

Coffman Commentaries on the Old and New Testament

Revelation 1

Verse 1

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show unto his servants, even the things which must shortly come to pass: and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ ...

Although the primary meaning of this phrase regards the source of the prophecy as having come from God through Jesus Christ, it is also true in the extended sense of being a revelation of the Son of God in his capacity as the judge appointed by the Almighty God himself and divinely commissioned to "execute judgment" ([John 5:27](#)). The word "Revelation," capitalized in the text, was so rendered in order to indicate the word as the title of the prophecy. It is translated from a Greek word [apokalupsis], from which also comes the similar English word given to the book and also applied to a whole field of similar writings. It means "an unveiling."

The things which must shortly come to pass ...

Scholars generally assume that this means: (1) either that all of Revelation was fulfilled within a very short time after John wrote, or (2) that such events as "the thousand years" and the final judgment were mistakenly believed by the apostle to lie in the near future. We simply cannot believe that either proposition is true. Caird declared that all of the events John prophesied were "expected to be accomplished quickly in their entirety." ^{F1} Even the respected Foy E. Wallace, Jr., wrote that, "The word 'shortly' denotes immediacy; the events applied to them, not to centuries after their time, and even yet to come." ^{F2} The objection to the view in (1) is twofold: first, many of the events foretold in Revelation, notably the final judgment, did not take place "shortly"; and secondly, it is incorrect to suppose that the holy apostles of Christ erroneously "taught" that the end of all things would occur soon. It may be freely admitted that they may indeed have been mistaken in thinking such a thing; but, in fairness, it must be admitted that none of them either implied or declared the Second Advent to be an event in the immediate future. The statement before us teaches no such thing. The meaning of it is the same as when Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is at hand," meaning that the "beginning of it" was near at hand. Furthermore, the declaration of John in 4:1 that some of the things he prophesied were to "come to pass hereafter" categorically refutes such views. Regarding the view in (2), we heartily agree with McGuigan who said:

The claim is made that the early church believed that the second coming was near in time; but this is just not true. They may have lived aware of the possibility of his coming soon, but that they believed he was coming soon is not at all established by the New Testament. ^{F3}

Furthermore, such a figure as reigning with Christ "a thousand years" could not possibly have been written by one who believed the end of the world would occur in a few weeks. No matter what view of the prophecy is taken, the extensive treatment of the Second Advent and accompanying judgment of all mankind absolutely forbids the notion that all of this great prophecy has already been fulfilled. There are some who delight in attributing ignorance and misunderstanding to the New Testament writers, using their false interpretation of this verse to bolster their opinions. For a more thorough refutation of the false view that the apostles all expected the speedy return of Jesus, see in my Commentary on 1 Thessalonians, pp. 18-20.

Signified it by his angel ...

The use of angel (singular) here is strange, especially in view of the fact that a number of angels are seen in the course of the Revelation. Lenski's explanation of this has the ring of truth:

Such singulars are at times generic. "His angel" does not necessarily mean only one and the same angel. Any angel, now one, now another, would be Christ's (and God's) angel ... that conferred the commission on John. [F4](#)

Unto his servant John ...

The only person who ever lived in the first century, speaking with the great authority evident in Revelation, who could possibly have identified himself in these words, was the holy apostle John, the son of Zebedee, and author of the fourth Gospel and the three Johanne epistles. As Hendriksen expressed it:

We are thoroughly convinced that there was only one John who did not need to add "the apostle", for the very reason that he was the apostle! Besides, he does not call himself "the apostle" because he (in this book) wrote in his capacity as a seer (or prophet). [F5](#)

Further comment on the authorship of this book is in the introduction.

Verse 2

Who bare witness of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, even of all the things that he saw.

Some interpreters of this verse have found a reference to the gospel and John's testimony there; but the final clause appears to define the testimony as that contained in this prophecy.

Of the word of God ...

This is the great affirmation here. It declares the Book of Revelation to be indeed and in truth the word of God, given by the Father to Christ, and by Christ to John, who in turn delivered it to the churches. This is the very loftiest claim that possibly could be made upon behalf of this sacred writing.

Of all things that he saw ...

The one verb saw embraces also the things which John heard in the course of his seeing the visions.

Verse 3

Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of the prophecy, and keep the things that are written therein: for the time is at hand.

It was noted above that "shortly come to pass" cannot be applied to all that is revealed in the prophecy; but the last clause here surely indicates that some of the events foretold would soon occur, the very imminence of them leading to this double beatitude which was to be heeded by the persons who originally received the epistle. Regarding the events which were indeed imminent, the great persecution about to break forth against the Christians was most certainly one of the things in view. "There is general agreement that John expected persecution of the church by the Roman Empire." [F6](#)

Frank L. Cox noted that, "This is the first of seven beatitudes in the book, the other six being found in Rev. 14:13; Rev. 16:15; Rev. 19:9; Rev. 20:6; Rev. 22:7, and Rev. 22:14." ^{F7} Regarding this one, Beasley-Murray wrote:

The blessing invoked is on the one reading aloud to the congregation and on those hearing and observing that which is enjoined. There are two classes here, not three, the last two participles being governed by one subject. ^{F8}

The words of this prophecy ...

Although the book is called "Revelation" in Rev. 1:1, it is here also called "this prophecy," a title for it which appears five other times in Rev. 19:10; Rev. 22:7; Rev. 22:10; Rev. 22:18; and Rev. 22:19.

Verse 4

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits that are before his throne.

To the seven churches ...

It is evidently John's preference for the number seven that lies behind this book's being directed to only seven congregations, because the New Testament names others in the same province, namely, Troas, Colosse and Hierapolis. Among the Hebrews, this was a sacred number often used to symbolize the whole or the completeness of something. Thus, the interpretation of these seven standing for all of the congregations of Christ throughout the world would appear to be correct. "It is certain that while the book is addressed to a limited circle of Asian churches, the author's purpose was to reach beyond these to all the churches throughout the world." ^{F9} The evidence of this universal destination of the book is found in the repeated injunction, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches."

Of Asia ...

In the New Testament, Asia always means the Roman province located in the western part of what is now known as Asia Minor, with a possibly wider meaning in Acts 2:9.

Grace to you and peace ...

Greetings similar to these are found in nearly all the New Testament epistles, especially those of Paul.

From him who is and who was and who is to come ...

The Greek words from which this is translated are literally, "The BEING and the WAS and the COMING." ^{F10} Of course, in English this is not grammatical, nor for that matter is it grammatical in the Greek; but as Moffatt said, "(This is) a deliberate violation of grammar to preserve the immutability and absoluteness of the divine name." ^{F11} There are many examples of such awkward grammar in this prophecy; but "(They) are not due to ignorance of Greek construction, as shown by the predominantly correct uses in the book." ^{F12} This title of God is essentially that of Exo. 3:14, "I AM who I AM." Christ also used this title of himself in Mark 6:50; Mark 13:6; Mark 14:62, and in John 6:35; John 8:12; John 10:7; John 11:25 and John 14:6.

And from the seven Spirits that are before his throne ...

Isa. 11:2 has this:

And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

There are seven titles of the Holy Spirit in this passage from Isaiah, and from very early times this reference in Revelation has been associated with it. "It denotes the Holy Spirit in the plenitude of his grace and power." ^{F13} The decisive reason for this interpretation was given by Hinds: "It is used in the salutation in direct association with God and Christ, and a blessing is invoked from the three." ^{F14}

Verse 5

And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood.

Jesus Christ who is the faithful witness ...

There is a powerful New Testament emphasis upon the faith of Jesus Christ, as in Paul's writings, especially in Gal. 2:16,20; 3:22; Rom. 3:22,26; Eph. 3:12; Philp. 3:9; etc. There is a false impression that since Christ was deity incarnate he did not need to have faith; but in our Lord's humiliation as a man, faith in the Father was his predominate characteristic. All hope of salvation rests ultimately in the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was the faithful witness in the sense of delivering accurately to mankind the word and the commandment which the Father gave him on behalf of humanity.

The firstborn from the dead ...

The New Testament records the resurrection of Dorcas, the daughter of Jairus, Eutychus, the widow's son at Nain, and that of Lazarus in addition to the resurrection of Christ. In addition, there were "many of the saints" who came out of their graves following the resurrection of Christ (seven resurrections). In what sense, then, is Christ the firstborn from the dead? He alone came back from death never to die again; and besides this, there is the inherent significance of his being the first of many to triumph over death. As Beckwith put it: "The language implies the future resurrection of the saints." ^{F15}

The ruler of the kings of the earth ...

Christ is here spoken of as the possessor of all power and authority, fully in keeping with the Saviour's words, "All authority in heaven and upon earth has been given unto me" ([Matthew 28:18](#)). It should be noted that this authority belongs to Christ in the present time and perpetually. He is not planning to start ruling at some future time; he rules now! A great deal of the misunderstanding of this prophecy, as well as of the whole New Testament, derives from a failure to take account of this tremendous truth. Many have difficulty believing that Christ rules now; because, as they say, the world is in such a dreadful mess. However, the world was in a dreadful condition in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, who had to eat grass with the beasts of the field for seven years to learn that "The Most High rules in the kingdom of men" ([Daniel 4:25](#)). As for the reason why God's rule permits such atrocious wickedness on earth, it is clear enough that God permits it because it is in keeping with his purpose. The reign of Christ now in this present time will be more extensively treated under the "thousand years" interpretation ([Revelation 20:2](#)). There is no way in which this student of the Lord's word can accept such a declaration as that of Hal Lindsey, who wrote: "Even though Christ has the right to rule the earth, he isn't exercising this authority over kings and kingdoms at this time." ^{F16} If Christ is not exercising his authority, how can the church receive his promise that Christ will be with us "even unto the end of the world" ([Matthew 28:18-20](#))? Yes, despite the inability of some to see and recognize it, Christ is ruling now and will continue to rule until the last enemy is destroyed ([1 Corinthians 15:25](#)).

Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood ...

Of significance are the present tense (loveth) and past tense (loosed), showing that Christ's love is continuous, and that the redemption mentioned is a past accomplishment. Since it is an undeniable truth that Christ keeps on saving the saved until at last they are saved eternally in heaven, it is evident that the initial salvation in conversion is the redemption that John had in view here; therefore, the KJV rendition of this as "washed us" is likewise correct. On what the scholars consider sufficient textual

evidence, this was changed to "loosed us" in subsequent versions. The Greek words for these two expressions are almost identical in appearance; and, furthermore, it is immaterial exactly which is the original reading. As Hinds said:

Both words state true facts. That Christ washes us, cleanses us, through the merits of his blood is unquestionably true, as stated in Rev. 7:14. But by Christ's blood we are loosed from our sins also. [F17](#)

The passage in Rev. 7:14, as well as the overtones of the whole context, incline us to accept the opinion of Carpenter: "The general tone of thought would lead us to prefer "washed" as the true reading." [F18](#) The slavish following of certain preferred manuscripts is not necessarily an infallible method of determining accuracy.

Verse 6

And he made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father; to him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

And he made us ... a kingdom ... priests unto his God and Father ...

The first step in understanding this passage is to get rid of the two verbs in the future tense that have been added to the passage by the translators. (Note the italicized words in the ASV text.) There is a world of difference in the statements, "God made us a kingdom" and "God made us to be a kingdom." John was not writing of what Christians were to be, but of what they already were. Beckwith, like many others, applied these words to the future, saying that, "The reference is not to the saints as forming the kingdom which Christ now rules." [F19](#) The teaching of the entire New Testament, however, makes it absolutely certain that Christians are now in Christ's kingdom ([Colossians 1:13](#)), the precise terminology of this verse being found in Paul's words there. This passage reflects Exo. 19:6, where it is revealed that God's purpose for Israel was that, "Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests." 1 Pet. 2:9 is also parallel to this. Therefore, our text means that, "Christ has made us a kingdom, each member of which is a priest unto god." [F20](#) This is not some far-off thing that will happen in some so-called millennium; it is the status of things now in Christ's church. As Earle said, "This is not only a great privilege, but a great responsibility." [F21](#) All the members of Christ's kingdom, which as far as we are concerned is synonymous with his church, should be constantly engaged in offering up the spiritual sacrifices appropriate for a kingdom of priests. For a list of the sacrifices, as outlined in the New Testament, see in my Commentary on James, pp. 196-198.

The glory and the dominion ...

John here breaks into a noble doxology, using words which imply the present and eternal dominion of the Son of God. The New Testament doxologies invariably ascribe the same power, honor, and glory which belong to God to his Son, Jesus Christ. See Rev. 5:12,13; Rev. 7:10; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 13:21; 1 Pet. 4:11; 2 Pet. 3:18; and Jude 1:24.

Verse 7

Behold he cometh with the clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they that pierced him; and all the tribes of the earth shall mourn over him. Even so. Amen.

This is the topic-sentence of Revelation, a great deal of which relates to the final judgment, an event mentioned at least seven times in the prophecy; and these are not seven different kinds or occasions of

judgment, there being only one judgment day, the final and awesome event that shall conclude the dispensation of grace, see the resurrection of the dead and the assignment of every man's destiny, and bring the redeemed into their eternal habitations. It will occur at the Second Advent of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Behold he cometh with the clouds ...

These words apply to the Second Advent, as in Matt. 24:30; Mark 14:62; Acts 1:9-11; and Mark 13:24.

Every eye shall see him, and they that pierced him ...

There is no connection between this and the passage in Zechariah, except that the terminology is similar, the great difference being that in the Old Testament their looking upon the one who was pierced, and mourning, was grief for the pierced one, not grief for themselves, as is clearly indicated here and in Matt. 24:30, which words John evidently had in mind when this was written. To understand exactly the object of the mourning here, one should read Rev. 6:15-17. See Zech. 12:10-13:1.

All the tribes of the earth shall mourn over him ...

This clause, along with the preceding "every eye shall see him" indicates the final judgment, that being the only occasion when all the tribes of earth and every eye (that is, every man) shall behold the Christ.

And they that pierced him ...

Even the generation that crucified Christ will not be exempt from confronting him in the final judgment. The mourning here mentioned will be due to the startling realization on the part of the wicked that the whole course of their lives has been wrong. The atheist will suddenly know that God is a reality. The proud, the arrogant, the thoughtless, the sensualist, the materialist, and all who have lived as if there were no God shall be summoned to a judgment which they have never allowed as even possible. The mourning of people in that circumstance will surpass any possible description of it. And the mourning will not be "over Christ" in the sense of their grieving for what was done nearly two thousand years ago TO HIM (how could people even imagine such an interpretation?). No, their grief will be for themselves. The Second Advent will be bad news indeed to the vast majority of mankind.

Verse 8

I am the Alpha and the Omega, saith the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Who is the speaker in this verse, Jesus Christ, or God the Father? In view of the eternal power and authority of Christ, already stressed, it would appear that John is here emphasizing the Deity of Christ. Earle quoted Plummer as being of that opinion and also pointed out that J. B. Smith gave extensive quotations to show that all of the ancients attributed these words to Jesus Christ. ^{F22} In a sense, of course, it makes little difference, because the same things are true of Christ that are true of God the Father. It makes for better unity in the passage to ascribe Rev. 1:8 to Christ.

