



Interpreting the Book of Revelation

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In a day when most horrors of this book can be matched or exceeded on our planet, and when many are wondering whether we shall make it through 1984, let alone till 2,000, Revelation leaps into relevance. The Lamb slain for all *has conquered*, on a cross. By this cross his disciples are conquerors, hanging tough in the testimony of Jesus—to the death if need be. Only *God* is Lord. “Worship *God!*” (22:9). Blessed are the conquering, for life with God is theirs forever with all their sisters and brothers whose robes are laundered white in the slain Lamb’s blood!

I. ORIENTATION

A. *What Is the Book of Revelation?*

A many-splendored piece, Revelation is a combination of apocalypse, prophecy, and letter.

1. Apocalypse.

That the Book of Revelation is an apocalypse confronts us in its very first word. “Apocalypse (from) Jesus Christ,” the first three words in Greek, function as a kind of title to the book. (“Revelation” is simply the Latin-English equivalent of “apocalypse,” from the Greek word for “a disclosure,” “an unveiling.”) But what is an apocalypse? On the basis of extensive empirical data, John J. Collins proposes this useful definition, which is both comprehensive and succinct: “‘Apocalypse’ is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an other-worldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world.”¹ Since Revelation is a Christian apocalypse, a con-

¹John J. Collins, “Introduction: Toward the Morphology of a Genre,” *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, ed. John J. Collins (*Semeia* 14; Missoula: Scholars, 1979).

sideration of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic can prove helpful for the understanding of the nature and origin of the book.

a. *Jewish Apocalyptic.*

1) Origin of Jewish Apocalyptic. The God of the Bible is proclaimed as the creator who fashions an ordered universe out of nothing, ever actively concerned about and involved with his creation. Toward a glorious consummation he shepherds through history a creation fallen,

humankind having affected all the rest. The God of Scripture provides for his creatures in this age, and has loving thoughts for their blessedness when the present aeon comes to a close. Eschatology, “the teaching about last things,” deals with this end time. Apocalyptic is a special kind of eschatology with its own characteristics—to be considered further as we move along—which developed out of prophetic eschatology, according to many, if not all, interpreters. On this development Paul D. Hanson has written convincingly;² his concise definitions of prophetic and apocalyptic theology follow:

Prophetic eschatology we define as a religious perspective which focuses on the prophetic announcement to the nation of the divine plans for Israel and the world which the prophet has witnessed unfolding in the divine council and which he translates into the terms of plain history, real politics, and human instrumentality; that is, the prophet interprets for the king and the people how the plans of the divine council will be effected within the context of their nation’s history and the history of the world.

Apocalyptic eschatology we define as a religious perspective which focuses on the disclosure (usually esoteric in nature) to the elect of the cosmic vision of Yahweh’s sovereignty—especially as it relates to his acting to deliver his faithful—which disclosure the visionaries have largely ceased to translate into the terms of plain history, real politics, and human instrumentality due to a pessimistic view of reality growing out of the bleak post-exilic conditions within which those associated with the visionaries found themselves. Those conditions seemed unsuitable to them as a context for the envisioned restoration of Yahweh’s people.³

This is not the occasion to recapitulate the origin and history of prophecy in Israel. Suffice it to say that it was one thing to proclaim God’s will to monarch and people during the reigns of such kings as David, Solomon, and Ahab and throughout the pre-exilic period; it was quite another after 587 when Israel’s political identity as a nation ceased. Hanson states further that in spite of “this difference in the form of prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology, it must be emphasized that the essential vision of restoration persists in both, the vision of Yahweh’s people restored as a holy community in a glorified Zion. It is this basic continuity which compels us to speak of one unbroken strand throughout the history of prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology.”⁴

²His position seems considerably stronger than that of von Rad, who links apocalyptic origins with wisdom literature. To imply at least that the apocalyptic view of history is per se not rooted in saving history (Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* [2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962-65] 2.303) seems to ignore, e.g., Daniel’s prayer (9:4-19, esp. v. 15, regarding the Exodus) and “the song of Moses...and the song of the Lamb” (Rev 15:3-4). Further, both prophetic and apocalyptic predict the glorious *restoration of God’s people* at the end time.

³Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 11-12.

⁴*Ibid.*, 12.

