14:1, which explains the seal of God as the Father's name, the mark of Christians (cf. 3:12). The first group corresponds to the true Israel as opposed to "those who say they are Jews but are not" (2:9; 3:9). The true Israel is the body of faithful Christians. If, in turn, this true Israel is the church, then the two descriptions both refer to the same entity but from two different vantage points. The first description is the sealing of Christians for protection during the woes of messiah, and the second description is a preview of their final triumph at the end. They are at once "the Israel of God" and the multitude of Christian believers "from every nation, tribe, people and language."

The first description pictures the Christian community before the time of affliction, while the second anticipates its victorious celebration in heaven after the tribulation has passed. It should be noted, of course, that the seal of God which protects his people from divine judgment does not prevent them from suffering at the hands of the evil powers of the age. As noted under the fifth seal, many of them will face martyrdom (6:9-11). Similarly, Jesus could at the same time warn his disciples that they would suffer persecution, betrayal and martyrdom, but also assure them that "not a hair of your head will perish" (Lk. 21:12-19). Nevertheless, even death could not destroy them, for as will be said later, "They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death," and yet they were victorious (12:11). They overcame by the blood of the Lamb (7:14; 12:11a).

The Blowing of the Seven Trumpets (8:6--11:19)

The opening of the seventh seal (8:1-2) produced no judgments on the earth as with the first six seals. Rather, when the seventh seal was opened, John saw seven angelic trumpeters. Trumpeters are especially associated with war and the Day of Yahweh, and the appearance of seven of them is ominous, to say the least.⁴⁶ Their task, according to 8:3-5, was to answer the prayers of the martyrs who had been calling for vengeance from under heaven's altar (cf. 5:8; 6:9-11), a vengeance not completed until the pouring out of the bowls of wrath (cf. 16:7). The godless world had persecuted God's people; now, heaven's judgment would fall upon the godless world.

Are the parallels between the trumpet judgments and the plagues of Egypt intentional?

Yes. The parallelisms of hail (Ex. 9:22-26//Rv. 8:7), the turning of water to

⁴⁶ The imagery of seven angels comes from Tobit 12:15 and 1 Enoch 20:1-7. The intertestamental Jewish conception was that there were seven archangels, which included the biblical Gabriel and Michael as well as Raphael, Uriel, Suru'el, Raguel and Saraqa'el.

blood (Ex. 7:19-22//Rv. 8:8) and the gloom of darkness (Ex. 10:21-23//Rv. 8:12) are almost certainly intentional. Just as in Egypt when the people of God were under severe oppression by Pharaoh, and God answered their cries of distress by sending terrible strokes of judgment upon Egypt, so God has heard the prayers of the martyrs under heaven's altar and will send terrible strokes of judgment upon the earth. It is important to remember that in Egypt God protected the Israelites from the plagues (Ex. 8:22-23; 9:4, 26; 11:23; 12:13), and in the Apocalypse God seals his servants so that they will not be harmed (7:3; 9:4).

How literally should one take the fractions "one-third," and how far should one go in trying to find modern parallels to the trumpet judgments?

It is likely that the repeated fractions of "one-third" (8:7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) are indications that the trumpet judgments are not total devastation. To interpret literally a third of the sun and moon, for instance, becomes logistically problematic. It is better to consider the fractions as part of the apocalyptic genre. Remember, this is an apocalypse, not the London Times! Since the trumpet judgments are not total, there is room for judgments yet to come.

The interpreter should also use reserve in trying to find modern parallels to these judgments. Imaginative interpretations of ecological imbalance, toxic waste, pollution, acid rain, volcanic eruption, the greenhouse effect, black holes, meteor showers, colliding comets, solar and lunar eclipses, nuclear fallout, star wars weapon systems and a host of other possibilities have all been suggested. More than two decades ago, Hal Lindsey tried to convince the Christian community that Communist China would field a 200 million man army and cross the Euphrates River in an invasion of the west (cf. 9:16).⁴⁷ Others said that the scorpion-like "locusts" of 9:3ff. were actually stealth bombers. Such identifications are needlessly reckless and speculative. The real fulfillments may be altogether unlike anything anyone has ever suggested! The intent of John's vision of the trumpet judgments is to describe horrible plagues of universal proportions and grotesque demonic activity in a godless world. For the early church, it meant that pagan Rome, which was persecuting the Christian church, would be judged by God. Historically, this judgment certainly happened. The population of Rome was drastically reduced by war, the Germanic invasions and plague.⁴⁸ The fulfillment of these judgments on pagan Rome does not exhaust the extent of the prophetic vision, however. At the end of the age, there still

⁴⁷H. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), pp. 81-87.

⁴⁸ It is estimated by historians that between the reign of Marcus Aurelius and the restoration of rule in AD 284, the population of the Roman Empire was reduced by one third, cf. E. Burns et al., *World Civilizations*, 6th ed. (New York: Norton, 1982) I.264. Well known, of course, are the repeated invasions of Rome by the Goths, Vandals, Ostrogoths, Huns, Visigoths and Franks.

may be other terrible strokes of judgment to fall upon a godless world. It is wiser to leave the exact nature of these fulfillments an open question, however.