Alpha and the Omega ...

These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and are here used figuratively to stand for the entirety of anything. Such a comparison seems to have existed for ages. The Hebrews said of Abraham that, "he kept the law from Aleph to Tav (first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet). "From A to Izzard" was a colonial proverb in America with the same meaning. ("Izzard" was an early American name for the letter Z).

Plummer pointed out that the use of this figure is progressively expanded in Revelation. Note:

Alpha and Omega ([Revelation 1:8](#)).

The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end ([Revelation 21:6](#))

The Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end ([Revelation 22:13](#)).

Since the usage of this expression in subsequent passages of Revelation undoubtedly refers to Christ, there is no good reason why it should not be applied to him here.

Who was and is and is to come ...

See full comment on this under Rev. 1:4.

The Almighty ...

Scholars make a big point out of this word's being one of the "the Septuagint's renditions of Yahweh Sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts" ^{F23} but there is no reason for not applying it also to Christ who was prophetically designated as "The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father" ([Isaiah 9:6](#)). That this is indeed a proper and appropriate title of Jesus Christ will vividly appear in subsequent chapters of this magnificent prophecy. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is often referred to as God. For more complete elaboration of this see in my Commentary on Hebrews, p. 31. Furthermore, he himself used the Old Testament "I AM" no less than eight times. See under Rev. 1:4. Also, of those eight New Testament usages of the "I AM" title for Jesus Christ, five of them are in the gospel of John; and the appearance of two more such usages here in the first chapter of Revelation emphasizes the close correspondence between it and the other Johannine works. The same mind lies behind all of them.

Verse 9

I John, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

I John ...

See introduction for comment on the authorship of Revelation. Although an apostle, and possibly the last surviving apostle, he here identified himself with his readers as their brother and a fellow-member of Christ's kingdom. All of the sacred writers hesitated to flaunt their authority; and even Paul, who, in a sense, was compelled to do so by circumstances, proclaimed himself the chief of sinners and the least of saints.

Partaker with you in the tribulation and kingdom and patience ...

"These are a present experience and possession" ^{F24} of John and his readers. As Lenski put it: "We (Christians) are the kingdom, in it, partakers of it, lifted to royalty in it!" ^{F25} All theories that deny the present existence of the kingdom of Christ are contrary to the New Testament.

Which are in Jesus ...

It is surprising that Moffatt would perceive this as primarily "A Pauline concept." ^{F26} While true enough that Paul did stress this conception, it surely antedates him. All of the New Testament authors wrote of it, and it goes right back to Christ himself who gave the analogy of the true vine in John 15. This corporate conception of Christ's kingdom as being composed of those who have been baptized into Christ dominates the New Testament. The kingdom itself, as stated in this verse is "in Jesus." Those who are "in Jesus" are the kingdom. The New Testament knows nothing of some far-off time when the kingdom will come. It is a present reality. The thousand years' reign with Christ is going on right now, and has been going on, since the first Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ is reigning and will continue to reign until all enemies are vanquished. His holy apostles are reigning with

him ([Matthew 19:28](#)). This reign is identified in Matthew as occurring during the times of "the regeneration," that is, the times of the new birth, meaning that it is going on right now. As for the saints reigning with Christ, John includes his readers in this very passage as being fellow-partakers with himself in the kingdom of Christ. The trouble with many is that they have lost a sense of exaltation through being "in Christ" and have started longing for something different from the glorious salvation already available "in Christ," that is, in Christ's precious kingdom.

Was in the isle that is called Patmos ...

This is a small island, only about half the size of Manhattan Island, ten miles long, with a maximum width of six miles, and with an area of only 13 square miles. "It is an island of the Dodecanese group, Greece, in the Aegean sea about 28 miles south-southwest of Samos (37 degrees 20 minutes north latitude and 26 degrees 35 minutes east longitude). It is volcanic, bare and rocky, rising to an altitude of 800 feet with a deeply indented coast." [F27](#) The 1951 population of Patmos is given as 2,613; but in John's day it is said to have been principally a rock quarry and used as a place of banishment for certain types of offenders.

Regarding the tradition that the apostle John was banished to Patmos, living in exile there when he received the Revelation, both the event of his banishment and the date of it are uncertain. The usual tradition that he was banished to Patmos by Domitian (c. 95 A.D.) and released 18 months later by Nerva [F28](#) is incapable of any dogmatic proof. Even if accepted, the question of the date would still be in doubt.

The complicating factor is that Domitian was the de facto emperor for a year or so in 69-70, following his father Vespasian's elevation as Emperor, July 69 A.D. He was hailed by the army in Rome as Caesar and continued to administer the affairs of Italy until his father's return. [F29](#) Vespasian was not pleased by the high-handed behaviour of his son. Josephus stated that he was ruler until his father returned. [F30](#) He moved into the royal residence, signed all edicts and proclamations in his own name, being in every sense, during that period, Emperor. Vespasian returned to Rome, however, in the latter part of 70, and promptly appointed Nerva as one of his chief administrators, who moved at once to quash some of the measures taken by Domitian. Thus we have the strange fact that Nerva, in a sense, succeeded Domitian in authority both in 70 A.D. and in 96 A.D. For this reason, the tradition that John was banished by Domitian and released by Nerva does not even touch the problem of WHEN such events occurred. The events might have taken place either in 70-71 or in 95-96! Robinson preferred the early date, writing: "So, he was banished by Domitian and restored by Nerva, as the tradition says, but in 70-71 A.D.!" [F31](#)

Regarding the theory of John's having been banished to Patmos, the New Testament gives no hint of any such thing, but the mention of tribulation in the same verse certainly seems not opposed to the tradition. If indeed John was an exile, it would be in keeping with the experience of some of God's other great prophets. When Jacob saw God at Bethel, when Moses saw God in the burning bush, when Elijah heard the still small voice, when Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord by the river Chebar, and when Daniel saw the ancient of days in Babylon, all of them were exiles. Wallace, however, was of the opinion that John was not an exile, but that, "His reason for being in Patmos was no other than to receive the Revelation." [F32](#) Certainty in the matter is impossible.

For the word of God and the testimony of Jesus ...

The language here could mean either (1) that John was in Patmos to preach the gospel or for the express purpose of receiving the Revelation or (2) that he had been banished to Patmos as punishment for his loyalty in proclaiming the word of the Lord. There is no way to tell exactly which understanding of the words is correct.

Verse 10

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet.

In the Spirit ...

Not much is known of this state of being "in the Spirit"; but, evidently, all of the Scripture writers were in such a state when they received their divine revelation. Jesus said of David, "How then doth David in the Spirit call him Lord?" ([Matthew 22:43](#)). Many speculations about this have yielded little or no valuable information.

On the Lord's day ...

This expression is found only here in the New Testament, "and beyond all reasonable doubt it means on Sunday." ^{F33} "There is every reason to believe the church used the word in protest against Caesar-worship." ^{F34} Some have thought this means the day of judgment, indicating that John was transported by the vision to the time of the final judgment; but the judgment is invariably "the day of the Lord" in the New Testament. Here, "Lord's day" is a similar construction to "Lord's supper" ([1 Corinthians 11:20](#)). "It means `belonging to the Lord', or `consecrated to the Lord'." ^{F35} The Greek construction rules out the interpretation that would make this mean the judgment. ^{F36} According to Deissmann, from A.D. 30 and continuing until 98-117, one day of every month was called "Augustus Day" ([Greek: hemera Sebaste]); and it certainly could have been that the Christians started referring to the first day of the week as "the Lord's day" in opposition to the current idolatry directed toward Roman emperors. It is preposterous to suppose that "the Lord's day" is a reference to the Jewish sabbath. Saturday was a day of the week upon which Jesus spent the entire twenty-four hours of it in the tomb! On the other hand, Sunday was the day Jesus rose from the dead, the very same day the apostles met him in the upper room, and a week later on another Sunday the Lord appeared to his assembled apostles again. Sunday was the day the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost; it was the day the disciples came together to break bread ([Acts 20:7](#)); it was the day the collection was taken up ([1 Corinthians 16:2](#)); and, added to all of this, the invariable Christian tradition of more than nineteen centuries makes Sunday the day of Christian assemblies, a custom still observed all over the world. "The Lord's day" is thus an exceedingly appropriate title for the day.

A great voice, as of a trumpet ...

"This voice was presumably that of the Son of man." ^{F37} Dake counted over sixty usages of the word "great" in the Book of Revelation. ^{F38} Bruce, however, did not believe the great trumpet-like voice mentioned here was that of the Lord, basing his opinion on the fact that the Lord's voice is said to be like the sound of many waters ([Revelation 1:15](#)). ^{F39} He viewed it as a herald-like prelude to the appearance of the Great Conqueror. This would appear to be the better interpretation.

Verse 11

Saying, What thou seest, write in a book and send it to the seven churches: unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamum, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.

We shall give particular attention to each of these churches in connection with the letter addressed to each. "It is difficult not to feel that SEVEN CHURCHES are chosen because of the sacred nature of that number." ^{F40} Full agreement with this view is felt, as noted under Rev. 1:4, above. There is, furthermore, a sense in which the seven here selected represent a diversity of conditions prevailing in congregations throughout history. We do not believe that these seven churches stand for seven successive periods of the history of the church throughout the current dispensation; but that, in any given age, there may be congregations exhibiting the same characteristics as those found in any one, or

all of the seven churches mentioned here. This very day, there are "Philadelphia churches," and "Laodicean churches," and even "Sardis churches." All seven churches lay relatively close to each other in western Asia Minor; and they have the same sequence in Revelation that would normally be followed by a person visiting all seven.

Verses 12, 13

And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And having turned I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the candlesticks one like unto a son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about at the breasts with a golden girdle.

I turned to see the voice ...

"As in Genesis 3:8, the voice is put for the speaker." [F41](#) One of the big things in Revelation is the voice so frequently mentioned. The voice from heaven is one of the principal focal points in the whole book.

Seven golden candlesticks ...

Caird has a remarkably perceptive interpretation of this, thus:

Once again John is asserting that the church is the new Israel, the true people of God, but with this difference: whereas Israel was represented by a single candelabra with seven lamps, the churches are represented by seven separate standing lamps; for, according to the teaching of the New Testament, each local congregation of Christians is the church universal in all its fullness. [F42](#)

For a discussion of the Jewish candlestick, its connection with Zech. 4, and its symbolism, see in my Commentary on Hebrews, pp. 181-183.

One in the midst of the candlesticks ...

This, of course, is the Lord Jesus Christ, here represented as walking amidst his congregations, only the seven here mentioned? Of course not, but amidst all the congregations of his people throughout history. This is one of the truly great messages of the whole prophecy. Christ is with his congregations! He is fulfilling the promise of Matt. 18:20; 20:28.

One like unto a son of man ...

This rendition could be greatly improved by reading it "the Son of man," for, as Beckwith pointed out, "the article before "son" is omitted"; [F43](#) and this could be rendered "the Son of man." "That Christ is meant and not an angel is shown by Rev. 1:17f." [F44](#)

Garment down to the foot ... golden girdle ...

Most commentators see these things as symbols of the high priesthood of Jesus Christ; but, as Beckwith said, "That office of his is not mentioned in our book." [F45](#) We believe that Christ is here presented as the Judge of all people. The sword in his mouth a moment later in the text is no part of the trappings of a priest. The garment down to the foot and the golden girdle are marks of rank and dignity. "Neither shows Christ to be represented here in his priestly character, as many commentators interpret." [F46](#)

Verse 14

And his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire.

This description of the white hair is a "deliberate reminiscence of Dan. 7:9, where it belongs to the Ancient of Days." [F47](#) This application to Jesus Christ of the attributes of deity is a recurring phenomenon in Revelation. There are also a number of other reflections of the Book of Daniel, not only in this passage, but throughout the book.

His eyes were a flame of fire ...

This indicates the omniscience of Christ, the ability to penetrate all disguises and to judge things as they are, not as they might pretend to be.

Verse 15

And his feet like unto burnished brass, as it had been refined in a furnace; and his voice as the voice of many waters.

"The sense is that the feet of Jesus resembled gold-bronze, not as this is when it is cold, but as it appears when it is glowing in the intense heat of a furnace. Where such feet tread, they utterly blast and instantly turn to ashes everything they touch, or even approach." [F48](#)

Here again, we have a figure that is utterly incompatible with the priestly function of our blessed Lord. It is in his character as Judge that he appears in this introductory vision and throughout the book of Revelation.

Verse 16

And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth proceeded a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.

Two-edged sword ...

A most unlikely symbol of any priestly function. As Wallace said:

This sword stands for divine justice, and means that Jesus Christ was, and is now, the executor of righteous judgment and justice. [F49](#)

Sun shining in his strength ...

Here is a reflection of the imagery of Malachi regarding the "sun of righteousness" that shall rise with healing in his wings. Christ as the light of the world; Christ as the center around which everything else revolves; Christ the omnipresent one (who could hide from the sun?); and Christ the omnipotent one - all of these are appropriately symbolized by this glorious countenance.

Despite the fact of so much of Revelation using terminology and imagery found in the Old Testament, the essential teaching of Revelation is not derived. "It conveys a conception of the Messiah which is unique, for Christ is endowed with a splendor and authority which hitherto had been ascribed only to God." [F50](#)

Before leaving this verse, it should also be pointed out that the mouth is a very abnormal place from which a sword might appear; the symbolism, therefore, includes the meaning that the gospel which came from the mouth of Jesus is the two-edged sword. And why two-edged? As Bruce expressed it: "It

proclaims grace to those who repent and put their faith in God, with the corollary of judgment upon the impenitent and disobedient." [F51](#)

Seven stars ...

For comment on this, see under Rev. 1:20 where the key to understanding them is revealed.

Verses 17, 18

And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as one dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying, Fear not; I am the first and the last, and the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.

I fell at his feet ...

Paul fell at the feet of Jesus revealed to him as a supernatural person ([Acts 26:14](#)); and the phenomenon occurs frequently throughout the Bible, especially in connection with receiving visions. See Ezek. 1:28; Dan. 8:17; 10:9; and Matt. 17:6.

Fear not ...

How fully in the character of the beloved Jesus are these blessed words to the terrified apostle. With similar words he comforted the apostles that night when they were struggling to navigate Galilee, and on the night of his betrayal, "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." This is the message that heaven has often shouted to earth, but the need to hear it is perpetual. The night the shepherds beheld the angelic band speaking of "Good tidings which shall be to all people," their message began with, "Fear' not."

I am the first and the last, and the Living one, etc ...

Again, we are reminded of that holy Being who IS and WAS and SHALL BE for ever. See more on this under Rev. 1:8.

This writer has made a practice for many years of reading these two verses as the final committal at the graveside, with only one deviation from the text here, using J. B. Phillips' translation "death and the grave" instead of "death and of Hades," as here.

The Living one ...

This is particularly interesting, because it is a title of God himself. This is really the most important title in the verse, because it is as the Living one that Christ holds the keys of death and of the grave. Christ, like the Father, possesses life in his essential nature. "As the Father hath life in himself, even so gave he to the Son to have life in himself" ([John 5:26](#)).