2) Later Jewish Apocalyptic. While the beginnings of Jewish apocalyptic, are seen in sections of the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and others, the genre came into flower during the period 200 B.C. to A.D. 100. Although a remnant had returned to Jerusalem from the exile

after Cyrus' decree, followed later by Jews accompanying Nehemiah and Ezra, the climate was not conducive to prophecy. Rather it was the era of the priest, the cult, and the rule of law. Subsequently the conquests of Alexander the Great, the reign over Palestine by his successors (especially the Seleucids), and the venal struggle for the office of high priest in Jerusalem resulted in a milieu that fostered apocalyptic. This trend was exacerbated when in 167 B.C. Antiochus IV Epiphanes profaned the temple altar and the Maccabean war was joined. Although in 164 a new altar was built, such events as they had experienced raised new and perplexing questions for Godfearing Jews. Jewish apocalypses from the 300-year period mentioned above include such works as Daniel (7-12), 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch, and 4 Ezra.

b. *Christian Apocalyptic.*

1) Apocalyptic is also to be found in the teachings of Jesus and in early Christian literature. According to Matthew, when Jesus sent out the 70 to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, he said, "Truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes" (10:23b). Luke reports that the 70 returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" Jesus responded, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (10:17-18). When Jesus had reduced to absurdity the accusation that he was casting out demons by Beelzebul, prince of demons, he went on to say, "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). Not merely is God's reign new; it is here! God's reign, the Son's parousia, war in heaven—and much more in the Gospels (cf. Mark 13 and its parallels)—have the flavor of apocalyptic.

2) Paul. The apostle realizes he is among those "upon whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11). Previously he had written to the Thessalonians, troubled because they had thought Jesus would return visibly before any of them died, "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ shall rise first" (1 Thess 4:16). Paul engages in marriage counseling in the light of his conviction that "the appointed time has grown very short" (1 Cor 7:29). 1 Corinthians 15, solidly anchored in the tradition of primary importance—Christ's death for our sins and his resurrection (15:3-4)—is packed with apocalyptic. Though the proud Corinthians think otherwise, they really "haven't seen anything yet."

3) Revelation. Although there are other apocalyptic passages in the Gospels, Paul, and the remainder of the New Testament, by turning to the Book of Revelation it is possible to define more closely and to illustrate what apocalyptic is.

a) Revelation as Expressing Apocalyptic Theology. It is held above that Jewish apocalyptic eschatology is a development from prophetic eschatology. Apocalyptic is a certain way of looking at last things, at the end time. How does apocalyptic view the end?

(1) The end is near. John writes, "What must soon take place" (1:1). "The time is near" (1:3).

(2) The consummation of the cosmos is accomplished by Christ's second coming. "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him" (1:7). Toward the end of Revelation, heaven opens and The Word of God, Faithful and True, appears on a white horse to rule the nations (19:11-16).

(3) Apocalyptic views the end in terms of a titanic war between God and Satan and their

followers. It is a life and death struggle, and humans are in the thick of it (cf. the messages to the seven churches, 2:1-3:22). There is war in heaven (12:7-12); there are wars on earth (6:3f.; 9:15-19) with other catastrophes abounding. But it is of paramount importance that quite early in Revelation a most significant fact is established: “The Lion of Judah, the Root of David [the Lamb...slain], has conquered” (5:5-6). All else, battles included, must be viewed in this light. The believers are encouraged patiently to endure in battle, trusting *Christus Victor*, confident that their names will not be blotted out of the book of life (3:5). The stakes are high.

(4) Despair and hope are the Siamese twins of apocalyptic theology. Pessimism about the events of this age is joined with a lively hope in the God who in Christ has conquered and will soon consummate his victory.

(5) Signs of various kinds point to a decisive end, anticipating its arrival. The cycles of seven seals, trumpets, and bowls press inexorably toward the final day. When the seven bowl plagues are announced, they “are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended” (15:1).

(6) Eschatological newness is God’s goal. With the vision of a new heaven and a new earth comes the statement from him on the throne, “Behold, I make all things new” (21:1-5).

(7) Theocentricity is the hallmark of paradise. “Behold, the dwelling of God is with people” (21:3). The city’s “temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And...the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (21:22-23). “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (22:13). The end is GOD!

b) Revelation in the Context of Apocalyptic Literary Characteristics. Although “apocalypse” (Rev 1:1) is the word that proved basic for establishing the literary genre, it is such a variegated type that the Book of Revelation both shares in and lacks some of the common literary marks of apocalyptic.