What is the meaning of the angel and the "little scroll" (10)?

The reader should recall that between the 6th and 7th seal, there was an interlude with two scenes. A similar interlude occurs between the sounding of the 6th and 7th trumpet, and it also contains two scenes. The first scene is of the angel with the "little scroll."

It should be pointed out that the "little scroll" is probably *not* the same as the seven-sealed scroll of chapter 5, since John uses different Greek words to describe them (5:1; 10:2). Rather, the imagery comes from the prophetic calls of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. The eating of the scroll indicates the filling of the prophet's mouth with the oracles of the Lord (Eze. 3:1-4). At first, the eaten words would be a "joy" and "delight" (Je. 15:16), but in the end, they would bring indignation, unending pain and an incurable wound (Je. 15:18). Similarly, for John the "sweetness" of the oracle must surely refer to the triumphant promise of Christ's return, but the "bitterness" of the oracle comes from the terrible predictions of plagues and judgments on the world.

Incidentally, the wording in the older English versions, "There should be time no longer" (cf. KJV), is misleading, and it has been corrected (cf. NKJB). This statement is not announcing the end of history, but rather, that there would be no more delay before the final events in the age.

What is the point of having seven thunders speak but not revealing what they said?

This element in the scene suggests that there is more to come in the future, but the meaning is still hidden. It is not unlike St. Paul's experience of hearing inexpressible things in heaven that he was not permitted to tell (cf. 2 Co. 12:4). The counsel of God is always to some degree a mystery, even when it is in the process of being revealed!

Who are the two witnesses?

The two witnesses are rather obviously patterned after Zerubbabel and Joshua (Zec. 4:3-5, 12-14; 3:1; 4:8-9; Rv. 11:4), on the one hand, and Moses and Elijah on the other (Ex. 7:20; Dt. 18:15; 1 Kg. 17:1; 2: Kg. 1:10, 12; Mal. 4:5; Rv. 11:5-6). However, it should be remembered that single figures in the apocalypse can sometimes refer to groups as well as individuals (i.e., the woman clothed with the sun and the great whore are figures that may represent groups). Interpreters are divided over whether the two witnesses are individual persons or groups.

Those who interpret them as individuals usually believe them to be Moses and Elijah *redivivus*, based on the mysterious circumstances of their deaths (cf. Dt. 34:5-6;

Jude 9; 2 Kg. 2:11). Otherwise, they may refer to two individual persons yet to arise who will have the powers of Moses and Elijah.⁴⁹ If they have any reference to the period of the early church, it is hard to see what it might be.⁵⁰

On the other hand, if the two witnesses refer to groups (or some particular group), the most natural interpretation is that they represent the church, God's new covenant people to whom Moses and Elijah testify (cf. Mt. 17:3//Mk. 9:4//Lk. 9:30). This interpretation has the attraction of explaining the strange reversal of Jewish-Gentile symbolism both in this passage and in the rest of the Apocalypse. Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel since the time of David, has become an unbelieving pagan community, typified as Sodom and Egypt (11:8). The temple, with its priesthood and furnishings once exclusively reserved for Jewish worship, symbolically has become the Christian church (1:6, 20; 3:12; 5:10; 6:9; 7:15). The ark is now in heaven, not on earth (11:19). The old sacrifices of Torah have been replaced by a single, universal sacrifice, the Lamb slain (5:6). In fact, the category of Jewishness itself has been reversed (2:9; 3:9). If this reversal bears upon the temple scene in 11:1, then the worshippers in the temple are Christians who are protected until their Christian witness has been completed (11:5a). The two witnesses symbolize the church in its evangelistic witness. The beast who attacks the witnesses is pagan Rome who persecutes the early church, and in a double entendre, it is also the kingdom of antichrist at the end of the age that shall rise against the church. At the end, the church will be resurrected from the dust of martyrdom, ascending into heaven at the call of God (11:12). The city of Jerusalem, which has now become pagan, will collapse (11:13).

Do the periods described as "time, times and half a time" (12:14), forty-two months (11:2), three and a half days (11:9), and 1260 days (11:3) have any connection with the visions of Daniel (Da. 7:25; 9:27)?

It is hard not to believe that these time periods in the Apocalypse are intentional reflections upon Daniel's prophecies. Forty-two months, 1260 days, and three and a half days are all equivalents.⁵¹ Furthermore, these same increments are mentioned later in the Revelation (12:6; 13:5), along with the enigmatic but equivalent phrase "time, times, and half a time" (12:14), which also appears in Daniel

⁴⁹ There is also the interpretation that they are Enoch and Elijah, the two Old Testament characters who did not "die," though there is nothing directly in this passage to suggest Enoch. Nevertheless, the interpretation is an ancient one, cf. Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, 50.

⁵⁰ One could speculate about the deaths of Peter and Paul in Rome in the early 60s A.D., but the power to send plagues did not characterize either of the apostles' ministries.

⁵¹ Forty-two months, of course, is three and a half years. 1260 days, by Jewish lunar reckoning, is also three and a half years. If the last "week" of Daniel is divided in half, the three and a half days must represent half a week--but remember that Daniel's "week" is a week of years, not a week of normal days.