Verse 19

Write therefore the things which thou sawest, and the things which are, and the things which shall come to pass hereafter.

This is John's commission to write the vision for the benefit of the seven churches, and for all generations. Of course, the three things mentioned which John was to write have often been understood as an outline of the book, the things which he saw referring to Rev. 1, the things which are pertaining to Rev. 2 and Rev. 3, and the things that shall be "hereafter" referring to the balance of the

prophecy. However, we agree with Smith who said, "This classification does not help much in interpretation." ^{F52} Furthermore, he pointed out that the word "hereafter" is used eight other times in Rev. 4:1; 7:1; 7:9; 9:12; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1; 20:3! It is very difficult to reconcile this repeated use of "hereafter" with the theory that everything in the book was fulfilled "shortly" after it was written. Erdman also objected strongly to the "popular view" that this verse gives us a three-fold outline of Revelation. ^{F53} Caird also thought that, "It is better to take the words "things which thou sawest" to mean the whole of John's vision." ^{F54} It is the view of this interpreter that in each of the cycles covered by the prophecy there are things past, present, and future in all of them. For example, the judgment, mentioned over and over again, is a future event; and it is mentioned no less than seven times, each mention of it coming in a different section of the book.

Verse 20

The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks are seven churches.

Seven stars are the angels of the seven churches ...

All kinds of efforts have been made to identify these "angels" of the seven churches as the ruling bishop, the pastor, the chief elder, or other human representative of the church; but such a view cannot be otherwise than incorrect. As Plummer said:

Whatever may be the exact conception, "the angel" is identified with and made responsible for the church to a degree wholly unsuited to any human officer ... he is punished with it; he is rewarded with it. ^{F55}

Erdman, Earle, Plummer, and many many others have understood the angel to be a personification of the church itself; but the best explanation this student has uncovered is that of R. H. Banowsky, thus:

The angels are the symbolical representatives of the churches ... in toto. The angels then are all those members of the church who are actively engaged in carrying out God's commands ... in any or all congregations throughout the world. Christ holds them in the hollow of his hand and gives them the strength and protection that only He can give. ^{F56}

In keeping with this interpretation is the fact that in spite of the seven letters being directed in each case to "the angel" of the church, it is not an angel, but the church itself which is addressed. "Hear what the Spirit saith to the churches" is the injunction repeated no less than seven times, applying in each case to the message that was written to "the angel" of the various churches. It is clearly the members of the church who are addressed; hence, the conclusion must be that in some kind of metaphorical language, the members are individually represented under the figure of an angel, that is a star, in Christ's right hand.

The consideration should also be noted that, if any such thing as a metropolitan "bishop" had been intended by this, there can be no doubt whatever that the primitive church would have preserved this title for "bishop."

The seven candlesticks are seven churches ...

It was noted under Rev. 1:13 that in the vision, these churches are not joined in one corporate unity, as was the case with the Jewish candlestick, familiar to all as depicted on the Arch of Titus. No. They were separate and independent, indicating the autonomy and completeness of each local unit of the

church of Christ. Also, there is another lesson to be received from this, when the illustration is compared with the words of Jesus who warned that a person's religious life, his spiritual life, should not be hidden under a bushel, under a bed, or under a vessel; but that it should be put "on a stand!" ([Luke 8:16](#); 8:16 and its). The application is that a truly spiritual life is always identified with the local congregation of the Lord's people. In plain words, this simply means that every Christian should "put his membership in the church." If he does not do so, he is not likely to have any spiritual life whatever within a very short time.

It is characteristic of Revelation that, even after it has been "explained," the mystery and uncertainty often remain. It must be admitted that the interpretation we have received concerning the "angels" of the churches still leaves many questions about it. Significantly, this is true even after the heavenly voice has itself told us what the stars in Jesus' hand represent. For those interested in a further pursuit of this, Beckwith has given a somewhat extensive review of the various solutions proposed by scholars. He concluded the review with the solution that both the lampstand and the angels represent the churches. "The lampstand represents the outward organic life of the church; the star symbolizes the angel which is the invisible spiritual life of the congregation." [E57](#)

Coffman Commentaries on the Old and New Testament

Revelation 2

Verse 1

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, he that walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks:

EPHESUS

This is actually the second inspired letter to Ephesus, the canonical book of Ephesians having, in all probability, been directed to this same congregation. See the introduction in my Commentary on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Regarding the city itself:

It was the major city of the great Roman province of Asia which embraced a large area of what is now Asia Minor. Its history reached into the remote past, tradition claiming that it was originally founded by the Amazons. Blaiklock stated that the "city was at least ten centuries old when Paul entered it." ^{F6} Alexander the Great captured it in 334 B.C.; but one of his generals, Lysimachus, inherited it; but by the times of the apostles, it was a thoroughly Roman city, but with a Culture deeply colored by the pagan associations with the city's past. Artemis, the principal deity (the Biblical Diana), actually went back to the old Asiatic goddess of nature; but by Paul's time her worship had taken on a different character. Symbolized by a monstrous object of worship (reportedly having fallen from heaven, and possibly a meteorite) that resembled roughly a human female figure with grotesque multiple breasts, her temple, four times the size of the Athenian Parthenon, had become in the days of the apostles perhaps the most important building in Asia. It was a combination of the Bank of England, a city of refuge, a manufacturing and commercial center, and the heart of the whole pagan area. The original temple burned the night Alexander the Great was born; and later, he offered to give his wealth to rebuilding it, if they would inscribe his name on the portal. The Ephesian priests declined with the comment that it was not appropriate for one God's name to be inscribed on the temple of another God! The character of that temple as a city of refuge resulted in the entire sanctuary area, a quarter of a mile in all directions, becoming one of the vilest collections of thieves, murderers, and lawless persons ever known on earth. ^{F7}

By the times of the apostles, the harbor had begun to silt up, and Ephesus was rivaled by other cities. It was, in a sense, a decaying metropolis; and some have supposed that the general character of the city may have contributed to the waning ardor of the Ephesian congregation.

Despite this, it was far and away the most important city of the entire area when John wrote, and it was appropriate enough that the first of these letters should have been addressed to the congregation in Ephesus.

Ephesus with its great temple continued until 262 A.D., when it was sacked and destroyed by the Goths. The Edict of Theodosius closed all the pagan temples about 389 A.D.

Today, a Turkish village, Ayassoluk, the modern representative of ancient Ephesus, stands about a mile N.E. of the ancient city. ^{F8} In view of the wretched history of this city in the post-apostolic period, one must conclude that God did indeed remove her candlestick out of its place.

The angel of the church ...

See introduction for discussion of this. It cannot be that a literal angel is meant, because that would involve supposing that God sent a message through a mortal to a supernatural being. It cannot mean the local bishop, pastor, or other officer of the church; because it would not be in harmony with the justice of God to believe that such a human officer would have been condemned, or complimented, for what other humans were doing. The angel here is fully accountable for the condition of the church, and this demands the thought of some kind of personification, or by extension, every Christian. After all, every Christian is kept firmly in the Saviour's right hand.

The seven stars in his right hand ...

All of these letters reflect the magnificent description of the Christ given in the foregoing chapter, the particular details chosen for the reference to Christ in each case being usually understood as especially appropriate to the time and circumstance in each city. Christ's holding the stars in his hand, as here, suggests the utmost concern of the Lord for every single one of the Christians, the waning love of the Ephesians for each other (as some think) being a tacit denial of the great truth thus symbolized.

Walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks ...

This indicates the active, constant, and persistent energy in which Christ is concerned with the welfare of every church and every Christian.

Verse 2

I know thy works, and thy toil and patience, and that thou canst not bear evil men, and didst try them that call themselves apostles, and they are not, and didst find them false;

I know ...

This clause appears throughout the letters, reminding all people that, "All things are naked and open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do" ([Hebrews 4:13](#)).

Works ... toil ... patience ...

Like the other letters, except in cases where no commendation was possible, this one begins with the Lord's approving recognition of their good points. No list of their works is given, but presumably there were many. Scholars point out that "toil" refers to arduous, sweat-producing labor. They were indeed working at their religion. "Patience" here is the great New Testament word [Greek: hupomone], meaning: "The gallantry which accepts suffering, hardship and loss and turns them into grace and glory." ^{F9}

And didst try them that call themselves apostles ...

Many commentators have pointed out that, "To the apostle John, apostle always means one of the Twelve"; ^{F10} and so we understand it here. There were men pretending to be apostles in the highest sense of that word. Those who reject this view suggest that this was such a bold claim that none would have dared to make it; but they forget that some even pretended to be Christ! We find full agreement with Carpenter who considered this verse "additional evidence of an early date of the Apocalypse." ^{F11} Supporting the same interpretation, Plummer said:

In 68 A.D., when contemporaries of the apostles were abundant, the claim to be an apostle might with some show of reason be made; but in 95 A.D. such a claim would be ridiculous. ^{F12}

Practically all interpreters are aware of this, but having already chosen a late first century date, they are compelled to insist that "apostles" is here used in some secondary sense. Plummer commented on that thus:

Trench admits this (the implication of an early date), and hence tells us that "apostles" must not be pressed, as though it implied a claim to have been sent by the Lord Jesus; but this is exactly what "apostle" does imply. [F13](#)

Didst try them ... and find them false ...

That Christ himself commended the diligence and faithfulness of the Ephesian church in disproving the claims of false apostles indicates that the false claims were reasonably and plausibly advocated, and that the refutation of them was not always easy.

Verse 3

and thou hast patience and didst bear for my name's sake, and hast not grown weary.

Thou hast patience ...

Here again is the word which means not merely a passive submission to what must be endured, but the dynamic ability of endurance and faithfulness without discouragement by any or all difficulties.

For my name's sake ...

The New Testament emphasis upon the name of the Lord is extensive. Salvation is in no other name ([Acts 4:12](#)); all Christian activities are to be done in his name ([Colossians 3:17](#)); we are justified in his name ([1 Corinthians 6:11](#)); we are baptized in his name ([Acts 2:38](#); [19:5](#)); we are called by his name ([James 2:7](#)); our sins are forgiven for his name's sake ([1 John 2:12](#)); we should believe on his name ([1 John 5:13](#)), etc. Here, the patient endurance of the Ephesian church was commended by the Lord himself because their faithfulness had regard to the holy name of the Son of God.

Verse 4

But I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love.

What a shocker is such a statement as this. The charge is not that they were in danger of leaving their first love, but that they had already done so! A lot of ink has been wasted on the explanation of "what" exactly was their first love. The first love of every true church is our Lord himself; and what is indicated here is the departure (in heart) of the Ephesian church from their Lord who had redeemed them. Oh yes, they were still busy with all kinds of tremendous works; but, significantly, these were not designated as "the work of faith." They were running their religion from a center of affection, not in the Lord, but in themselves. Of course, they were still advocating and defending all of the great doctrines of the faith, but the love of the Saviour was missing.

Some very interesting postulations have been presented regarding the situation here, such as the following:

Their intolerance of imposture and their hatred of heresy had bred an inquisitorial spirit which left no room for love. They had set out to be defenders of the faith ... only to discover that in the battle they had lost the one quality that really matters. [F14](#)

While true enough, in a sense, such an interpretation seems to imply that it was their very loyalty to the faith that resulted in their lapse. Their hatred of heresy "bred" their defection; and that cannot be true. Whatever caused their failure, it was not intolerance of imposture, nor hatred of heresy. "Only

the pure Word produces a pure faith, and ... pure love." [F15](#) To suppose that brotherly love could exist without a hatred of heresy and intolerance of imposition is to suppose that apples can grow where there is no tree. "Love itself is misconceived when it is supposed that it can be great and strong without faithfulness to the Word." [F16](#)

Some of the interpreters of this passage seem to be of the opinion that love of the brothers is here contrasted with sound doctrine, and that, of course, the latter is more important; but such teaching is not in the passage. As a matter of fact, it is an addition to the word of God to affirm that, "A slackened sense of the obligation to mutual love formed the cardinal sin at Ephesus." [F17](#) That such a lessening of mutual love had indeed occurred is doubtless true, but it was not the cardinal sin; that was "their leaving their first love, who is Christ." A failure in the Christian's heart of his love for Christ results quickly in all of the other failures.

We should not pass this verse without noting the allegations often based upon it to the effect that this slackening of love and zeal must indicate that at least a generation had elapsed following the days of Paul before such a defection could have occurred. Almost all of those who prefer a 95 A.D. date for this book rely heavily upon such an assumption. However, as Plummer said, "This verse is certainly no obstacle to the theory that the Apocalypse was written about A.D. 68." [F18](#) The notion that many years must have elapsed prior to the failure of the Ephesians does not take account of many facts given in Scripture. The Galatians defected from the gospel within two or three years (at the most) after they were converted. The frequent apostasies of Israel in the Old Testament often occurred at once after periods of loyalty. Only a few days elapsed while Moses was on Mount Sinai, but that was plenty of time for Aaron to make the golden calf. Not only do the theories of many years preceding the lapse ignore such Scriptures, but they are grounded in an ignorance of human nature. The same city that welcomed Jesus Christ on Sunday with palms and huzzas shouted him to the cross on Thursday! No "thirty or forty years" was necessary to produce that!

Verse 5

Remember therefore whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works; or else I come to thee, and will move thy candlestick out of its place, except thou repent.

Remember ...

How often has the Lord admonished his human children to remember! "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth"; "This do ye in remembrance of me" ([1 Corinthians 11:25](#)); "Remember how he spake unto you" ([Luke 24:6](#)); "Remember his holy covenant" ([Luke 1:72](#)); "Remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things" ([Luke 16:25](#)), etc. There are actually three "R's" in this passage: Remember ... Repent ... Reform.

Repent and do the first works ...

This is one of the most important clauses in the whole passage; it is the key to understanding what had happened. What were those first works which the Ephesians had stopped doing? They were the commandments of the Lord. Oh, to be sure, they were carrying on an extensive program of works, but such things were not the work of faith. The interpretation that fills many of the commentaries with the view that the Ephesians had all the works they needed misses this point altogether. It was not a question of their having discharged their full obligation regarding works, but a case of their having failed in this very category. They were not, at the time of John's writing, doing the "work of faith"; they were doing their own thing religiously. Such things, no doubt, were indeed good works, else Christ would not have commended them; but the first obligation of every Christian and every church on earth is to do the works Christ commanded. This failure, of course, was due to their having left their first love; and the shameful condition of this congregation is the Biblical exhibit of much that is going on right now in the so-called Christian world of the present time.

Did the Ephesian church heed the admonition here given? It would appear that, for some little time, at least, they did so. Bruce noted, "That the church at Ephesus paid heed to this warning is a fair inference from the testimony of Ignatius, who commends it for its faith and love." [F19](#)

Or else I come to thee, and will remove thy candlestick ...