(1) Along with other apocalypses, the book abounds with visions and auditions (“I saw” and “I heard”) through which revelation is given.

(2) Symbols, pictorial language, beasts “out of this world,” and much more dominate apocalyptic, not least Revelation; a symbol may be “tensive,” not exhausted by or limited to one referent.

(3) Pseudonymity is a general trait of the genre, but not of Revelation. The author is simply John (1:1, 4, 9), not some Enoch or Abraham of millennia or centuries before.

(4) Related to pseudonymity are “predictions” allegedly made centuries before the time of the writer. The remarkable “fulfillment” of “predictions” about events up to a certain date only helps both in establishing pseudonymity and in dating the actual author.

(5) Apocalypses usually make extensive use of previously written texts. Some use direct quotations, but not so Revelation. Allusions to Old Testament literature abound, but they are nuanced in creative ways. Symbols are reshaped, images are reborn, old things become new. New Testament writings are also in the picture: formally, John’s composition is partly of a piece with the many letters of the New Testament, and his emphasis on the indispensability of the Lamb slain is his way of expressing what is

central to other New Testament books.

(6) Another feature Revelation has in common with other apocalypses is that its visions are mediated by a heavenly being (cf., e.g., the angel of 1:1, 17:1, 7, 15, etc.).

(7) Although not so preoccupied with sweeping world epochs as some apocalypses, Revelation still uses many expressions of time. God is he who was, is, and is to come, the Alpha and the Omega (1:8). There is precise timing (9:15), split-second timing (18:10, 17, 19; cf. Gal 2:6) and the three and a half years (e.g., 11:2, 13:5) or days (11:9), reminiscent of the mysterious three and a half times of Daniel 7:25-27. A thousand years Satan shall be bound, the millennium when Christ and his martyrs shall reign.

(8) Numbers per se are also prominent in Revelation. There is a recurring use of such numbers as 3, 7, 10, 12, 1,000, and 144,000.

(9) For all their symbolic, pictorial language, their extensive use of numbers, predictions, epochs, and literary allusions, apocalypses are not meant to be obscure to their intended audience; they are composed to uncover, to reveal. They are exposés par excellence, meaningful to their first readers, with messages subject to contextual controls, and therefore are not to be subjected to the whims and fantasies of scaremongers and bookmongers 2,000 months or 2,000 years after they were written.

(10) Revelation begins with “apocalypse” (1:1), continues with apocalyptic, and has an apocalyptic allusion in the last chapter which adds to the “inclusion” aspect of the contents of Revelation 1 and 22:6-21. In Daniel 12:4 the prophet is told, “But you, Daniel, shut up the work and seal the book, until the time of the end.” In Revelation 22:10 John is ordered, “Do not seal up the work of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.” Apocalyptic at the beginning, at the end, and between—but John’s is distinctive apocalyptic, God’s message for God’s *now*!

2. Prophecy.

a. *John’s Claim for His Book.* Revelation is prophetic as well as apocalyptic; very early in the book this is made clear. God’s servant John “bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy” (1:2-3). Also in the last verses of the book, when the author warns against adding to or subtracting from Revelation, he writes of “the words of the prophecy of this book” and “the words of the book of this prophecy” (22:18-19). By such an “inclusion” the author seems to intend that his whole book be understood as prophecy (cf. also 22:7 and 10).

b. *John’s Commission to Be a Prophet.* Even as Paul puts himself in the pro-

phetic tradition (cf. Gal 1:15-17 with Isa 49:1 and Jer 1:4-5), John does. He describes his commissioning in terms of a vision (1:9-20) when he was “in the Spirit” and heard a voice saying, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches” (1:10-11). Seeing “one like a son of man” radiant as the sun, he fell at his feet as though dead, but was again told, “Write what you see” (1:12-19).

c. *Revelation’s Contents.* The content of the book is prophetic: it proclaims God’s Word to particular people in specific situations, encouraging them to hear and hearken here and now. Regardless of the various shapes and forms which parts of the book assume, it constitutes an

immediate message to God's people: it is prophetic.