(7:25; 12:7). It is less clear that the time increments directly relate to the 70 weeks prophecy, though they well might. In particular, the last week is divided in half.

Christians do not agree about how the seventy weeks of Daniel should be interpreted. Some say the whole seventy weeks were contiguous and have already been fulfilled in the death of Jesus and the earliest period of the Jewish Christian church. Others, notably the dispensationalists, say that there is a great interval between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week so that the fulfillment of the final week is reserved for the end of the age and corresponds with the great tribulation after the church has been raptured. In either case, John may have drawn on the imagery of the final week of Daniel to describe the closing period of the age.

During the first three and a half years, the two witnesses carry out their ministry (11:3). During the final three and a half years, the witnesses will lie martyred (11:7-10). It is a moot question whether these final seven years are to be taken at face value or whether they are one more symbol, in an almost unending series of symbols, drawn from Jewish apocalyptic. If the latter, some suggest that the time period could even include the present age. The fact that the forty-two months are directly connected to Jesus' statement about the present age being the "times of the Gentiles" during which Jerusalem would be "trampled" might suggest a non-literal interpretation of the time periods (11:2; cf. Lk. 21:24). If so, then the first three and a half years represent the period when the church freely testifies to the gospel, while the last three and a half years represents the time of the church's affliction and martyrdom. On the whole, there is no consensus.

Is the seventh trumpet the same as Paul's "last trump?"

Two factors have led some interpreters to connect 1 Co. 15:52 with the seventh trumpet. One is the statement that at the seventh trumpet, the mystery of God would be completed (10:7). This has been taken to mean that the church, which is the mystery of God hidden for ages (Ro. 16:25; Ep. 3:3-6; 6:19; Col. 1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3), will finally reach its conclusion at the coming of the Lord (11:15, 18). The other is Paul's reference to the "last trumpet", given that the seventh trumpet is the end of the series.

The first of these arguments seems more persuasive than the second. John and the early church probably knew of the Pauline vocabulary about the "mystery" of the gospel, and if so, it would not be surprising for John to allude to it here. However, that Paul would anticipate John's series of seven trumpets by referring to the "last trumpet," or more to the point, that Paul would expect his Corinthian audience to anticipate John's series of seven trumpets almost half a century before the prophecy was given, is severely anachronistic and must be discounted.

Why does the seventh trumpet seem to conclude history when the Apocalypse is only half completed?

This question must be answered along the lines of the structure of the book. If the book is strictly linear, then the statements of consummation in 11:15-18 must be anticipations of what will come later. If, on the other hand, the book employs an overlapping structure, that is, if it either intensifies or recapitulates events, then 11:15-18 does indeed describe the end.

The structure of the book also bears upon the theory of mid-tribulationism. If one connects the completion of God's mystery (10:7) with the interpretation that the two witnesses are the church called into heaven (11:12)--and if one at the same time understands the Apocalypse to be a strict chronology--then the rapture of the church occurs in the middle of the tribulation period since it occurs in the middle of the Book of Revelation. Mid-tribulationists have long used this passage as their primary support. However, most interpreters do not see the Apocalypse as a strict linear chronology, and if it is not, the mid-tribulationist position falls.

The Woman, the Dragon, the Beast and the False Prophet (12:1--13:18)

The visions of the seven seals and the seven trumpets have a numerical parallelism with the vision of the seven last bowls of wrath. However, prior to the vision of the bowls of wrath, there are several other visions that depict the terrible oppression and persecution of God's people. The first of these visions features four figures: the woman clothed with the sun, the great red dragon, the beast from the sea, and the beast from the earth.⁵² God's persecuted people are alternatively called "our brothers" (12:10), "those who obey God's commandments" (12:17), "those who hold to the testimony of Jesus" (12:17), and "the saints" (13:7, 10). Near the end of the book, they are identified as martyrs who were beheaded "because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God" (20:4). The nomenclature is general enough to permit debate about their identity. Are they Christians (the post-tribulationist view)? Are they righteous Jews or non-Jewish converts who live during the great tribulation period after the church has been raptured (the pretribulationist view)? And who are the antagonists? Can they be identified with world figures or entities? These are the crucial questions in chapters 12 and 13.

Who is the pregnant woman clothed with the sun?

The imagery of a pregnant woman facing a dragon was an internationally known symbol depicting the struggle between the righteous and the powers of evil. It

⁵² When these four figures are added to the figures of the Lamb (5, 14), the great prostitute (17-18) and the Bride (21), they complete the series of seven primary figures in the book.

is to be found in the mythology of Greece, Mesopotamia and Egypt.⁵³ Indeed, the imagery is also to be found in the Old Testament, where a pregnant woman struggles to give birth to the messianic people and the messianic age (Is. 26:17-18; 66:7-13; Mic. 4:10-12).