This reference to the "coming" of Christ is not to the Second Advent, but to a visitation of providential judgment upon the Ephesians unless they repented. As McGuiggan put it: "This coming depends upon whether or not they repent; if they repent, he will not come and remove their candlestick." [F20](#) Beasley-Murray observed that:

Such statements in no wise conflict with the truth of the final appearing, a fact which theologians have not always remembered when speaking of the "coming" of Christ, as though the recognition of these lesser appearings in any way invalidated the truth of the great appearing. [F21](#)

The final coming of Christ in the Second Advent will occur, irrespective of any group's repenting or not.

Remove thy candlestick ...

This does not refer to any total destruction of a church or of a city, but to the removal of the impenitent from any effective status as a lampstand of the truth in Jesus Christ. Many a church has continued to enjoy life on earth long after their utility as an effective instrument of spreading the gospel of Christ has perished. Such churches have indeed had their "candlestick" removed.

It is wise, here at the outset of Revelation, to observe that, "The coming of Christ, as here and elsewhere in the book, does not represent an imminent coming of Christ to end the world." [F22](#) As Caird expressed it, "The conditional threats to Ephesus, Pergamum and Sardis are evidence that an imminent Parousia was not one of the events which John believed was bound to happen soon." [F23](#)

Verse 6

But this thou hast, that thou hatest the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

The works of the Nicolaitans ...

This is not a reference merely to the evil deeds of the group mentioned, but to the promulgation of their evil doctrine, as appears a little later. Who were they? Irenaeus said that, "They are the followers of that Nicolas who was one of the seven first ordained to the diaconate by the apostles." [F24](#) They taught that it was a matter of indifference to commit adultery or eat things sacrificed to idols. "It was an exaggeration of the doctrine of Christian liberty which attempted an ethical compromise with heathenism." [F25](#) The reference to the Nicolaitans and to the doctrine of Balaam in the same passage ([Revelation 2:14,15](#)), a moment later, together with the phrase "in like manner" seems to indicate that the teachings were essentially the same. Despite the assertion of Irenaeus cited above, some students refuse to allow the identification of that sect with Nicalous, one of the Seven ([Acts 6:5](#)), Lenski complaining that, "It is a moral law not to make a noble Christian man a Judas without full evidence that he turned out to be a Judas." [F26](#) Of course, no one can disagree with that; but Moffatt declares that, "There is no reason to doubt the original connection of the party with him (Nicolaus)." [F27](#) Still it must be confessed that very little is known of this sect except what is revealed here.

Verse 7

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. To him that overcometh, to him will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.

He that hath an ear, let him hear ...

So! People do not receive spiritual information regarding their salvation from any inner impulses, dreams, impressions, or inner strivings of the soul, but by listening to the words given by the Holy Spirit. "This shows that God's revelations are spoken to man, not put into his heart through some mysterious spiritual power." ^{F28} Also notable in this paragraph and in this verse is the fact that, "God dictated these seven letters to John in the literal sense of the word. Therefore, the ancient prophets received verbatim messages: Thus saith the Lord." ^{F29} Our Lord himself often used this expression, as in Matt. 11:15; 13:9,43, etc.

What the Spirit saith to the churches ...

This is of great value in the interpretation of these passages, since it is clear here that the messages written by John were not: (1) to a supernatural being such as an angel; (2) to any human authority in the church; nor (3) to any single one of the congregations, but "to the churches." All that is written to any one of them applies to all. Even beyond this, all that is written is to the churches of all time.

To him that overcometh ...

The verb in this phrase can be translated conquereth, ^{F30} or conquers. It occurs only twice in the Gospels ([Luke 11:22](#); [John 16:33](#)) and only once in the writings of Paul ([Romans 12:21](#)). However, it is found in all seven of these letters to the churches, and John also used it repeatedly in 2 John ([2 John 2:13,14](#); 2:13,14, and [5:4,5](#)). ^{F31} Hendriksen was mightily impressed with the implications of this term and named his book on Revelation after it. ^{F32} John seemed to have some kind of preference for the word. It may be properly applied to a battle or a trial; but the word is used here independently of reference to any particular contest. "It means a victory over all kinds of evil that would harm the church or prevent the salvation of the contender." ^{F33}

I will give to eat of the tree of life ...

These words regarding the "tree of life" are found in Gen. 2:9 and in Rev. 22:2,4,19, thus binding the beginning and the end of the Bible together, all of which, first to last, is concerned with the recovery of that which was lost in the Fall. As to just what the tree of life actually is, it is difficult to think of it as any kind of literal fruit. It undoubtedly has reference to Christ himself, as indicated by the following:

The Hebrew word in Gen. 2:9 was rendered by the Septuagint (LXX) translators with a Greek word which means, not tree, but wood; and the New Testament writers used that same word (wood) for all four passages where it occurs in Revelation, and in Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; Gal. 3:13, and in 1 Pet. 2:24 regarding the cross upon which Jesus died. ^{F34}

Such blessed promises as this and all the others given in these passages seem to have been designed with a connection between them and the false superstitions of the people to whom they were addressed, in the sense of the good and the true being offered instead of the false. In this case, "Excavated coins of Ephesus show a date-palm, sacred to Artemis, and symbol of her life and beneficent activity." ^{F35} It is not unlikely, therefore, that the tree of life is a holy symbol of the Son of God himself.

Which is in the Paradise of God ...

The Greek word here rendered Paradise is Oriental, being first used by the historian Xenophon, denoting the parks of Persian kings and nobles. ^{F36} The thought of a garden is in it. Jesus used the word in his promise to the thief ([Luke 23:43](#)), and Paul was caught up into it ([2 Corinthians 12:4](#)), apparently identifying it as "the third heaven." Vine states that 2 Cor. 12:3 does not introduce a different vision. ^{F37} Paradise is most certainly an extraterrestrial location, because the tree of life is positively not

found anywhere on earth. Heaven is perhaps as good a synonym for it as we have. However, such conclusions should not be applied to the use of "Paradise" in Luke 23:43, where a slightly different sense is evident. The usage of it there would appear to be equivalent in meaning to "Abraham's bosom" ([Luke 16:22](#)). See further comment on this in my Commentary on Matthew, p. 501.

Verse 8

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These things saith the first and the last, who was dead, and lived again:

SMYRNA

An ancient cradle of Ionian civilization, Smyrna existed for a millennium before Christ, being utterly devastated and destroyed by Alyattes of Lydia in 600 B.C., ^{F38} lying in ruins until it was rebuilt by Lysimachus, one of the generals who inherited the empire of Alexander the Great, in 301-281 B.C. By the times of the apostles, it was again a flourishing Greek city, competing with Ephesus for first place in the province. "It was a handsome city, called the most beautiful of all cities under the sun, the great buildings on the nearby summit being called the crown of Smyrna." ^{F39} Smyrna lay next to Ephesus in the sequence that a traveler visiting all seven of these churches would naturally follow.

Smyrna still exists under the modern title of Izmir, Turkey, second in importance only to Ankara, and having a population of 286,000 in 1955. ^{F40} Strangely enough, Ephesus, threatened with the loss of its "candlestick" has virtually disappeared; but Smyrna, against which the Lord uttered no condemnation, is a great city even now.

To the angel of the church ...

See under preceding verse, and also under Rev. 1:20.

The first and the last, who was dead and lived again ...

Some have seen this identification of our Lord as peculiarly appropriate for a city which, itself, had lain dead for all the middle centuries of the first millennium B.C., but was then once more a favored city.

In Smyrna ...

This city was one of the oldest and most faithful of the allies of Rome, having erected a temple as early as 195 B.C. to the goddess Roma. ^{F41} There were also temples to Cybele and Zeus, and in one of them an inscription honoring Nero as "the Saviour of the whole human race." ^{F42} In 26 A.D., they also erected a temple to the roman emperor Tiberius, and were clearly a center of that cult of emperor-worship which resulted in so much sorrow for the church. ^{F43} In fact, "the earliest shrine of the provincial cult of Rome was established there in 29 B.C. ^{F44} Regarding the establishment of the church in Smyrna, we do not have any direct information; but, "It was probably established by the apostle Paul on his third missionary journey." ^{F45} Regarding Paul's work in Ephesus, which was not far from Smyrna, Luke recorded this: "And this continued for the space of two years; so that all that dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" ([Acts 19:10](#)). This most certainly must have included the citizens of Smyrna. The emperor cult was so strong in Smyrna that even many of the Jews were carried away with it. When Polycarp was martyred there in 155 A.D., the Jews cried out:

This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the overthrower of our gods who has been teaching many not to sacrifice, or to worship the gods ... The multitude gathered wood and sticks, the Jews especially eagerly assisting in it. ^{F46}

It was indeed a hostile environment in which the church of Smyrna lived. How tragically the once chosen people of Israel appeared in such a situation as that. They once had said, "We have no king but Caesar"; and at Smyrna they proclaimed themselves worshippers of the emperor. In the light of this chapter, there cannot be any doubt that the state itself made emperor worship a test of loyalty, condemning Christians to death who would not submit to it.

Verse 9

I know thy tribulation, and thy poverty (but thou art rich), and the blasphemy of them that say they are Jews, and they are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

This verse is a commentary on the situation at Smyrna at the time John wrote. Despite the claims of many commentators to the effect that no provincial persecution against the church by the state of Rome existed until the times of Domitian, hence supporting a late date for Revelation, there has recently come to light a great corpus of facts which point squarely to the times of Nero for just such an outbreak. The impact of the Neronean terror was mentioned both by Clement and by Tacitus, the fact of "thousands being put to death" in all probability being no exaggeration but possibly an understatement. Nero's being honored at Smyrna as "the Saviour of the whole human race" is evidence enough that any contradiction of this by Christians would have been proscribed and have resulted speedily in their death. As for the allegedly great persecution in the times of Domitian, "Recent studies have been strongly in the direction of showing that the evidence for a widespread persecution under Domitian is late and probably exaggerated" [F47](#) Sir William Ramsay's extravagant elaboration of the Domitian persecution is followed by many writers; but, as Robinson said, "However, (it is) largely drawn from his own imagination, playing on evidence in Revelation already interpreted as Domitianic material." [F48](#)

And are a synagogue of Satan ...

This, along with "them that say they are Jews, and they are not" shows that John has preempted the glorious titles of the once chosen people for the Christians. Christians are the real Jews, the true sons of Israel, as in Rom. 2:28. The Jews' meeting place is here designated "a synagogue of Satan." Although James used "synagogue" as designating a place of Christian worship, this was probably quite early, or possibly a name used only in Jerusalem. From the first, Christians preferred the word "church," which in time came to stand for the place of assembly also.

Verse 10a

Fear not the things which thou art about to suffer: behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days,

The devil is about to cast some of you into prison ...

As Hinds pointed out, "These words show that evil-workers are in the service of the devil," [F49](#) since it was actually men, human beings, who cast the saints into prison. Furthermore, this must not be understood as any form of mild punishment. Those seized by the government and awaiting trial and execution were held in prison, which in that ancient culture was only an anteroom to death. "The struggle anticipated here is desperate; martyrdom is no remote contingency." [F50](#)

And ye shall have tribulation ten days ...

This passage sheds light upon some of the problems of interpretation; but, of course, there is no

agreement upon exactly what is meant. The most reasonable supposition that this writer has encountered is that of Foy E. Wallace and Gaebelein:

This cannot mean a literal ten days, but rather the ten persecutions, the number of which is historically factual. [F51](#)

The number ten is of special interest, for history informs us that there were just ten persecutions of Christians by the Roman emperors. [F52](#)

Verse 10b

Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life.

Faithful unto death ...

This does not mean merely "until you die," but faithfulness, "even if fidelity involves death." [F53](#)

The crown of life ...

This and all similar promises given to these seven churches simply mean eternal life with God in heaven. Eating of the tree of life, receiving the white stone, or the morning star, etc., all mean the same thing. Why were different expressions used? Perhaps the view is correct that sees "The imagery here has direct reference and application to geographical, historical, and social features familiar to the seven congregations to which these cryptic letters were sent." [F54](#) Was it not appropriate that the citizens of Smyrna who were so proud of their crown (the tall buildings mentioned above), should have been reminded of the greater crown of life? Despite this, Beckwith, however, says that, "It is necessary to look for a local origin of the metaphor." [F55](#) The crown of life was an expression, which, with variations, occurs repeatedly in the New Testament: "the incorruptible crown" ([1 Corinthians 9:25](#)), "the crown of life" ([James 1:12](#)), "a crown of glory" ([1 Peter 5:4](#)), and "a crown of righteousness" ([2 Timothy 4:8](#)). All of these expressions refer to the same reward.

Verse 11

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

On the first sentence in this verse, see comment on the identical words in Rev. 2:7, also concerning "overcometh."

Shall not be hurt of the second death ...

The second death is a reference to the lake of fire in which Satan and his followers are destined at last to be overwhelmed. As Roberson pointed out, many expressions in these earlier chapters of Revelation find their full explanation in the later chapters. Among those he cited were: [F56](#)

Tree of life -- [Revelation 2:7](#); [22:2,14](#)

The new name -- [Revelation 2:17](#); [14:1](#).

Authority over the nations -- [Revelation 2:26](#); [20:4f](#).

The morning star -- [Revelation 2:28](#); [22:16](#).

The white garments -- [Revelation 3:5](#); [7:9,14](#).

Sitting on Christ's throne -- [Revelation 3:21](#); [20:4](#).

Second death -- [Revelation 2:11](#); [20:14](#).

Christ did not mention here "the first death"; but it is the death of the body to which all must submit. The second death is that of the soul, the absolute exclusion from God who is the source of life.

Christ did not utter any words of criticism or condemnation of this suffering church, offering only his love and encouragement. Those scholars who feel that they must go to the times of Domitian in order to find a time of martyrdoms in the church should remember that Stephen, James (John's own brother), and James the brother of the Lord had all suffered martyrdom already, and even much earlier than the earliest date affixed to this book. To this very day there are churches in which people are paying for their fidelity with their lives, notably in China and in other iron-curtain countries. What a mistake it is to confine this to a description of the church in the apostolic period. Furthermore, as Lenski said, "In 64 A.D., there were many martyrs when Nero accused the Christians of burning Rome." ^{F57} Moreover, it is only a favorite bias of some scholars who affirm that the persecutions then were limited to Rome and did not occur simultaneously in the provinces. It was noted in the introduction to 1 Peter, that Christianity was already a proscribed, illegal religion even in the Roman provinces when 1 Peter was written. Nero invited the governors of the various provinces to join with him in the martyrdom of Christians.

Verse 12

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These things saith he that hath the sharp two-edged sword:

PERGAMUM

Angel of the church ...

See references above on this.