3. Letter

a. *Indications near the Beginning of the Book.* Not far does one read in Revelation till one gets the impression one is overhearing, "John, take a letter, rather seven letters." "John to the seven churches in Asia" (1:4; cf., "Paul...to the churches of Galatia," Gal 1:1-2) follows hard upon the verses that contain "apocalypse" (1:1) and "prophecy" (1:3). A salutation beginning "Grace to you and peace" (1:4b) is reminiscent of the greeting among the first verses of each of Paul's epistles, and the doxology (1:5b) has its counterparts in some of the letters of the apostle. As observed above, the prophetic commission includes writing and sending a scroll to the seven churches (1:11). "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write" (2:1) begins a series of seven such injunctions in chapters two and three. The allusions to the radiant Christ of 1:12-20 establish that it is he who is the ultimate author of the letter's praises, warnings, promises, judgments, admonitions, and greetings.

b. *Indications Toward the End of Revelation.* While the words, "I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches" (22:16) is somewhat reminiscent of the epistolary language of the first chapters of Revelation (cf. 1:4, 11; 2:1), especially the last words of the book engage our attention. They are very similar to the way Paul concludes his letters: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen" (22:21). That Paul's benedictions are in the second person whereas John's is in the third and includes *all* the saints may be another clue that the seven churches of Asia are meant to indicate the church universal (see below).

c. *Combining These Indications.* The fact that both in the first chapters and in the last John uses parts regularly employed in contemporary letters again makes for "inclusion." John would have his churches understand that he conceives of his whole composition as a personal letter to them.

B. Further Introductory Matters

1. The Author.

John, of course, is the author. John who? John one of the twelve? So says early tradition. But Eusebius in the fourth century thought its author was John the Elder of Ephesus. And a twentieth century scholar holds that most of Revelation comes ultimately from John the Baptist through his disciples. Though we cannot be sure of the exact identity of the John of Revelation, from his book we

have some things he says or implies about himself. As a servant of Jesus "who bore witness to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:1-2), addressing "the seven churches of Asia" (1:4), and beginning "Grace to you and peace," he was apparently a missionary pastor. No armchair quarterback he, but a player coach: "I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island of Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). Either as an exile or a missionary or both, he was on Patmos. He knows his readers' need to hear of Jesus "who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" (1:5) and who, "alive forever more" (1:18), inhabits (1:13,

20) and grasps his churches (1:16). John of Patmos is basically a pastor, fulfilling his ministry with letters, apocalypse, and proclamation.

2. The Recipients.

“Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea” (1:11), John is told. Northeast from Patmos Isle these cities in Asia Minor are listed clockwise. Though there were churches in other cities of this region, perhaps John mentions these because he knows them best. It may be that only seven are named because the number seven in Revelation symbolizes completeness; John therefore means to address the whole church with his book.

3. The Date.

Although a rather strong case can be made that Revelation was written around A.D. 68, it is generally held that a date toward the end of Domitian’s reign (A.D. 81-96), about 95, is more likely. This is in accord with the earliest and almost unanimous Christian tradition, stemming from Irenaeus in the second century, who had known Polycarp (ca. A.D. 70-156), the bishop of Smyrna.

4. The Situation.

Jews, Christians, and people of the Roman Empire in general had been passing through tumultuous times. In A.D. 64 Rome had suffered a severe fire; rumor said Nero had set it to make way for his own building plans. When the rumor would not die, the emperor fixed the blame on Christians, who were then in large numbers burned, crucified, and torn by animals and killed. While this official move against Christians was not because of their testimony, it nevertheless deeply branded itself into their common memory. By 66 all Judea rose against Rome in a revolt cruelly crushed by the Roman general Titus in A.D. 70, when besieged Jerusalem was starved, stormed, and destroyed. This would likely have happened earlier had not four Roman emperors either committed suicide or been assassinated in one year. After Vespasian’s reign, Titus was emperor from 79-81 when there were two remarkable disasters. In A.D. 79 the volcano of Vesuvius erupted, burying alive the cities of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Stabii; the next year a three-day fire raged in Rome, destroying Vespasian’s new temple of Capitoline Jupiter. Upon Titus’ death in 81, he was succeeded by his brother Domitian, who required the officers of his household to address him

as *dominus et deus* (Lord and God), a title by which he was generally designated. The events between 64 and Domitian’s reign, especially the Neronian persecution and the destruction of Jerusalem, were stamped ineradicably into the consciousness of Christians.