Who is this woman? Interpretations have ranged from Israel to the Christian church to the virgin Mary. The clearest points of identification are the references to Joseph's dream, where the sun, moon and twelve stars refer to Jacob, Rachel and the sons of Israel (Ge. 37:9). The male child to be born who would rule the nations with an iron scepter seems a clear reference to the messiah from David's line (Ps. 2:7-9). That the woman is the virgin Mary (the Roman Catholic view) seems unlikely due to the statements in 12:6, 13-16, where she seems to represent the persecuted people of God who would be protected for three and a half years. The dream of Joseph fits with the interpretation that the woman is Israel, but the fact that her persecution follows the ascension of Christ does not.⁵⁴ The persecution of the woman and her offspring who "hold to the testimony of Jesus" fits the interpretation that she is the persecuted church (12:6, 13-16; 20:4), but it is difficult to see how the church can be said to give birth to the Messiah. Perhaps the best approach is to simply avoid the tight distinction between Israel and the church and simply see the woman as representing the people of God, the true Israel. If so, then she represents all God's people, whether Jewish or Christian.

Who is the great red dragon, and when is the war in heaven and the persecution that follows?

There is consensus about the identity of the dragon, since he is directly identified as Satan (12:9). The war in heaven, however, is a different matter. It is traditional, based on this passage and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, that Satan took a third of the angels with him in his fall at the beginning of time. The present context, however, is not clearly a flashback. Could it be an apocalyptic description of Christ's victory over Satan in the cross and resurrection (cf. Jn. 12:31)? If this interpretation is followed, then the dragon's persecution of God's people on earth would have a peculiar relevance in light of the Roman imperial persecutions and the martyrdoms of Christians, who overcame by their "testimony" and did not "shrink from death" (12:11). On the other hand, Daniel speaks of a time of terrible distress, protection and deliverance associated with Michael, the archangel, and the fact that this trauma is to climax with the resurrection of the dead seems to refer to the end of history (Da.

⁵³ G. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 191-197.

⁵⁴ The dispensational interpretation that the flight of the woman into the desert is Israel's protection by God during the great tribulation at the end of the age presupposes the gap between the 69th and 70th week in the 70 weeks of Daniel, a viewpoint that is at least unclear.

12:1). Because of the difficulty in pinning down the war to a particular time, some interpreters argue that the vision should be viewed in a timeless way. If so, then the war between good and evil is always in process.

At present, there is no consensus about the time of the war. It is clear that this celestial conflict, however it is to be viewed, has dire ramifications for God's people on the earth. Failing in his attempt to destroy the Messiah, the dragon takes his revenge upon the people of God for three and a half years (see discussion under 11:2-3, 9). As before, there is little consensus about whether to take the three and a half years as literal or symbolic.

Who is the beast from the sea?

The beast from the sea is clearly the earthly agent of the dragon as shown by the parallelism of seven heads and ten horns (12:3; 13:1) and the statement that the dragon gave him his power (13:2).⁵⁵ The persecution of God's people will occupy the three and a half year period during which the beast will carry out his terrible deeds on behalf of Satan. The beast is a composite of the world empires in Daniel's vision of the four beasts (Da. 7). Many interpreters connect him with Paul's description of the "man of lawlessness" (2 Th. 2:3-12), Daniel's description of the "little horn" (Da. 7:8, 11, 20-26), and John's "antichrist" (1 Jn. 2:18; 4:3). He blasphemes God and persecutes God's people on the earth.

The healing of the beast's death wound has attracted much attention (13:3, 14). Does this refer to the *Nero redivivus* myth popular in the Roman Empire and even among some early Christians?⁵⁶ Dispensationalists have long taught that it refers to the death of the Roman Empire and its revival in the end of the age,⁵⁷ and many believe that this revived Roman Empire has its final expression in the European Union. Others interpret that it refers to a reoccurring pattern of blasphemy and persecution to be seen in Antiochus Epiphanes, who desecrated the second temple in 167 BC, Titus, who destroyed the second temple in AD 70, the imperial Caesars, who demanded emperor worship at penalty of death in the 90s AD, and finally, the eschatological antichrist, who shall persecute God's people at the end of the age.

Who is the beast from the land, and what is the mark of the beast?

The description of the second beast carries a religious motif in that, like a priest, he uses miracles and deceptions to direct the diabolical worship of the first beast (13:12, 14-15). Later, he will be called "the false prophet" (16:13; 19:20;

⁵⁵ This same imagery of the seven-headed dragon is found in the apocalyptic work the *Odes of Solomon*, 22:5.

⁵⁶ In Christian apocalyptic, Nero was depicted as the antichrist risen from the dead (*Ascension of Isaiah* 4:1-14; *Sibylline Oracles* 4:119; 5:363; 8:70).

⁵⁷ J. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), p. 199.

20:10). He enforces allegiance to the first beast by total economic control.

The mark of the beast is one of the best-known features of the Revelation. The beast's *charagma* (= engraving, brand, mark) stands as the antithesis of the seal of the living God. Both marks are in the foreheads (7:2-4), one identifying the "servants of God" (7:3) and the other identifying the followers of the beast (14:9-11). Those who have the seal of God are to be protected (7:2-3), while those who have the mark of the beast (or, alternatively, those who are not sealed with God's seal) are to be tortured by terrible judgments (16:2; cf. 9:4).