The name Pergamum means citadel, ^{F58} but the word parchment, meaning paper of Pergamum, also derives from it. ^{F59} When political jealousy interrupted the supply of papyrus from Egypt, Pergamum invented the method of making paper from the skins of animals; and a great library was built there, which was later moved to Alexandria and consolidated with the library there. The founding of the city lay beyond the mists of long pre-Christian history, but coins were minted there as late as 452 B.C., and possibly much earlier. The principal importance of the place dates from the times of Lysimachus (355 to 281 B.C.), after whom Pergamum continued as a kingdom until Attalus III, upon whose death (133 B.C.) the kingdom was bequeathed to Rome. By Christian times, Pergamum had become the chief center of the Roman emperor-worship, no less than three temples being erected there to Roman emperors, ^{F60} but with many other temples also, to Zeus, Athena, Dionysus, and Asklepios (the serpent-god of healing). Of these, the temple of Zeus (Soter Theos), the "saviour god," had a huge altar 40 feet high carved like a great throne into the face of the mountain dominating the city, perhaps suggesting the words, "where Satan's throne is" ([Revelation 2:13](#)). A school of medicine was there, connected with the worship of Asklepios; and the city was also the principal seat of Roman authority in the area. All of these gave the city something of the character of a great imperial cathedral metropolis. It was the Roman sword which constituted the ultimate authority in the times and place of Pergamum, and thus it

was most appropriate for John to speak of Christ to them as, "He that hath the sharp two-edged sword," an authority infinitely greater than that of Rome. The sword, of course, is the word of the Son of God.

The climate of Pergamum, religiously, was especially threatening to Christians. "Pergamum had mingled and synthetised the deities of three races, and of three successive periods of their history." [F61](#) With these, they had also combined the worship of the Caesars, temples to both Augustus and Tiberius having already been constructed there when Revelation was written. In this atmosphere, there were some Christians, no doubt, who favored the incorporation of Christianity into the religious life of the community without a collision with the pagan world. As Billy Graham stated it, "The message to the church at Pergamum speaks of the danger of theological compromise ... Their sin was tolerating theological error in their midst." [F62](#)

Verse 13

I know where thou dwellest, even where Satan's throne is; and thou holdest fast my name, and didst not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwelleth.

I know where thou dwellest ...

Repeatedly, this affirmation of the omniscience of the Master emphasizes the truth that all things are open and naked to the eyes of the Lord.

Where Satan's throne is ...

See under preceding verse.

Holdest fast my name ...

See under Rev. 2:3.

And didst not deny my faith ...

The usage of "faith" in this verse is significant, standing, as it so frequently does in the New Testament, for the Christian religion.

Even in the days of Antipas ... who was killed ...

Nothing is known of this Christian martyr except what is written here. The inference is that he died for his faith and that the event was known widely in the church.

Where Satan dwelleth ...

In all probability, like the expression above, "where Satan's throne is," this is a reference to the pagan emperor-cult which was centered in Pergamum. "It was a power which was then testing the church and had effected the death of Antipas." [F63](#)

Caird gives an extensive analysis of the arguments that might have been advanced by the compromise party in Pergamum, to the effect that "All that the emperors really wanted was a gesture of political loyalty," [F64](#) that actually the pagan "gods" were really "nothing," and that gestures of honor given them were without meaning, etc.; but Blaiklock explains the adamant refusal of Christians to participate in such things thus:

Allow the pinch of incense before the emperor and the landslide would begin. The guild-feasts would follow, a problem for Christians in Thyatira. Then would come the immoralities of Corinth's worship of

Aphrodite, and the breakdown of Christian morality, the sanctities of Christian marriage, the whole challenging distinctiveness of the Christian faith, the whole purpose of its being. [F65](#)

Verses 14, 15

But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there some that hold the teachings of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also some that hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans in like manner.

The teaching of Balaam ...

"Evidently this error of Balaam was the chief principle of the sect of the Nicolaitans." [F66](#) "The teaching of Balaam is merely John's opprobrious name for the teaching of the Nicolaitans" [F67](#) The nature of their teaching is clear enough. They advocated participation in pagan worship, eating things sacrificed to idols, and committing fornication, essential ingredients of all pagan worship. Significantly it is the "works," the behaviour of the Nicolaitans, that is condemned in the Ephesian church; but at Pergamum, the practice of immorality has become an established teaching by some who openly advocated it, perhaps on the basis that some kind of compromise with paganism was inevitable. Balaam, repeatedly mentioned by New Testament writers, is usually held up as an example of evil. His error is set forth in Num. 25:1ff; 31:16. Regarding the Nicolaitans, some have supposedly found a connection between his name and that of Balaam; but Beckwith noted that:

The purely symbolical interpretation of the name based upon a supposed identity of the Greek word [Nikolaos] with the Hebrew word [Balaam] is not supported by certain etymology and is too artificial. [F68](#)

See further comment on Nicolaitans under Rev. 2:6.

Verse 16

Repent therefore; or else I come to thee quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of my mouth.

The admonition here is that, "The church as a whole must repent of its too tolerant attitude to the errorists." [F69](#) As Graham noted, "They had taken no corrective action and had applied no discipline." [F70](#) Such a "broadminded" indifferent attitude toward gross sins would have to be repented of.

I will come unto thee quickly ...

"The one thing clear is that, when John speaks of an imminent coming of Christ, he is not necessarily thinking of the Parousia (the Second Advent)." [F71](#) What is meant is that a divine judgment against them will be speedily enforced. This may be understood in either of two ways, or both: (1) Their effectiveness as a true church would soon disappear unless they repented. (2) A supernatural, divine visitation against them would be executed, as upon Ananias and Sapphira ([Acts 5:1-10](#)). Moffatt understood it to be the latter, "some physical malady or mortal sickness." [F72](#) If Moffatt is correct in this, as would seem to be indicated by the more specific reference to Jezebel ([Revelation 2:20-23](#); 2:20-23,), then the very fact of such judgments, associated with the earliest years of the church, being threatened here would indicate an early date for Revelation.

Make war against them with the sword of my mouth ...

This is a symbolical reference to the word of God as the principal weapon employed in the destruction of error.

Verse 17

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. To him that overcometh, to him will I give of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and upon the stone a new name written, which no one knoweth but he that receiveth it.

On the first sentence, see under Rev. 2:7, and also regarding "him that overcometh."

I will give of the hidden manna ...

The great feasts in the idol-temples were nothing to be compared to the feast of one who eats of "the bread of life" ([John 6:35](#)). John remembered the words of Jesus who in that passage identified himself as the true manna that came down from God out of heaven. It is here called "hidden" because it was a secret unknown to the pagan world of the community to which Revelation was written. Finding some reference to the Hebrew myth about a literal pot of manna in this is ridiculous. As Bruce said, "This is another expression meaning eternal life." ^{F73} Many of the other expressions similarly used, such as the white stone, also have exactly that same meaning.

White stone ...

It is not necessary to find the meaning of this in ancient superstitions. Small pebbles (not necessarily white) were used as tickets to public functions, especially feasts; and what is meant is simply that the ones who overcome shall receive, "a ticket of admission to the heavenly banquet, a very permanent ticket to an eternal feast." ^{F74} The reference to the new name known only to the recipient ... "The idea is conveyed that outside the Christian experience no one can really know what God is, or what he gives. The redeemed and victorious alone understand what it means to belong to God." ^{F75} Regarding the stone's being white, Cox said that it was, "not the black stone of their condemnation, but a white stone to their exoneration, admitting them to the secret places of the Most High." ^{F76}

Verse 18

And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet are like unto burnished brass:

THYATIRA

Some twenty miles east of Pergamum on the road to Sardis was Thyatira, a name which means "castle of Thya," ^{F77} and which is probably retained in the modern Ak-Hissar (white castle), a Turkish town on a fertile plain, being the center of the cotton industry, and a relatively important town of 30,156 (1955). ^{F78} In New Testament times, the dye industry was important, Lydia having been from Thyatira ([Acts 16:14](#)). It was also the home of many influential trade guilds, having their own deities, temples, and guild halls, where feasts, tending to obscenity, and all kinds of iramoralities were practices. Politically, Thyatira was a kind of buffer state between Pergamum on the west and Seleucus (Syria) on the east, evidently changing hands a number of times between the two states in pre-Christian history. ^{F79} "Apollo the sun god, was the principal deity," ^{F80} probably leading to the reference to the Son of God and the morning star in this message, as a contrast.

Verse 19

I know thy works, and thy love and faith and ministry and patience, and that thy last works are more than the first.

Such a glowing tribute as this leads one to wonder what could be wrong with a church like that. But despite their faith, love and works, increased and expanded, a cancer was gnawing away at the vitals of the congregation, and that problem would lead to the burden of the message.

Verse 20

But I have this against thee, that thou sufferest the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess; and she teacheth and seduceth my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols.

The woman Jezebel ...

This verse is one of the most interesting in the New Testament, because here there well could have been an example of female leadership having been accepted in a church of Christ. The very fact of this character's having been allowed to teach, with the sufferance of the whole church, and of her also claiming the gift of prophecy strongly suggest it. Moreover, the prominence which Lydia doubtless had in bringing the gospel to the place could have created a favorable atmosphere for the development of just such an aberration. However that may be, there is a clear case here of a dissolute woman having usurped the principal authority of a church. The word Jezebel "is not a figurative term for a party or a movement; it designates an actual person ([Revelation 2:2f](#)), her followers being distinguished from her." ^{F81} Whatever her actual name might have been, the Lord called her "Jezebel," after the "wicked queen of that name who tried to establish an idolatrous cult in the place of the worship of Yahweh and was herself accused of whoredom and witchcraft ([2 Kings 9:22](#))." ^{F82} Some have sought to identify her with the Chaldaean Sibyl, a pagan religious establishment that stood outside the walls of Thyatira; but, as Lenski said, "The woman of this letter cannot be such a sibyl; she is a pretending prophetess who operates right in the Christian Church as one of its members." ^{F83}

To commit fornication ... eat things sacrificed to idols ...

This identification of the sins of Jezebel identifies her and her followers with the followers of Balaam and with the Nicolaitans, there being no difference whatever in the sins cited. It is quite evident, therefore, that in the three churches of Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira, the problem was the same, that being the type of wickedness described here; and that the principal thrust of the messages regards the progression of this evil from: (1) the conduct of a few at Ephesus; to (2) the justification of it by a body of teaching at Pergamum; to (3) the leadership of the church, in the person of Jezebel, having been thoroughly corrupted by it.

Verse 21

And I gave her time that she should repent; and she willeth not to repent of her fornication.

I gave her time ...

The longsuffering of the Lord is in this. The Saviour is not seeking some grounds for casting out his

children, but overlooks their transgressions for a season, waiting for their repentance. For the willfully impenitent, however, there remains a judicial hardening and the execution of judgment. As Beasley-Murray said, "There is also the implication that Jezebel had been previously warned." ^{F84} Another necessary deduction from this was cited by Carpenter, thus: "True repentance is a repentance whereby we forsake sin." ^{F85} The immorality at Thyatira was flagrant, and more flagrant still was their persistence in it.

Fornication ...

There is no need to spiritualize this as "spiritual adultery." The obscenities and debaucheries openly observed in the pagan culture were fleshly, sensual, carnal and reprobate.

Verse 22

Behold, I cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of her works.

I cast her into a bed ... into great tribulation ...

This appears to be an immediate and summary judgment against the type of wicked error rampaging in Thyatira. It is hard not to see in this exactly the same kind of judgment referred to in Rev. 2:16; that is, a divine visitation similar to that which befell Ananias and Sapphira ([Acts 5:1-10](#)). There even seems to be a distinction between "them that commit adultery with her," as in this verse, contrasted with "her children" in Rev. 2:23, suffering being the punishment here, and death there.

Except she repent ...

Even yet, the gates of mercy had not closed, but this was the final warning.

Verse 23

And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he that searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto each one of you according to your works.

And all the churches shall know ...

The appropriate nature of the threatened visitation should be noted. The bed of suffering was an appropriate reward for the bed of fornication; and their judgment was to be as notorious as their scandal had been.

I will kill her children with death ...

Regarding the diverse punishment of the fornicators in Rev. 2:22 (suffering), as compared with death for "her children" here, Beasley-Murray thought that, "The former were sufficiently influenced by Jezebel to compromise their Christian loyalty, but the latter wholly embraced her doctrine." ^{F86} If such a terrible judgment was indeed executed upon them, the example of it would have had tremendous force in nerving the church to stand against paganism.

Verse 24

But to you I say, to the rest that are in Thyatira, as many as have not this teaching, who know not the deep things of Satan, as they are wont to say; I cast upon you none other burden.

The rest ...

"For the first time in these epistles, we meet with those who are spoken of as the rest, who are carefully distinguished from the great body of professing believers. The world had penetrated the church." [F87](#)

Who know not the deep things of Satan ...

There seems to be some doubt about what, exactly, is meant here. The problem was stated thus by Plummer:

Did they call their doctrine "deep things," which the Lord here enlarges to "deep things of Satan," in order to declare its true nature? Or did they themselves call their knowledge "the deep things of Satan," which they fathomed in order to prove their mastery over them? [F88](#)

Plummer thought it was the former, but Lenski believed it was the latter. It could have been either. If the former, the Lord here exposed their "deep things" as really being of the devil; and, if the latter, the deviates were reasoning as some do even today, who say that in order to triumph over evil one must practice evil. "To probe the depths of Satan, one must go down into these depths ... the folly and fallacy of such reasoning are obvious." [F89](#)

I cast upon you no other burden ...

"The very language of Acts 15:28 is echoed in this"; [F90](#) and it seems possible, at least, that there is here "an allusion to the Jerusalem concordat of the early church which is recommended tacitly as a safe, wise rule of conduct." [F91](#) Lenski, however, rejected this view, thinking that the reference is to the fact that "heretical opposition is always felt as a weight or burden that necessitates more strength to hold fast what we have." [F92](#) It does not seem to this writer that the two viewpoints are necessarily opposed to each other.

Verse 25

Nevertheless that which ye have, hold fast until I come.

The coming here is not the Second Advent. "It was necessary to hold fast to the Christian profession until Christ came in visitation through the trials soon to confront the churches." [F93](#)

Verse 26

And he that overcometh, and he that keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give authority over the nations:

He that overcometh ...

See other comments, above, on this expression. Note that here we have a definition of "overcoming," which means "keeping the works of Christ unto the end." What end is this? Every end, whether the end of difficulties, the end of life, or the end of the ages.

Authority over the nations ...

There is an echo here of our Lord's great parable in Luke 20:13-17, wherein the faithful servants were promised rulership over "five cities" and over "ten cities." The manner of the Christian's authority over nations does not appear in this promise, but it is evident subsequently in the prophecy ([Revelation 20:4](#)).

Verse 27

and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to shivers; as I also have received of my Father:

As the last clause of this verse indicates, the authority Christians are to exercise is "as" the authority that the Father has given Christ. They will "reign with him," not in the literal sense of enjoying temporal authority in human governments, but in the spiritual sense of sharing the holy blessings of his kingdom and of winning others through the gospel of Christ. The twelve apostles, at this very time, are reigning with Christ ([Matthew 19:28](#)); and it is inconceivable that anything other than this is implied here. The bizarre notion that some eschatological revolution connected with a literal return of Christ to the earth will suddenly give the reins of human government into the hands of Christians is foreign to the New Testament. "This is not a future millennium text. It is plainly the imagery of the irresistible force of the gospel." [F94](#) "The rod of iron" and the shattering of the "potter's vessels" are merely expressions of that great power.