Although there is no hard evidence of a *general* persecution of Christians during Domitian’s reign, there was, varying from place to place, local persecution of which John himself and Antipas (2:13) very likely were victims (cf. also 2:10). While for some years Christians were considered a Jewish sect and not singled out for punishment, the Neronian persecution and the Jewish War resulted generally in their being thrust into visibility and being differentiated from

the Jews. Christians became increasingly subject to various hazards and temptations from Jew and pagan. Since local political informers might report them, some believers were tempted to initiate or maintain a low profile in testimony and life. Strong were the variegated enticements of “the grandeur that was Rome.”

II. A CLOSER LOOK AT THE BOOK

Since the Book of Revelation resists being outlined there are as many outlines as outliners. But to help get at the meaning, the following is suggested.

A. *An Outline of the Book of Revelation*

A Tract for Testifiers in Tough Times

The Prologue, 1:1-18.

- I. 1:9-3:22 Seven Churches’ Letters, prefaced by the Prophetic Call, 1:9-20.
- II. 4:1-8:1 Seven Seals, prefaced by:
 - A. Heavenly Worship of Lord God Almighty King Creator, 4:1-11.
 - B. Heavenly Worship of Lion of Judah, Lamb Slain, Who Has Conquered, 5:1-14.
- III. 8:2-11:19, Seven Trumpets, Sixth followed by:
 - A. Mighty Angel with Mini-scroll, 10:1-11.
 - B. Two Witnesses Who Testify, Are Killed, Revived, Ascend to Heaven, Evoke Glory to God, 11:1-14.
 - C. The Seventh Trumpet, 11:15-19.
- IV. 12:1-14:20, Between Seven Trumpets and Seven Bowls.
 - A. Woman Bears Male Child; War in Heaven; Wars on Earth, 12:1-17.
 - B. The “Unholy Trinity”: Dragon; Beast from the Sea; Beast from the Earth, 13:1-18.
 - C. Lamb on Mt. Zion with 144,000; Harvests of Grain and Grapes, 14:1-20.
- V. 15:1-16:21, Seven Bowls.
 - A. Introduced by (15:1-4):
 1. Statement: “With (the bowls) the wrath of God is ended,” 15:1.
 2. The Song of Moses and of the Lamb, 15:2-4.
 - B. “Seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God,” 15:5-8.
 - C. Seven angels pour out the seven bowls of God’s wrath, 16:1-21.
- VI. 17:1-18:24, The Harlot Babylon, Her Beast, Doom, and Dirge.

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- VII. 19:1-22:5, The Final Triumph and the New Creation.
 - A. Songs of Triumph: Marriage of the Lamb; the Conquering Word of God. 19:1-21
 - B. The Millennium; Satan’s Defeat; The Last Judgment. 20:1-15
 - C. The New Heaven and the New Earth.. 21:1-22:5

The Epilogue 22:6-21

B. Some Possibilities for Several Interpretive Sessions

There are of course many ways in which the Book of Revelation could be divided in order to begin to get a grasp of its meaning through a direct examination of its contents. The following division for five introductory sessions is one way to proceed. Interpreting Revelation entails reading, re-reading, and perusing the book with helps, not least in order to understand allusions to the Old Testament and the New, including Revelation itself. The questions in the several divisions are meant to be piquant and suggestive rather than exhaustive. Once the book's meaning in its original context begins to unfold, there follows the joy of discovering contemporary applications also.

1. God and His Creations: Chapters 1-5.

General Objective: To find out what these chapters tell us of God, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit, his churches, his heaven.

How does God reveal himself? When and what does he reveal himself to be? Who is Jesus Christ? What is he doing and what has he done (cf., e.g., 1:5 and 5:5f.)? How significant is the "has conquered" of 5:5? What references are there to the Spirit? What seems to be the relationship between the Spirit and Jesus? Who constitute the churches in Asia? What special temptation do they face? What above all are they encouraged to do? Why? How is the one on the throne most effectively described? What can that seven-sealed scroll contain which only the Lamb slain can open? Contrast and compare the songs of chapter 4 with those of chapter 5.

2. Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls: Chapters 6-9; 11:15-19; 15-16.