The identification of the beast's mark is directly associated with the number 666.⁵⁸ The fact that the mark is described as both a "name" and a "number" (13:17) has led many interpreters to add up the numerical equivalents of various names.⁵⁹ The name Nero is the most popular, especially since it connects with the *Nero redivivus* myth, while the name Titus is another speculation. Both these names would have had meaning for the first readers of the book. Some early Christians saw the "mark" as the state certificate issued to verify that a citizen had participated in the required ritual of emperor worship. The modern trend toward identifying people by numbers has fueled many theories, including social security numbers, international bar codes, implanted computer chips and so forth. Before any interpreter goes too far afield in speculation, however, it might be well to consider that if the seal of God is interpreted other than literally, the mark of the beast may be as well. The fact that the number 666 is a triplicate series one short of the number seven may argue for a non-literal interpretation. If seven is the number of fullness, and in particular, the number of the fullness of the church (chapters 2-3), then six is the number just short of that and perhaps signifies false religion.⁶⁰ In any case, no consensus has been reached among Christian interpreters on the precise meaning of this mark.

The Lamb, the 144,000, the Angel Messages, the Harvest of the Earth, and the Seven Last Plagues (14-16)

Where is Mt. Zion?

Earlier, it was pointed out that the Apocalypse contains a series of reverse symbolisms. True Jews are Christians, the old Jerusalem becomes Sodom and Gomorrah, the priesthood is now the worshipping Christian community, and the temple has become the Christian church. Here, once more, is a reversal. Mt. Zion, the hill immediately north of the city of David which once was the site of the first and second temples, has become heaven itself (14:1, 3). If the mark of the Beast will

⁵⁸ Some early manuscripts read 616, though 666 has much greater manuscript authority.

⁵⁹ In both Greek and Hebrew, cardinal numbers were written as alphabetic letters.

⁶⁰ M. Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1975), pp. 128-131.

identify the followers of evil, the seal of God will identify those who triumph through the blood of the Lamb and their faithful testimony (7:1-4; 12:10-11; 14:1). They will stand with the Lamb in triumph upon heavenly Mt. Zion.

What is the meaning of the "eternal gospel" and the angel messages, and who are "the saints?"

The first angelic announcement is a final warning to the people on earth that they must make a choice; either worship God or, by default, worship the beast. This message is the basic imperative of Holy Scripture from beginning to end. The announcement of the fall of Babylon anticipates what will be described in more detail later. The third angel warns that loyalty to the beast will merit a terrible judgment. Together, these three messages "call for patient endurance on the part of the saints...who are faithful to Jesus."

Who are these "saints?" Because the term "saint" is somewhat generic, various interpretations are possible. Dispensationalists are convinced that they are Jews who have turned to Christ during the final period of tribulation. While such an interpretation is not impossible, it is driven more by the theological structure of dispensationalism than by exegesis of this passage. It seems more natural to take the "saints...who are faithful to Jesus" as referring to Christians who live during the time of terrible oppression by the beast. The blessing upon those who "die in the Lord" recalls the martyrs who are killed for their testimony (6:9).

What is the meaning of the harvest scene?

John uses two metaphors, a grain harvest and a grape harvest. In the first, he makes two important allusions. The harvester is someone "like a son of man," an obvious allusion to the vision of Daniel (Da. 7:13-14) and probably referring to the Lord Jesus Christ. The grain harvest recalls Jesus' parable of the tares and wheat (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43), where the harvest is the end of the age. A separation is to be made between "the righteous" and "everything that causes sin and all who do evil." Thus, the grain harvest is probably a metaphor for God's gathering of the righteous to himself, while the grape harvest is a metaphor for God's gathering of the wicked for judgment. As before (cf. 6:9-11; 8:3-5), God's judgment on the earth, here initiated by the command to throw the grapes into the winepress of judgment, is a response to the prayers of the martyrs.

Who are the victors singing the Song of Moses and the Lamb?

The accumulation of references to the saints, those sealed by God, the martyrs, the triumphant 144,000, and those having the testimony of Jesus all seem to be images of the same group--the Christians who have struggled against the powers of evil, both in ancient Rome, at the close of the first century, and in the world

throughout the last period of the age. These victors are the Christian martyrs who have been faithful "unto death" (cf. 2:10). They have completed their final "exodus" over the sea of fiery trial, refusing to surrender to the beast and his mark (15:1-2). Just as Moses once led his people across the Red Sea, the Lamb has led his faithful followers to victory through martyrdom (15:3-4). The only thing remaining is for those who killed them to be dealt the seven final plagues, symbolized by seven golden bowls of divine wrath that will be poured out upon a wicked world (15:5-8).

Are the parallelisms intentional between the seven last plagues, the seven trumpet judgments and the plagues upon Egypt in the exodus?