Verse 28

and I will give him the morning star.

This, like all similar promises in connection with these seven letters, is the promise of eternal life. "This does not mean, to invest the overcomer with its glory, nor to give him possession of Christ himself, but to make the dawn of salvation or of life eternal shine on him after his dark affliction." [F95](#)

Commenting on the thought in these verses, Caird said, "We are compelled to look for the fulfillment of this promise (having authority over the nations) in the present order." [F96](#) The ruling with a rod of iron and shattering the potter's vessels refer to the smashing of paganism. "Pagan resistance will indeed be smashed, but God will use no other iron bar than the death of his Son and the martyrdom of his saints." [F97](#) And we do not hesitate to add: the preaching of the gospel!

Verse 29

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

Again, reference is made to Rev. 2:7 where this is commented upon. Lenski pointed out that here and in the following three letters this admonition is placed at the end instead of at the beginning, thus dividing the seven into two groups of three and four; but, "We are unable to say just why they are so divided." [F98](#)

"Moral compromise is the central danger in Christ's message to the church at Thyatira," ^{F99} some think; but there is more to it than that, although admittedly that is bad enough. There was an abdication of the eldership in that church; a vile woman had taken it over, and they had done nothing about it. Furthermore, there was the general toleration of the philosophy and teaching which formed the rationalistic support and encouragement of the immorality. Aside from Sardis, the church next written, Thyatira was the worst of the seven addressed in this series.

Regarding what we have interpreted as the promise of a miraculous judgment against the situation in Thyatira, if such an interpretation is correct, there must have been special and unique qualities of the infection there which required it. The divine economy regarding miracles requires this understanding. Therefore, we shall attempt to show that the situation there did indeed justify such a heavenly interference with it.

The proud and domineering Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of Tyre, was the wife of Ahab, king of Israel; and she made Baalism the official religion of the northern kingdom, hastening its decline and fall by the idolatry which she introduced. "She was responsible in large measure for the collapse of the nation because of the evils which she introduced ([1 Kings 16:29-33](#))."^{F100} If she who is called Jezebel in this letter to Thyatira had been permitted to continue without divine interference, the total collapse of Christianity under the encroachments of paganism might have followed; but there was divine intervention. Furthermore, it would appear that the church got the message; and that at no subsequent time is there any record of the eldership of a church of our Lord abandoning their authority to a woman.

The legitimate deduction from what is revealed in this message to Thyatira is that the eldership of a church should use the full authority of their position to countermand and eliminate every emergence of false teaching in their congregations. There could have been no excuse whatever for their dereliction in the instance of Jezebel's wanton disregard of the teaching of Christ and her openly advocating the cause of paganism in the congregation.

Coffman Commentaries on the Old and New Testament

Revelation 3

Verse 1

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars: I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead.

A present-day village named Sart, composed of a few paltry huts, is all that remains of the once proud capital of the Lydian monarchy, ^{E1} and which probably existed even before the Lydian kingdom came into being in 1200 B.C. ^{E2} Great names of ancient history were associated with the place, such as Croesus (with fabulous riches), Cyrus, and Alexander the Great. When Xerxes launched his disastrous invasion of Greece, Sardis was the staging area for his immense army. It was strategically located on top of a plateau protected on three sides by almost perpendicular cliffs overlooking the Hermus valley, giving the city strong military protection. Despite this, however, the city was twice destroyed through their overconfidence in leaving the supposedly unclimbable cliffs unprotected. Such overconfidence is understandable; for on all but the south side, "Its perpendicular rock walls rose 1,500 feet above the valley, and provided a natural citadel." ^{E3} Both Cyrus in 546 B.C. and Antiochus the Great in 218 B.C. captured Sardis by scaling the undefended cliffs. The great importance of the city in ancient times, how ever, had sharply declined in apostolic times; and the city itself partook somewhat of the "deadness" that this letter ascribes to the church there. The principal temple of the place was that of Cybele, identified with Artemis, and like all other pagan temples a center of immorality. Ruins of it lie along the Pactolus river in the valley below the cliffs, the once gold-laden sands of which were one source of the city's wealth. The worship of the emperor was also strong there; and, out of gratitude to Tiberius who had aided financially in rebuilding the city after an earthquake in 17 A.D., they competed for the honor of building a temple to him; but they lost out to Smyrna. ^{E4} Tiberius remitted their taxes for a period, but Sardis never regained its place of importance, except for a brief while in the reign of Diocletian. It existed continuously until 1402 when it was so completely destroyed by Tamerlane that it was never rebuilt. ^{E5} Scott reported that "only two or three shepherds inhabited a hut there" at the time of Arundel's visit in 1826, and that in 1850 "no human being was found living in the once mighty and populous Sardis." ^{E6}

The fact that no New Testament records tell of the establishment of the church in Sardis should not be thought strange; because only a small fraction of the activity of the apostles and first generation Christians is mentioned in the New Testament. Sardis probably learned the truth about the same time that other churches in the area were planted, and possibly from the very same sources.

He that hath the seven Spirits of God ...

Christ represented himself to this church in terminology describing the glorified Saviour in the first chapter. As noted earlier, this clause is difficult; but it likely means, "the Holy Spirit sent in his fullness to the seven churches." ^{E7}

I know thy works ...

This is stated in all seven of the letters.

Thou hast a name that thou livest ...

This means that the people of this church were "nominal Christians, professing to live the Christian life"; ^{E8} but it also seems to indicate that they enjoyed a good reputation in the community, a

deduction from the fact that no mention of any opposition from the pagan society is made. They apparently had no Balaam, no Nicolaitans, and no Jezebel. Not even the Jews were mentioned as opposing them. Perhaps Caird was right in referring to them as, "The church everyone spoke well of, the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity, unable to distinguish between the peace of well-being and the peace of death." ^{F9} Although not all at Sardis were "dead" ([Revelation 3:4](#)), "The majority had so fully compromised with the pagan environment that they were Christian in name only." ^{F10} They could have been a rather large and influential body of people, for there is no reference to their having but a "little strength" as was the case at Philadelphia. However they might have looked in the eyes of men, they were nevertheless dead in the eyes of the Lord.

And thou art dead ...

What a dreadful sentence of condemnation is this. The Lord had not one word of approval for this church, no works to commend; and the inference in Rev. 3:5 is that he had already blotted the names of some of them out of the book of life.

Verse 2

Be thou watchful, and establish the things that remain, which were ready to die: for I have found no works of thine perfected before my God.

Be thou watchful ...

Many commentators love to tie this in with the repeated destruction of the city of Sardis through failure to "watch"; but this is not necessary. Christ himself, in the great discourse on Olivet (Matt. 24 and parallels), enjoined watchfulness; and that discourse is frequently in the mind of the writer throughout Revelation; and this is very likely the case here. See Mark 13:35,37.

Establish the things that remain ...

This stresses a truth sometimes overlooked, namely, that even in dead, wicked, in different congregations there may be some members, probably humble and obscure, who are still trying to do the will of God and in their hearts grieve for the desolation. Barnes said, concerning such as these:

An important duty in a low and languishing state of religion, is to "strengthen the things that still survive." It is to cultivate all the graces that do exist; to nourish all the love of truth that may linger in the church; and to confirm, by warm exhortation, and by reference to the gracious promises of the word of God, the few who may be endeavoring to do their duty, and who, amidst many discouragements, are aiming to be faithful to the Saviour. ^{F11}

Verse 3a

Remember therefore how thou hast received and didst hear; and keep it, and repent.

Earle, in this and the preceding verse, found five steps to a revival: (1) "Be watchful"; (2) "Strengthen the things which remain"; (3) "Remember"; (4) "Hold fast"; and (5) "Repent." ^{F12}

Remember ...

"Memory is again the lever for repentance, as in Rev. 2:5" ^{F13} See notes on that verse, above. And just what were those things they were supposed to remember? We are not told, but Hinds is probably correct in the view that:

This could include the miraculous proof which may have been present when the church was established, a remarkable evidence of the truth of the gospel; but it may have reference to the sincerity and enthusiasm with which they accepted the gospel. [F14](#)

Verse 3b

If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.

It is common for interpreters to make this mean that John is warning Sardis to be prepared for the Second Advent; but as Caird noted, "If we allow John to speak for himself, he is clearly saying that the coming itself is contingent on the church's refusal to repent." [F15](#) Thus, as in the other references to "the coming" in these chapters, it is a "coming in judgment" that is meant, not the final Advent, but a providential visitation upon the sinful. The Second Advent is not contingent upon any group's repentance. When our Saviour gave the great Olivet discourse (Matt. 24, Mark 13, Luke 21), he mingled the prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem and those of the Second Coming, some of his discourse referring to both events, the first as typical of the second; and the same method is here employed. Therefore, the warnings of providential judgments and "trials" coming upon the church, with the admonitions to "watch," etc., likewise have their application to the ultimate Coming of the Son of God in glory.

Verse 4

But thou hast a few names in Sardis that did not defile their garments: and they shall walk with me in white; for they are worthy.

A few names ...

This means, of course, a few persons, Christians, who despite the prevailing wickedness and deadness of the church were still faithful, but in danger of being overcome at last by the defection of the vast majority. As Barnes said, "This indicates that where error and sin prevail, there may be a few who are worthy of divine commendation." [F16](#) When a church dies, or becomes evil, many innocent persons are always discouraged and lost as a result. Nothing can be more tragic than such an event.

They did not defile their garments ...

This plainly indicates that the prevailing immorality of the pagan culture was being indulged by Christians. "While maintaining outwardly their good works and Christian activities, they were adapting themselves to the luxury and (sinful) pleasures of their pagan environment." [F17](#) Moffatt declared that the language here is similar to that found in votive inscriptions from Asia Minor, in which "soiled clothes disqualified the worshipper and dishonored the god." [F18](#) However the resemblance was superficial. Whereas the pagan priests were concerned with literal clothes, the apostle's letter here has reference to "soiling one's clothes" figuratively or spiritually. Committing immorality would in deed have been soiling one's clothes spiritually.

For they shall walk with me in white ...

Like all the other promised rewards in this series of letters, this is a promise of eternal life stated in figurative terms. Most commentators seem to concur in this view. "This white is not the white of the undefiled robe; it is the lustrous white of glory." [F19](#) "It would seem that walking in white is a way of describing those who are justified." [F20](#)

Verse 5

He that overcometh shall thus be arrayed in white garments; and I will in no wise blot his name out of the book of life, and I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.

Shall be arrayed with me in white ...

This, of course, is to be taken in close connection with Rev. 3:4. Rather than finding some reference in this to customs of pagan worshippers, it is better to understand the figurative meaning of it as similar to that mentioned by Adam Clarke:

The great council of Israel sat and judged the priests. If in a priest any vice was found, they stripped off his white garments and clothed him in black, in which he wrapped himself, went out, and departed. Him in whom no vice was found they clothed in white; and he went and took his part in the ministry with his brother priests. ^{F21}

I will in no wise blot his name out of the book of life ...

For fuller comment on "The Book of Life," see in my Commentary on Hebrews, pp. 381, 382. It is significant that Christ's confession of the faithful is, in some manner, connected with enrollment in the book of life, not only upon the occasion of the initial inscription, but upon the final entry into heaven. A verse like this is inevitably associated with the study of predestination; and sharply divergent views of it are taken. Bruce, for example, has this:

The "book of life" appears here ... to include at first all whose names are on the membership roll of a local church; but those whose membership is but nominal have their names deleted, i.e., the Lord declares he never knew them ([Luke 13:25,27](#)). ^{F22}

The significance of such an interpretation is that it means that some who are enrolled in the book of life were never saved at all. "The Lord never knew them." It is difficult to understand how anyone could believe that heaven itself endorses the earthly enrollment of wicked people whom the Lord "never knew" by inscribing their names in the book of life. It is impossible, therefore, for us to accept the notion that any reference whatever to the membership rolls of any local church is to be found here. Any true conception of the "Book of Life," which belongs to the Lamb of God, makes it inconceivable that any unsaved, unredeemed persons would ever be inscribed in such a list unless they were entitled to be so recognized. Whatever this passage may seem to say to others, this writer sees in it the positive and certain declaration that born-again, redeemed Christians, whose names, upon the occasion of their conversion, are indeed written in the book of life, are still subject to probation. If they should fail to continue in faithfulness to the Lord, their names will be blotted out of the book of life; and we fully agree with Roberts who wrote, "Christ had already had to blot out the names of most of the Sardis Christians from the heavenly register." ^{F23} The predestination in which John believes is a conditional predestination. A man cannot earn the right to have his name on the citizen roll, but he can forfeit it." ^{F24}

And I will confess his name ...

This is an echo of Matt. 10:32,33. For the connection between this confession and inscription in the book of life, see in my Commentary on Hebrews, pp. 381, 382. From this place, it seems that Christ not only confesses the redeemed upon the occasion of their conversion, but again, upon the occasion of their entry into heaven.

Verse 6

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

This is identical with the admonition addressed to all seven of these churches. See discussion of it under Rev. 2:7.

Verse 7a

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write.

PHILADELPHIA

The very name Philadelphia arouses our interest, as one of the great modern cities of the United States bears the same title. "Here is the seventh and last occurrence of this word in the New Testament, the other passages where it is found being: Rom. 12:10; 1 Thess. 4:9; Heb. 13:1; 1 Pet. 1:22; and 2 Pet. 1:7 (twice). [F25](#)

Philadelphia is supposed to have been founded between 189 B.C. and 138 B.C., either by Eumenes, king of Pergamum, or his younger brother Attalus; but, "one thing is certain: its name commemorates the loyalty of Attalus to his brother." [F26](#) The word means "lover of his brother," a fact evident in these events: (1) a false rumor of Eumenes' assassination led to Attalus' acceptance of the crown, which he relinquished when his brother returned to Greece, and (2) Attalus resisted Roman encouragement to overthrow Eumenes and become king. [F27](#)

The great earthquake which devastated twelve cities in the very district where these seven churches lay (17 A.D.) was particularly destructive in Philadelphia, due to its being nearest the fault line. For an extended period afterwards, there continued to be many more earthquakes, especially at Philadelphia, which was called the "city of many earthquakes." Some of the citizens refused any longer to live within the city proper.

Philadelphia was also the city that tried to change its name. After Tiberius' help in rebuilding after the earthquake, they tried to name their city "Neocaesarea," meaning "New Caesar," but the name never became established. They tried again in the reign of Vespasian to name the place "Flavia" after the name of his dynasty; but this too failed to catch on; thus the city twice tried to name themselves after their "god," but failed! It is difficult indeed not to see a consciousness of this in Rev. 3:12. [F28](#) "Still another name of the city was Decapolis, because it was considered one of the ten cities of the plain. And in addition to all these names, it sometimes bore the title of Little Athens." [F29](#) There were many temples and centers of learning in the city. The grape industry in the area resulted in the practice of rites connected with the pagan god Bacchus (Dionysus). The present name of the place is Ala Sheher, "the Red City," so named, not from the bloodshed there, but for the volcanic earth of its location. [F30](#)

Up until the current century, Philadelphia was nominally Christian, with about one fourth of its population professing Christianity, leading to the comment of Gibbon that, "Among the churches of Asia, Philadelphia is still erect, a column in a scene of ruins, a pleasing example that the paths of honour and safety may sometimes be the same." [F31](#) Still, Philadelphia suffered the terrible subjection under the Turks who followed Tamerlane, who had subjected the city in 1403, and is said to have "built about it a wall of the corpses of his victims." [F32](#) "Of whatever remnant of Christianity may be left in Philadelphia today, there are no statistics." [F33](#) Following the edict of the League of Nations in 1922, practically all the Christians were deported.