General Objective: To try to get at the relationships among the Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls sections. Should they be viewed as developing in a linear way, as repetitive, or....

a. *Seven Seals*, 6:1-8:1. In light of 5:1-6, what does the opening of the first four seals signify? Imagine yourself as a person in one of the seven churches listening to a fellow member read about the opening of the fifth seal and then the sixth. How might you respond? What facts about God's people are suggested by the 144,000, sealed, 12,000 from each tribe (7:1-8)? By the "great multitude...from every nation" (7:9-12)? What is really at the core of this "white robe theology"? How might a hearer respond to 7:15-17? To 8:1?

b. *Seven Trumpets*, 8:2-9:21; 11:15-19. What is suggested by 8:2-5 concerning prayer? How would you compare what follows the four trumpet blasts with what happens after the opening of the four seals? Of what in the history of God's people is the former reminiscent? What added dimensions of woe result from the blowing of the fifth and sixth trumpets? What are the clues in chapter 9

as to God's intent with the events following the trumpet blasts? How might that which follows the seventh blast affect the hearers (11:15-19)? What can we say about the time when the events here described take place?

c. *Seven Bowls*, 15:1-16:21. What evidence is there in these chapters that this series of seven is different? (Recall the general objective stated above.) What is the significance of the harmonious blending of "the song of Moses...and the song of the Lamb"? (cf. Luke 9:31). Compare the effects of the pouring of the bowls with the results of the first two series. What

special dimensions surface after each of the last three bowls is poured? What is visualized after the pouring of the seventh bowl?

3. What Difference Does It Make Whether One Testifies to Jesus? Chapters 10-14.

General Objective: To note what receives special emphasis in this central portion of the book and to see what connection there is between the testimony of Jesus and his cross to the witnesses' testimony of Jesus and their martyrdom.

a. *The Mighty Angel with the Mini-scroll*, 10:1-11. What recurring note does the mighty angel sound? What is the mystery to be fulfilled? How are the bittersweet scroll and prophesying related?

b. *The Temple and the Two Witnesses*, 11:1-14. What aspects of testifying are demonstrated in the first three verses? In verses 4-11? What is accomplished through the witnesses that catastrophes alone fail to bring about?

c. *The Woman and the Wars*, 12:1-17. Who is this woman? Who is her male child, and why is there such brevity in his biography (12:5)? What happens to the woman and "the rest of her offspring"? Characterize the latter. Comment on both parts of this characterization. How is Satan thrown out of heaven? (cf. the general objective above). Why is this victory bittersweet?

d. *The Enemies of Testifying*, 13:1-18. What/whom does the beast rising from the sea suggest? Who supports this beast? Of whom is a seemingly mortal wound that healed reminiscent? In this milieu what is an alluring temptation for God's people? Why? Where lies their power to resist and overcome? How would one's name be removed from the book of life (cf. 3:1-6)? Whom does the beast rising from the earth represent? Under the second beast, what kind of future seems evident for God's witnesses who are faithful? We have the second beast's number-666. What is likely its name?

e. *The Lamb with His 144,000, His Angels, and His Harvests*, 14:1-20. What characterizes the 144,000? Distinguish among the messages of the three angels. In this situation what is to be the stance of the saints? Note how they are again described. What is their hope for blessedness? What does the harvest of grain suggest? Does the phrase "outside the city" (14:20) contribute to the interpretation of the harvest of grapes? Explain. Perhaps an apocalyptist writes at least as boldly as a hymnist.

There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.⁵

⁵W. Cowper, *The Lutheran Hymnary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1935) 314.

4. Babylon's Sin, Sins, Doom, and Dirge: 17:1-18:24.

General Objective: To identify Babylon, her sin(s), her power, weakness, and fate.

Who/what is Babylon? Who/what is not? What evidence is there of her attractiveness? What is her root sin? What sins sprout from this? Who are those who conquer her? What does 17:15-18 suggest about evil? What special activity of Babylon has pervaded earth and sea, and why is it so culpable? What do you make of 18:4? Who is judging Babylon? What time note pervades the dirge like a death knell? What is the tone of much of 18:21-24?

5. The Final Triumph and the New Creation: 19:1-22:21.

General Objective: To glimpse the blessedness of those who patiently endure in faithfully testifying to Jesus.

a. *The Harlot's Demise; the Bride Prepared for Faithful and True*, 19:1-21. What evokes the first "hallelujah choruses" (19:1-4)? The third (19:5-8)? What seems to be a recurring temptation among God's servants (19:9-10; cf. 22:8-9)? What pivotal, indispensable event is described in 19:11-16? Note the names, actions, appearance, and followers of "him on a white horse," appearing when heaven opens. In whose blood is his robe dipped? In the final battle, who is pitted against whom? Who conquers? "Fallen is Babylon"—what happens now to the beast and false prophet? How are the rest slain?