The parallelisms are so striking that they must be intentional. Consider the similarities between the exodus and the final plagues:

The Exodus	The Final Plagues
Boils (Ex. 9:8-11)	Sores (Rv. 16:2)
Water to blood (Ex. 7:19-22)	Water to blood (Rv. 16:3-4)
Darkness (Ex. 10:21-23)	Darkness (Rv. 16:10-11)
River frogs (Ex. 8:5-6)	River frogs (Rv. 16:13)
Storm (Ex. 9:22-26)	Storm (Rv. 16:18-21)

Consider, also, the parallelisms between the effects of the trumpets and the bowls:

Trumpets	Bowls
The earth (8:7)	The earth (16:2)
The sea (8:8-9)	The sea (16:3)
Rivers and springs (8:10-11)	Rivers and springs (16:4)
The sun (8:12)	The sun (16:8)
Darkness (9:2)	Darkness (16:10)
The Euphrates (9:14)	The Euphrates (16:12)
Voices, thunder, earthquake, lightning and hail (11:15, 19)	Voices, thunder, earthquake, lightning and hail (16:17-21)

There is, of course, a difference. The trumpet judgments are partial, affecting only a third of things (cf. 8:7-12). No such restriction is given for the bowls, for they are "final plagues" (15:1).

Where is Armageddon?

The name Armageddon is the Hebraism *har-Megiddo* (= mountain of Megiddo). Megiddo lies in the Esdraelon in northern Israel. It is the site of several famous battles in Israelite history, such as, the conflicts of Deborah and Sisera, Saul and the Philistines, Josiah and Pharaoh-Neco II. Solomon and Ahab both fortified Megiddo extensively, and the fortress of Megiddo served as a watchtower for the entire Esdraelon Plain. Hence, the name Armageddon seems to have been chosen for its association with past military excursions. If the "great city," here called "Babylon"

(16:19) and earlier referred to as the "great city...where the Lord was crucified" (11:8), is the same as the city where the blood flows freely (14:20), then it is Jerusalem. Of course, Jerusalem is not in the Esdraelon, so the conflation of ideas present an anomaly. Furthermore, the name "Babylon" was well-known in John's time as a cryptic title for Rome. It seems that John has used apocalyptic imagery to show that old Jerusalem has become a symbol for worldly oppression and evil (11:8), and it may well be that both Jerusalem and Armageddon function, not so much as geographical locators, but as symbols for a world system in rebellion against God, a rebellion that in John's day was expressed in pagan Rome. At the end of the age, this same world rebellion would be expressed in the kingdom of the beast. The "great city" = Jerusalem = Babylon = Rome = the kingdom of the beast in rebellion against God.

The Reign and Ruin of Babylon (17:1--19:10)

Twice John has referred to Babylon, once in the angel message that Babylon had fallen (14:8) and the other in the description of the seventh bowl of wrath (16:19). He also has referred to "the city" (14:20), a reference that will be repeated several times in chapters 17-18. Here, John will take up the vision of Babylon in earnest as he works toward the climax of his apocalypse.

To what does Babylon refer?

Several clues are to be found in John's description of Babylon. First, he speaks of it as a city which "made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries" (14:8; 17:2; 18:3, 16, 18; 19:2). This city "sits" on seven hills (17:9), and it is "the great city that rules over the kings of the earth" (17:18). He also speaks of Babylon as a "mystery," that is, as an entity whose true identity would be revealed by God (17:5, 7). He describes Babylon as a whore who commits adultery with the potentates of the world (14:8; 17:1-5, 15-16; 18:3, 9; 19:2), a prostitute whose sins were piled up to heaven (18:5). He says that she is the home of demons and "a haunt for every evil spirit" (18:2). Finally, he indicts Babylon as a woman drunken with the blood of the martyrs (17:6; 18:24).

The reference to Babylon should be taken as a symbol of entrenched worldly resistance to God, the epitome of wickedness and godlessness. In the Old Testament, Babylon, the haughty empire, was doomed to destruction by the Hebrew prophets (Je. 25:12-14; Is. 13-14, 47). Just as ancient Babylon held the people of God in exile, so also this Babylon will oppress those who hold to the testimony of Jesus (17:6), including the apostles and prophets of the Christian church (18:20). Just as members of the diaspora were called to leave Babylon in the return from exile (Is. 48:20), so now the saints of God are called to leave the system of evil which is permeated with sin (18:4). Since the whore "sits upon many waters," symbolizing the nations of the

world (17:15), it is clear that she cannot simply refer to Babylon in Mesopotamia or yet any other contemporary Babylon of secondary status (there were other cities named Babylon in John's era). Rather, John deliberately draws from a stock apocalyptic symbol in which Babylon was identified with Rome, the capital of the Mediterranean world (2 Baruch 11:1; Sibylline Oracles 5:143, 158-160; 1 Pe. 5:13). The description of Rome as a city upon seven hills was well-known in John's era, appearing in the works of Virgil, Martial and Cicero (cf. 17:9).⁶¹ So, Rome in John's time was the embodiment of the spirit of Babylon. Yet, Babylon was more than Rome, too, for it embraced more than a single empire or a single culture. Babylon is an ongoing eschatological symbol of Satanic deception and secular power. Babylon is to be found in every era of history, from ancient Babel and its tower, to Babylon in Mesopotamia, to Rome in the first century, and finally, to the modern citadels of self-aggrandizing secularism.

Earlier, through a reversal of symbolism, John depicted earthly Jerusalem as Sodom and Egypt (11:8), a city under judgment from God (11:13). It is likely that John intends Babylon, Rome, Jerusalem, Sodom and Egypt to be one and the same. They represent the aggregate of worldly cultures which exude the spirit of antichrist.