Verse 7b

These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth and none shall shut, and that shutteth and none openeth:

Holy ... true ...

These attributes of Christ are clearly appropriate for a church maintaining their love and faith in Christ in the midst of pagan culture.

Key of David ... openeth and none shutteth ... shutteth and none openeth ...

This verse is clearly related to the principal problem which confronted the Philadelphian church. That problem was Jewish opposition. Secular Israel, still in power over the Jews in a religious sense (this was prior to 70 A.D.), still pretended to have final right of determining who should or should not enter heaven, sternly resisting the claims of the Christians that they, the Christians, were the true Israel of God. To enforce their claims, the Jews cast out of their synagogues all Jews who accepted Christ, and the existence of that situation in Philadelphia when Revelation was written points squarely to the sixties and not to the eighties or nineties, because there were evidently Christians who desired to continue in fellowship with the Jewish synagogues, if it had been allowed. Paul, it will be remembered, attempted to maintain such a fellowship throughout his missionary efforts, always going first to the synagogues. This passage emphasizes the truth that, "It is Christ alone, and no longer Israel, who can give men entrance into the messianic kingdom." ^{F34} "Christ speaks as he by whom alone comes entrance to the Church, the spiritual house of God." ^{F35} The imagery of "key of David" and other expressions here is from Isa. 22:25-25, where the king of Israel deposed Shebna and appointed Eliakim as the chief-steward. The analogy is that Judaism has been replaced by Christianity as the true religion.

The key of David ...

therefore means, "undisputed authority to admit or exclude from the New Jerusalem (heaven)." ^{F36} We also agree with Mounce's opinion that, "This is an intended contrast with the practice of the local synagogue in excluding Christian Jews." ^{F37} However, there are further implications of this passage that are exceedingly important in understanding the New Testament, especially with reference to the kingdom of Christ (the church). The "key of David" means that, "Christ possessed the throne of David, and that the government was upon his shoulder ([Isaiah 9:6](#))." ^{F38} The annunciation angel promised Mary the mother of Jesus that God would give her Son "the throne of his father David" ([Luke 1:31-33](#)); and this verse is an indication that God had kept his promise. Acts 13:33-34 indicates that the prophecy of the "sure mercies of David" was fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ; and the prophecy of the rebuilding again of the tabernacle of David ([Amos 9:11-15](#)) was determined by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to have been fulfilled by the establishment of the church to which all of them at that time belonged. Added to all of these prophecies, declared by inspiration to have been fulfilled, is the pronouncement of Peter on Pentecost to the effect that God's raising up one after David to sit upon the throne of David was a prophecy of the resurrection of the Son of God ([Acts 2:29-33](#)). Wallace's summary of this is:

Jesus has the throne of David, the tabernacle of David, the sure mercies (blessings) of David, and the key of David in every spiritual sense of these terms ... These passages teach that the house of David was perpetuated in the kingdom of Christ, his Church. ^{F39}

Verse 8

I know thy works (behold, I have set before thee a door opened, which none can shut), that thou hast a little power, and didst keep my word, and didst not deny my name.

A door opened ...

Many see here a promise of opportunity; but, in the light of the preceding verse, it appears that the door of admission into the church, the messianic kingdom identified with the church, - this is the door meant. "It assures the church of how futile were such excommunications as the Jews were leveling against them." ^{F40} Beckwith and Mounce concur in this interpretation. However, both of these with many current scholars, hold there is a difference between the church and the kingdom; but throughout this series of commentaries, the position has been maintained that the church and the kingdom are one institution, not two, and that the "everlasting kingdom" mentioned by Peter ([2 Peter 1:11](#)) is not a different kingdom, but the eternal phase of the present kingdom. There are many New Testament references regarding the "open door" of opportunity ([1 Corinthians 16:9](#); [2 Corinthians 2:12](#); [Colossians 4:3](#); [Acts 14:27](#), ; 14:27,); but, with reference to all such doors, it is not necessarily true of them that "no man can shut." That promise pertains to the door of God's holy church.

Hast a little power ...

The general weakness of the church at Philadelphia is stated here. Despite this, the congregations here and at Smyrna are the only two against which the Lord uttered no condemnation. A church does not have to be large to be true and to be approved by the Lord.

Didst keep my word ... didst not deny my name ...

This means simply that the church there had been faithful to their trust; but by contrast with other congregations mentioned in these letters, it could indicate that the principal sins of those not approved were those of not keeping the Lord's word, and of denying his name. For further comments on "the name of the Lord," see under Rev. 2:3.

Verse 9

Behold, I give of the synagogue of Satan, of them that say they are Jews, and they are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.

This verse is not to be understood in the literal sense at all. Christians would not be honored by having anyone worship before their feet, nor could God be pleased by such a thing. What is done here is to take the ancient Scriptures regarding the Gentiles "bending before" Israel ([Isaiah 60:14](#)) and to state that the reverse is true now. The Jews were once God's chosen people, an honor forfeited by them in their rejection of the Son of God. "These words echo the words of the prophets telling of the coming of the Gentiles to do homage to the people of Israel, and of bowing themselves down before the soles of their feet." ^{F41} The fulfillment of this came when the Gentiles bowed themselves before the feet of Christ, the true Israel; and the fulfillment of Jesus' words as given by John here will occur when Jews are converted and bow themselves before Christ, with whom Christians are identified as being his spiritual body on earth. It is wrong to read this as if it declared any wholesale conversion of Jews at some future time. Throughout the ages, many faithful Jews have received Christ, and they are still doing so; and in this the prophecy is continually being fulfilled. Thus, in what Moffatt calls "the grim irony of providence," ^{F42} "what the Jews fondly expected of the Gentiles, they themselves will give to the Gentiles. They will play the role of the heathen and acknowledge that the church is the true Israel of God." ^{F43} After the Babylonian captivity, many Jews were settled in the district where these seven cities lay, and in time many of them became wealthy and powerful. "They were proud of their national

privileges (which, by inference, they still enjoyed), and powerful in numbers and wealth, no doubt despising the Jewish Christians as traitors." [F44](#)

Verse 10

Because thou didst keep the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell on the earth.

The word of my patience ...

Of several interpretations advocated regarding this, that of Trench as quoted by Earle seems the best: "It is much better to take the whole Gospel as the word of Christ's patience, everywhere teaching, as it does, the need of a patient waiting for Christ." [F45](#)

I will also keep thee from the hour of trial ...

This figures prominently in the theories of millennialists, who take the passage as emphasizing that Christians shall be delivered from not through the great trial, "implying the rapture of the church before the time referred to as "the great tribulation." [F46](#) "The thrust of the verse is against this interpretation. It was precisely because the church was faithful in time of trial that Christ in turn will be faithful to them." [47](#) This view of the passage harmonizes with the great high-priestly prayer of Jesus who did not pray that the Father would take his disciples "out of the world" ([John 17:15](#)), but that they would be faithful in the world. Furthermore, the promise of Luke 21:17 is explanatory of what is meant here. What Christ promised is safety through trials, not exemption from trials. "There is no promise in Revelation that God's people shall escape suffering and death, but there is the promise that no harm can come to their souls." [F48](#)

The hour of trial ...

What is the great trial which is coming upon the whole world? Primarily, the meaning is the great persecution that was upon the point of breaking out against the church. We agree with Beasley-Murray that it is certainly possible that, "an identical period of trial is referred to in both Rev. 2:10 and Rev. 3:1." [F49](#) The looming persecution against the church is starkly evident in all the New Testament books, and hardly any of them failed to address the situation. In fact, the principal burden of the great prophecies about to be unveiled was that of strengthening and encouraging the church against that very event. That it is here called "the hour" of trial does not mean that it will be over in an hour, or even in any relatively short time. "In the hour of trial" means "in any hour of trial." As Beasley-Murray said, "This is not a designation of a period of time, but of the trial itself." [F50](#) A secondary meaning applies the text to the final judgment. "In principle, the same promise would fit the judgment as the great trial for the whole human race." [F51](#) From Matt. 24, etc., all should be familiar with this quality in prophecies regarding such events.

Verse 11

I come quickly: hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown.

I come quickly ...

It is wrong to read this as if it said in the next few months or few years. Scholars love to give it that meaning; but it cannot be denied that, "Quickly may also mean suddenly, or unexpectedly." [F52](#) Why was a word with such a double meaning used? Simply because a double meaning was required. The great persecutions would indeed come quite soon, within months after this Revelation was written; where as, the judgment would not occur for millenniums, a fact which the exact words of the sacred writers

allowed for, even though they themselves might not have understood this. Indeed, it is not likely that they did fully understand it. See comment on this in my Commentary on 1 Peter under 1 Pet. 1:12. For identically this same reason, the Lord used the word "generation" ([Matthew 24:34](#)), having the double meaning of "those who are now alive," and of "the race of Israel." The first meaning applied to the destruction of Jerusalem, and the second applies to the Second Advent.

Hold fast ...

is an admonition to continued fidelity. Some had already given up the struggle.

That no man take thy crown ...

Regarding the crown of life, see under 1 Pet. 2:10, above. The possibility of another's taking the crown of a Christian does not have reference, as Plummer thought, to another's receiving the crown the Christian forfeits, but to the fact that those who through deception, seduction or social duress may influence a Christian to forfeit his crown through sin. It is true, however, that if a Christian forfeits the crown, another will take the place he lost. "Jacob received Esau's crown; Matthias Judas's; and the Gentiles that of the Jews." [F53](#)

Verse 12

He that overcometh, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God and he shall go out thence no more: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and mine own new name.

He that overcometh ...

That is, the conquerors of earth's allurements and temptations. Hendriksen's great book on "More than Conquerors" comes to mind frequently through the repeated use of this expression.

A pillar in the temple of my God ...

Like all of the similar promises to these churches, this is a promise of eternal life. The mention of the new Jerusalem and the new name require this understanding of it. "The temple, then, and the pillar are both figurative; and all reference to the historic church, or to position in it are excluded." [F54](#)

Despite the interpretation advocated above, many insist on seeing the temple here as meaning the church, and the reference to the pillar as a promise of security and stability in it for the faithful Christian, a view supported by Paul's frequent mention of the church as "the temple" of the Holy Spirit, etc. Wallace was of this opinion. There is also the additional consideration that in the new Jerusalem, there shall not be any temple ([Revelation 22:22](#)). Nevertheless, the overwhelming impression remains that the Lord was here speaking of eternal life. Many of the figures in Revelation are not always used in strictly the same sense. Of course, it is true, also, that the overcomer shall be established in the church with safety and security; but the greater fact of inheriting eternal life seems to be more in keeping with the similar promises prevailing throughout this series to the seven churches.

I will write upon him the name of my God ...

Addressed to Christians in a city which at least three times had changed their name, trying repeatedly to write upon themselves the "name of their God," this seems peculiarly appropriate. Some intimations of this glorious naming of God's children in eternity is seen in the fact of their being now baptized into the sacred triple name ([Matthew 28:18-20](#)) and of their wearing the name of Christ in the title Christians. We cannot say what may be implied beyond this in heaven.

Verse 13

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

What the Spirit saith to the churches ...

All of these seven messages are to all of the churches in perpetuity; and what is said to one, especially regarding promises, is said to all.

Verse 14a

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

LAODICEA

Laodicea is a word which has come to stand for lukewarmness, indifference and compromise. Some theorists make a big point out of what they affirm to be the meaning of the word: "Its name designates it as the Church of mob rule, the democratic church, in which everything was swayed and decided by popular opinion." ^{F55} We are reluctant to accept this, because the town was actually named by its founder Antiochus II (261-246 B.C.) after his wife Laodice. ^{F56} It was situated in the same general vicinity of the other six cities addressed in this series, on the great Roman road to Syrian Antioch. It was never much of a fortress, due to the vulnerability of the water supply, "which came principally by a vulnerable aqueduct from springs six miles away to the north in the direction of Hieropolis ... Laodicea could hardly stand a determined siege." ^{F57}

Laodicea was a banking center with a great deal of wealth. One of the great industries was that of wool and woolen garments, featuring a fine quality glossy black wool from Phrygian sheep; another industry was that of drugs developed in connection with the medical school there. One of the famous Laodicean remedies was a "Phrygian eye-salve" which was supposed to cure inflammation. Blaiklock speculated that this probably came from dried mud from one of the numerous hot springs in the area. ^{F58} This information illuminates the charges which the Lord made against the church of this city, in his words, "Thou art miserable and poor, and blind, and naked" ([Revelation 3:17](#)). It is as though he had said, "You are spiritually bankrupt in spite of all the banks, looms and pharmacies in the city."

Particularly noticeable was the wealth of Laodicea. Following the great earthquake which demolished the place in 60 A.D., they rebuilt at once from their own resources, declining the lavish gifts offered by the emperor. Scholars who suppose that Laodicea could not have recovered so quickly as a date in the late 60's for Revelation would indicate that they have failed to take their great wealth and self-sufficiency into account.

One other significant fact of the environment is that of the hot springs, which when mixed with water from the colder springs resulted in a lukewarm, nauseous mixture totally unsuitable for drinking purposes.

Laodicea suffered the same kind of general decline that came to the whole area in subsequent centuries, finally falling to the Turks in the 14th century. Today, it is called Eski-Sheher, meaning "old town," the capital of the Turkish province of the same name. The population in 1955 was 122,755. ^{F59}

The church at Laodicea was one of a group of three congregations known to us from the writings of Paul. He directed that two of his epistles should be sent there ([Colossians 4:16](#)). "These were the Colossian letter and another which has been lost, unless the epistle to the Ephesians is meant." ^{F60} This church received, along with Sardis, the strongest of our Lord's denunciations, there being no compliment of any kind extended to them.

Verse 14b

These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God:

The Amen ...

This denotes the one in whom verity is personified." [F61](#) There is also the sense of completeness and finality in it. Before Christ, there was no other; and after him there is no other.

The faithful and true witness ...

The faithfulness of Christ is affirmed in this, a truth often overlooked. As deity, Jesus Christ had no need of faith in the sense of its use today; but "as a man" he walked in faith, implicitly trusting all that the Father had promised. In the ultimate sense, all human justification derives from the perfect faith and perfect obedience of Christ.

The beginning of the creation of God ...

Plummer pointed out that the words here bear two possible interpretations:

The two meanings are: (1) that which would make Christ the first created thing of all things God created, and (2) that which would understand Christ as the Source of all the things God created. [F62](#)

Plummer and many other able scholars declare the second meaning to be the one intended here. "The words mean, the one from whom creation took its beginning." [F63](#) The agreement with Col. 1:16 is probably intended, for the church in Laodicea received Colossians.