b. *The Millennium; Satan's Final Defeat; Judgment*, 20:1-15. What happens during the millennium? Who reign with Christ and how is their reign initiated? In what does their reign consist? Is anything stated as to where the resurrected Christ and his resurrected martyrs reign during the millennium? How might the hearers in the churches respond to this reading about the millennium? Do you think "a thousand years" is meant to be taken literally? Why? Upon his release, what does Satan characteristically do? Is battle joined? Why? What happens to the "father of lies"? Are salvation by grace alone and judgment according to deeds mutually exclusive in Scripture? Try to find some evidence on this in Paul or elsewhere.

c. *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 21:1-22:5. What crucial characteristic of God does the descent of the new Jerusalem from heaven drive home? The first statement to come from him who sits on the throne is: "Behold, I make all things new." How is this to be interpreted? Describe the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, the holy city Jerusalem. What does the wall suggest, along with its twelve gates and twelve foundations? What of the gold and the jewels, the temple and the light? The gates, each a pearl, shall never be shut, and the nations are prominently in the picture (21:24-26; 22:2). What of this? What can be made of the inclusiveness and the exclusiveness, side by side, in Revelation 21 and 22? Of what are the water of life and the tree of life reminiscent?

d. *Epilogue*, 22:6-21. A clue to "soon" may lie in 22:13. Explain. Note that while the gates are never shut (21:25), there is yet evidence of separation (22:11 and 14-15). What can be made of 22:18-19? With what aspects of congregational life do 22:17 and 20-21 deal?

III. SOME GOALS IN STUDYING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Some dozen goals can be sought in studying the Book of Revelation, as follows: (1) To establish that the Book of Revelation is solidly rooted in history and is to be interpreted accordingly; (2) to determine whether the book consists primarily in predictive, proclamatory, or paracletic⁶ prophecy; (3) to get a grasp of the book's theology, including Christology, pneumatology, and soteriology; (4) to see whether Revelation teaches that history has an end, a goal, meaning; (5) to ascertain the significance of martyrdom in the book; (6) to determine the meaning of imminence in a book written some 1900 years ago (who/what is "soon," "near"? Is the "end" a person?); (7) to discover how parts of the Old Testament illuminate many of its passages; (8) to determine what can and cannot be understood about the millennium; (9) to relate the theology of Revelation to that of the other canonical books of the New Testament and the Old; (10) to come to grips with parts of the book that seem un-Christian or pre-Christian; (11) to

state concisely the fundamental message of the book for its first recipients; and (12) to find out and to take seriously what Revelation says to us today.

IV. SOME RESOURCES FOR MEETING THE GOALS

Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre, ed. John J. Collins (*Semeia* 14; Missoula: Scholars, 1979).

Caird, G. B., *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New Testament Commentaries; New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

Collins, Adela Yarbro, *The Apocalypse* (New Testament Message 22; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1979).

Ford, J. Massyngberde, *Revelation* (The Anchor Bible 38; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975).

Hanson, Paul D., *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

Jeske, Richard L., *Revelation for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

Lilje, Hanns, *The Last Book of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957).

Pilch, John J., *What Are They Saying About the Book of Revelation?* (New York: Paulist, 1978).

Rissi, Mathias, *The Future of the World* (Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series 23; Naperville: Allec R. Allenson, 1972).

“Paracletic,” as opposed to parenetic, is the most appropriate adjective that can be used to describe a person’s exhorting believers on the basis of God’s grace shown them. This hortatory encouragement is a pervasive note in Revelation, Paul, and the rest of the New and Old Testaments. The verbal cognate of parenesis occurs only twice in the New Testament (Acts 27:9 & 22) and then not in a theological context. As Edmund Schlink maintains, Paul always defines the New Testament imperatives as *parakalein* and *paraclesis*, “Gesetz und Paraklese,” *Antwort: Karl Barth zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Ernst Wolf (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1956) 326. Paraklesis is not law. As Schlink goes on to say: “Wie Gesetz und Evangelium sind auch Gesetz und Paraklese unterschieden. Das Gesetz ist ohnmächtig, die Paraklese aber hat teil an der sündentilgenden und erneuernden *dynamis theou*, die durch das Evangelium wirkt” (ibid., 327).

Schick, Edwin A., *Revelation—The Last Book of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

String fellow, William, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco: Word Books, 1973).

Sweet, J. P. M., *Revelation* (Westminster Pelican Commentaries; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979).