How are the seven heads and ten horns of the beast from the sea to be interpreted?

The beast from the sea, as discussed earlier (chapter 13), is the antichrist. His seven heads, in addition to representing the seven hills of Rome, also refer to seven rulers (or rulerships, if the term "king" is granted enough fluidity to represent a kingdom rather than simply a person). The critical factor in interpretation is that one of these kings "is," that is, his rulership was an existing entity at the time of the writing of the book. If the kings refer to individuals, then the date of the book's composition is crucial. That there are two competing dates among scholars is directly attributable to the correlation of the date of composition with the king who "is." The Roman emperors up until the time of Domitian are as follows: Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius (Caligula), Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus and Domitian. Nero was the sixth emperor, and his death was accompanied by a popular myth that he would rise again. Thus, Nero could be both the sixth king and also the eighth while "belonging to the seven" (17:10-11). If the head which was wounded and healed refers to the Nero *redivivus* myth (cf. 13:3, 12), and if, in turn, this same myth lies behind the description of the beast which "once was, now is not, and will come" (17:8, 11), then Nero is the critical king who "is." Of course, as we know, Nero did not rise again, and to complicate the case, the strongest early Christian tradition is that the Apocalypse was composed during the reign of Domitian, not Nero.

⁶¹ R. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 314.

A second reckoning begins with Augustus (following a listing of emperors by the Roman historian Tacitus) and passes over the three minor emperors, Galba, Otho and Vitellius. In this scenario, Vespasian would be the sixth emperor and Titus the seventh. Domitian, the eighth emperor, would have been a Nero-like emperor and the arch-persecutor of Christians. Still, this scenario is not entirely satisfactory either, since Vespasian did nothing to disturb the Christians nor did he promote the emperor cult. Furthermore, why pass over the three minor emperors who, though their reigns were short, were nevertheless genuine emperors.

A third reckoning is that the rulerships may refer to the great empire-builders of the ancient world, all of which carried the spirit of Babylon and antichrist: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome (the one which "is") and another still to come. This scenario satisfies the description "five have fallen, one is, and one is yet to come." The empire yet to come would be the world kingdom in the time of the antichrist, and the beast-antichrist would be the eighth but "of the seven" (17:11). Some have suggested that this final empire would be a revived Rome, either in power or in land area. This may be the meaning of the description of the beast who "was, is not, and will come up out of the Abyss." Following the demise of Rome, no true world empire has existed (although attempts have been made). Only in the final period of the age will there once more be a world empire to match those of the ancient world.

The imagery of the ten horns comes from Daniel's vision of the terrible beast with ten horns (Da. 7:7-8, 20-27). Their precise identity is unclear, especially since there is conflicting data between Daniel and Revelation. In Daniel, the ten kings precede the rise of the eschatological antichrist (the little horn), and in his rise to power he will destroy three of them (Da. 7:24). In Revelation the ten kings have no kingdoms until they are given rulerships in coalition with the beast (17:12-13). It is at least clear that these ten kings will gather to fight against the Lamb at his second coming (17:14; 19:19). Perhaps the number ten, in typical apocalyptic fashion, is to be taken as symbolizing fullness, and hence, the ten kings represent the collection of all worldly powers in alliance with the beast against Christ. Dispensationalists have speculated that they are the nations of the European Union, but this identification is uncertain.

Who are the people whom Babylon persecutes?

This question is like the one entertained earlier about the identity of "the saints" (cf. 14:12). Once again, various terms are used for the people of God, including "the saints...who hold to the testimony of Jesus" (17:6; 19:10), the Lamb's "called, chosen and faithful followers" (17:14), God's "people" (18:4), "saints and apostles and prophets" (18:20, 24), God's "servants" (19:2, 5), and the Lamb's "bride" (19:7). It is hard to conclude anything other than that the first readers of the Apocalypse would

have taken such language to refer to the body of Christians in the world, themselves included, as they faced the onslaught of imperial Rome.

The Consummation (19:11--22:21)

With the fall of Babylon, John now begins his last great scene. It is filled with the imagery of war and probably intentionally recalls the war scenes at the end of Zechariah, where Yahweh is described in a final battle with the nations (cf. Zec. 14:1-5). No longer is Jesus viewed as the Lamb, for now he is the mighty *'ish milhamah* (= man of war, cf. Ex. 15:3). His mount is not the peaceful donkey of the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, but a war horse. The aftermath of this war will bring universal peace, the judgment of the nations, and the eternal state as God's people live forever in the heavenly Jerusalem and a new world.

Does the war scene describe the second coming of Jesus Christ?

One of the fundamental themes in the Apocalypse is the return of Christ. The book begins with the announcement of his return (1:7), and it is urged to the churches as being "soon" (3:11). A warning is issued about it during the bowl judgments (16:15), and the book closes with multiple warnings of its nearness (22:7, 12, 20). Other passages in the Apocalypse, while they may not directly speak of the second coming of Christ, anticipate events which are closely associated with it, such as, the judgment of the dead (11:18) and the triumph of God's people (14:1). So, when John names the heavenly rider as "Faithful," "True," the "Word of God," and "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:11, 13, 16)--and even more to the point, when he describes the heavenly warrior with the same imagery as in his original vision of Christ (cf. 1:14, 16//19:12, 15)--it seems clear that he refers to Christ's second advent.

The warlike coming of Christ to the earth is the same as what earlier was referred to as "the battle of the great day of God Almighty" (16:14-16). John also draws from Ezekiel's war visions of the last great eschatological battle (cf. Eze. 39:17-20//Rv. 19:17-18, 21). The scene is the same as that described by Jude when the Lord comes "with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones" (Jude 14-15). From other biblical passages, we should interpret the "armies of heaven" or the "holy ones" to refer to the angelic hosts (Mk. 8:38//Lk. 9:26; 1 Th. 3:13; 2 Th. 1:7; cf. Zec. 14:5).

To what do the thousand years refer?

The vision of the thousand years of Satan's imprisonment and the reign of God's saints has long been a bone of contention among Christian interpreters. Since so many other numbers in the book are highly symbolic, should not this period be interpreted as a symbolism also? Many interpreters say, "Yes." The thousand years, in their view, symbolize the church age, a period when Satan has been defeated through the work of Christ on the cross (cf. Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Rather than

referring to a thousand years of 365 days each, the thousand years simply mean a very long time, the time of the church in the world until the return of Christ during which believers already "reign as kings" (cf. 1 Co. 4:8). At the very end of the church age, Satan once again is allowed to attack the people of God (20:7-9), and this final conflict is what the Book of Revelation is about. The final event following the church age is the great judgment (20:11-15). If one accepts this viewpoint, then the vision of the thousand years should not be taken as the result of the war in chapter 19, but rather, as a summary of the setting for the whole book. Following this interpretation, amillennialists do not look forward to a thousand year period in the future. In their viewpoint, it is already in process.

If, on the other hand, one takes the vision of the thousand years to refer to the result of the war in chapter 19, then it is obvious that the thousand years are still future. Premillennialists interpret it in this way. There are two primary viewpoints within premillennialism, the dispensational and historic premillennial positions. While both agree that the thousand years will follow the second coming of the Lord, they differ to the degree that they interpret the elements as symbols. Dispensationalists tend to interpret the thousand years as normal, calendar years. Historic premillennialists tend to interpret the thousand years as a long period of time, but in light of the other elements taken as symbols (i.e., the chain of Satan, the key to the Abyss), they do not contend for normal calendar years. Also, these two branches of premillennialism differ with regard to the role of the Jews during the thousand years. Dispensationalists tend to see Jewishness as primarily ethnic, and they hold that all the land promises of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants as well as the Hebrew prophets literally will be fulfilled during the millennium. Historic premillennialists, on the other hand, tend to see Jewishness as primarily spiritual, and hold that the promises of the Hebrew prophets are for all the seed of Abraham, that is, the children of Abraham by faith (cf. Ro. 2:28-29; 4:9-12, 16-17, 22-24; 9:6-8; Ga. 3:7-8, 29; 4:28-31). Thus, the dispensational vision for the millennium is very Jewish, and the Jewish people of God will remain distinct from the non-Jewish people of God. The historic premillennial vision anticipates the union of all God's people in light of the teaching of St. Paul (cf. Ep. 2:11--3:6).⁶² In the viewpoint of this author, the historic premillennial position best covers the biblical data.

What is the meaning of the vision about the New Jerusalem?

After the last judgment, John describes the new order for eternity, once more drawing from visions in the Hebrew prophets about a new heaven and new earth (cf. Is. 65:17-25; 66:22-24). The pain and distress of earthly life will be over (21:3-4),

⁶² For a more thorough discussion of different millennial views by evangelical proponents from each position, see R. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1977).

while those who have opposed God will be shut out (21:8, 27; 22:15). The center of John's vision is the New Jerusalem which is at once a city and a people (21:2, 9-10). Its gates represent the ancient tribes of Israel (21:12), and its foundations represent the twelve apostles chosen by Christ as the foundation of his church (21:14; cf. Ep. 2:20).

How literally should one take the descriptive elements in this vision? It seems obvious that there are at least some non-literal elements, such as, transparent gold streets (21:21), gates each of a single pearl (21:21), water of life and tree of life (22:1-2). It is likely that these superlatives in the description are intended to give some hint of the quality of eternal life that is indescribable in ordinary human terms. Most important, of course, is that God's people are eternally in his presence. The cubic city, with twelve edges each 12,000 stadia in length (21:16), equals the 144,000 that earlier symbolizes the number of God's people (7:4; 14:1).

Why does the epilogue stress that the events of the Apocalypse are "near?"

The idea of "nearness" is stressed throughout the concluding paragraphs (22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20). It can only mean that the consummation of history is always pending. While the Roman Empire's persecution of Christians was not the end of history, it still was part of that system of antichrist that in every generation opposes the people of God. So, regardless of the era, the end is always at hand. In the meantime, God's people must continue to live in righteousness and holiness as they wait for the consummation (22:7, 11, 14). The visions heralding the end are for the churches (22:16), and the invitation to follow the Lamb is to anyone who wills (22:17).