Verse 15

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would that thou wert cold or hot.

Two possible meanings of this are intriguing, and either one or both could be correct. Which is the right turns upon what Jesus meant by "I would thou wert cold or hot." If the Lord's reprimand here is the rough equivalent to, "You Laodicean Christians are just like the notoriously lukewarm drinking water in your town," then he meant that the Christians should be either like good cold drinking water, or like a beneficial hot drink from one of the thermal springs. On the other hand, if the "lukewarmness" here has reference solely to the spiritual temperature of the people, then he could have meant that he could prefer them to be cold, "because a lukewarm Christian can do the church more harm than an outright enemy of the faith." [F64](#) > Others have explained the possible meaning thus, "An honest atheist is more acceptable to the Lord than a self satisfied religious man." [F65](#) Whatever, exactly, was meant, the principal idea is devastatingly clear. This church had lost its enthusiasm, zeal, and excitement concerning their holy religion. Through the ages they have come to stand for the most disgusting thing on earth, a fat, lazy, self-righteous and complacent church, basking in their own presumed achievements, but wholly unacceptable to the Lord.

Verse 16

So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth.

Neither hot nor cold ...

The contrast is between the hot medicinal waters of Hieropolis, and the cold pure waters of Colossae." [F66](#) Thus, the church was providing neither refreshment for the spiritually weary, nor healing for the spiritually sick.

I will spew thee out of my mouth ...

This is a shocking figure, but one of the most expressive in the New Testament. Strangers entering Laodicea for the first time, when they tried to drink where the hot spring water and the cold came together, would usually "spew it out."

Verse 17

Because thou sayest, I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art the wretched one and miserable and poor and blind and naked:

How strange that God's people in such a place were destitute of spiritual graces. There was plenty of money, but they were poor; there was plenty of the finest clothing on earth, but they were naked; there was healing for many in the medical school, but they were blind. This is a sad commentary upon the way things are today with many Christians who live in the affluent society, with plenty of everything except that alone which can prevent their being like the Laodiceans, miserable and poor and blind and naked.

And knowest not ...

The worst thing about their condition was their total ignorance of the true nature of it. They had evidently mistaken "the good life" for the righteous life. They boasted of their riches and professed to need nothing whatever; and yet they were the neediest of all. May all Christians pray that they may not be self-deceived concerning their own spiritual condition. What can be done for the hypocrite who does not know he is a hypocrite, for the spiritual beggar who is dreaming that he is rich, or for the naked sojourner who imagines that he is fully clothed?

Verse 18

I counsel thee to buy of me gold refined by fire, that thou mayest become rich; and white garments, that thou mayest clothe thyself, and that the shame of thy nakedness be not made manifest; and eye-salve to anoint thine eyes, that thou mayest see.

It is evident that the lack of the Laodiceans was precisely in those areas where they fancied they were the strongest. The allusion to Laodicean wealth, their garment industry, and their "Phrygian eye-salve" is evident.

Buy of me gold refined by fire ...

This is a metaphor of true fidelity in Christ Jesus, as suggested by 1 Pet. 1:7; but the expression, "Buy of me" is particularly interesting. "the of me is emphatic," [F67](#) indicating that the true wealth is procurable only from the Son of God. Neither the banks of Laodicea nor the gold mines of Pangaeus can supply the blessed "riches in Christ" without which all mankind is miserable and poor and blind and naked. Furthermore, the very fact of a purchase being required in this command raises the question of what shall be tendered in order to receive the gold refined by fire? Lenski quoted Isa. 55:1 in this context:

Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price ([Isaiah 55:1](#)).

Lenski's comment on this is: "Buy for nothing! This is the strange wonderful gospel buying." ^{F68} With due deference, however, to the respected Lenski, the riches in Christ are not available "for nothing," but without money, there being a world of difference in the two propositions. The very thing wrong at Laodicea was that they were proposing to enjoy true riches of Christ for nothing. The same is true of a great deal of the current religious world around us today. Among the things that "in a sense" must be exchanged for the true riches are an obedient faith in Jesus Christ. However, it is only "in a sense" that such may be called "buying." There is no quid pro quo that may be tendered in order to receive salvation; and it was probably this that Lenski intended.

And white garments that thou mayest be clothed ...

Like the buying, above, this represents something which to some degree, at least, must be provided by the wearer, Christ, of course, being the only source. The apostles commanded that one should keep himself "unspotted from the world" ([James 1:27](#)). White garments of righteousness are supplied by the Lord to the baptized believer; but there is no promise of any such thing to the believer or unbeliever who will not be baptized. Thus, people are here commanded to "buy" white garments.

And eye-salve to anoint thine eyes, that thou mayest see ...

This demanded purchase, like the others, may not be had for money; but that does not mean that it is available upon any other terms than the one laid down in Scripture. "The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes" ([Psalms 19:8](#)). The only eye-salve, therefore, that will do spiritual blindness any good is the word of the Lord; and it was precisely this that the Laodiceans needed. How could they "buy it"? Through study and attention given to the word of God. Is this "for nothing"? Indeed no; but it is without money.

Verses 19, 20

As many as I love, I reprove and chasten; be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

For full discussion of the doctrine of chastening, see in my Commentary on Hebrews, pp. 317-319.

There is nothing like this in the whole New Testament; it could be intended for all the churches, but Laodicea's being the last one caused it to be incorporated here with the letter to that church. A literal translation is: "See, I have taken my stand upon your threshold, and I am continually knocking." ^{F69} Many have commented upon this matchless verse which is honored in the music and art of the world. Morgan paraphrased the meaning thus:

He waits for man. He is not waiting for a committee to pass a resolution. If any man hear my voice, I will come to him ... I will be his guest, "I will sup with him." He shall be my guest, "and he with me." I will sit at the table which his love provides, and satisfy my heart. He shall sit at the table which my love provides, and satisfy his heart. ^{F70}

"This promise has a eucharistic flavor about it. The mention of a supper with Christ pictures the last supper in the upper room, and the subsequent occasions when it was re-enacted as the continuing symbol of Christ's continuing presence." ^{F71} "This is one of the greatest gospel texts in the New Testament and should be quoted frequently in both public evangelism and in personal work." ^{F72}

Certainly, one of the applications of this verse is that of referring it to the Lord's Supper. This sacred institution, observed without interruption throughout the Christian era, enables every Christian to "eat with the Lord" in every observance of it. We agree with Caird who considered this reference imperative.

Verse 21

He that overcometh, I will give to him to sit down with me in my throne, as I also overcame, and sat down with my Father in his throne.

Plummer, and many others, see two thrones in this passage. "The throne promised is not that which Christ now occupies with his Father, but his own throne." ^{F73} However, there is only one supreme throne. "God's throne is Christ's." ^{F74} As we shall see in the next two chapters, Christ is now completely and gloriously enthroned. The notion of two thrones in this passage must be rejected. "God knows no other victory, and needs no other victory, than that which is won by the cross of Christ." ^{F75}

To sit down with me in my throne ...

"This promise of sharing the throne is the climax of an ascending series of glorious promises which carry us from the Garden of Eden to the throne of God in heaven." ^{F76}

Many do not seem to believe that Christians are now sharing the throne with Christ, but in a sense they are; despite the fact of this interpretation being merely the type of the glory that shall come later at the Second Advent (which is also in view here). Howard stated it thus: "Christians reign with Christ as his agents in proclaiming Christ's authority for man's salvation." ^{F77} Hinds' great summary of the thought here is:

As Christians are agents through whom men are saved ([1 Timothy 4:16](#)), so they are agents through whom Christ reigns. Hence, they sit with him in his throne, that is, rule with him. It is called the Father's throne because he gave it to Christ; it is Christ's because he sits upon it; it is the throne of David, because Christ, a Davidic descendant, sits upon it. Moreover, only one throne is supreme, that "of God and of the Lamb" (Rev. 22:1). ^{F78}

Verse 22

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

For the seventh time this message has been thundered from the gates of heaven, indicating that these letters to seven ancient churches have a relevance infinitely beyond the circle of the original recipients. "They are a composite word to the church universal throughout time." ^{F79}

A SUMMARY REGARDING THE SEVEN LETTERS

The background. The discerning student cannot fail to see that Jewish persecution against the church is active in these letters, in which "the synagogue of Satan" is twice mentioned ([Revelation 2:9](#); [3:9](#)). The casting of Christians into prison at Smyrna is evidently related to this Jewish opposition. "When the appeals of sophistry failed to draw the Christians back to the religion of their ancestors, the Jews sought every association possible with the Romans to crush the new sect ([Acts 24:14](#))."^{F80} At the time Revelation was written, this power of the Jews to enlist Roman authority in their campaign against the

church was drawing to a close; and therein, perhaps, is the explanation of the "ten days" reference in the letter to Smyrna. Such a deduction as this is disputed; but the fact cannot be denied that there is a strong Jewish complexion in the opposition cited in these two chapters. "Therefore, it appears that this was written before the fall of Jerusalem." ^{F81} If Jewish persecutions were about to end, however, there was yet a greater trial upon the horizon, "the great trial" coming upon the whole world ([Revelation 3:10](#)); and that is best understood as the great Roman persecutions, already begun under Nero, but due to be intensified and continued.

The throne. There is only one throne of universal power and authority, and that is the throne of God and of the Lamb ([Revelation 22:1](#)); and these seven letters show the power of the throne judging, encouraging, protecting, and guiding the church, reaching a climax in Rev. 3:21, where the church itself is promised a seat upon it, true in a sense now, but to be followed by greater honors later. In these letters, "ominous warnings provide a dark background for glowing promises." ^{F82} The next two chapters will provide a revelation of that great throne in more specific terms, but it is the same throne (authority) that dominates these letters. In this is seen the unity and logical sequence of progression in the Apocalypse.

The judgment. This is the theme of Revelation ([Revelation 1:7](#)); and the coming of Christ in his judgment of the churches is evident in all of the seven letters, his infinite knowledge of their affairs being invariably repeated, "I know thy works." Significantly, however, the judgments threatened are obviously related to the present time, being contingent in some cases upon the repentance of those judged; but beyond this, there are undeniable echoes of the Second Advent, as indicated by the repeated promises of eternal life, variously stated as eating of the hidden manna, receiving the crown of life, walking with the Lord in white, etc. In this double application of "judgment" both to things in the present life and to the saints' entry into heaven, the exact pattern of the Saviour's great Olivet address (Matt. 24, etc.) is followed. Much of Revelation will remain unintelligible unless this conformity to that pattern is observed. "Each representative church is being judged by the living Lord in anticipation of that climax (the judgment), and the correctives that he seeks to apply are preparatory for His elevation of the church to His side on the throne." ^{F83}

The dangers. What are the dangers against which these admonitions are designed to warn Christians? They are the danger of leaving our first love (Ephesus), the fear of suffering (Smyrna), the toleration of false teaching (Pergamum), allowing leadership to fall into evil hands (Thyatira), spiritual deadness (Sardis), the danger of not holding fast (Philadelphia), and that of an indifferent complacency and lukewarmness (Laodicea).

Plan of interpretation. We have rejected the futuristic notion that in the future all these cities are to be restored and that then these things shall be fulfilled, and also the conception that seven successive ages of the church are indicated. The seven churches have been understood here as literal, historical congregations, and that these seven were chosen because of the varied types of correction needed, thus making the letters applicable to all situations in the future of the church, in which the specified conditions might occur. Regarding the "seven successive ages" interpretation, we agree with Wilbur M. Smith who said:

The only aspect of this interpretation that may have some virtue is the interpretation of Laodicea. It seems that lukewarmness and indifference will mark the church at the end of the age, particularly indifference to the great doctrines of the faith and unwillingness to defend them. ^{F84}

THE INTRODUCTION AND KEY TO REVELATION

These seven letters are a marvelous introduction to the whole prophecy because: (1) there are just seven mentioned, corresponding to the seven successive parallel views of history which follow; (2) each of the seven letters ends with a reference to the "judgment" of Christ upon each church; and (3) the

great and final reward of eternal life appears under various figures in each of them, corresponding exactly to the culmination of the whole prophecy in the final JUDGMENT and the awarding of eternal life in the NEW JERUSALEM for the saints. These letters, in a sense, are a preview of the entire book of Revelation.

Coffman Commentaries on the Old and New Testament

Revelation 4

Verse 1

And after these things I saw, and behold, a door opened in heaven, and the first voice that I heard, a voice as of a trumpet speaking with me, one saying, Come up hither, and I will show unto thee things which must come to pass hereafter.

After these things ...

This means, "after the visions of the preceding chapters." John is not here speaking of "after the fulfillment of previous visions," but of "after his having seen them." The ancient myth of the whole world balanced on Atlas' shoulder is no more preposterous than the proposition that everything in Revelation from this point to the end will not even commence to be fulfilled until after the so-called "rapture" at the coming of Christ - all of which is allegedly derived from this little adverbial phrase! "There is no justification for assigning what follows to a time after this world." ^{F6}

I saw, and behold a door opened in heaven ...

As Earle stated it, "He saw the door standing open; he did not see it opened." ^{F7} John's use of the same figure for different purposes is apparent in this. The "open door" stands for opportunity, or the sinner's entrance into heaven ([Revelation 3:8](#)), the door of the human heart ([Revelation 3:20](#)), and the gateway of heaven of itself, here.

And the first voice that I heard ...

This is usually understood as a reference to the voice of Christ himself ([Revelation 1:10ff](#)). "This does not refer to the first of a successive series, but is a plain reference to the voice of the Lord already heard." ^{F8} There the voice was heard on earth, but here it is heard from heaven. Some of the implications in these remarkable visions are difficult to conceive. For example, "Can Christ be conceived of as inviting the prophet to ascend and see him in heaven? Why not? Revelation will suggest that such questions should not be asked." ^{F9} We have just noted the multiple employment of "open door" as an expression of diverse realities, and there are countless other examples of the same thing throughout. Does the Lamb of God have seven horns ([Revelation 5:6](#))? The great scarlet-colored beast has ten horns ([Revelation 17:3](#))! As Beasley-Murray observed:

One who adapts Biblical images as freely as he has in this chapter should not be expected to preserve an undeviating consistency in his pictures. They are for kindling the imagination, not for transference to the drawing board. ^{F10}

Consistency has been described as the vice of small minds, and there was certainly nothing small about the mind which lies behind Revelation. One very important key to understanding Revelation is in this. The interpretation of a figure in one passage does not necessarily bind the interpretation in another. "He makes no attempt at sustained metaphor or allegory." ^{F11} Revelation is simply not that kind of book.

Scholars have often complained about the grammar of Revelation. For example, "The word for voice in this passage is used first as feminine, and then as masculine." ^{F12} The inspired writer rose above the ordinary rules of grammar, because there was no other way of conveying the exact sense. His proper observance of grammatical rules elsewhere shows clearly that he knew them and understood them, thus his deviation here was meaningful and purposeful. This example is cited here as one of many in

the book; and what is said here applies to the others. "The change to the masculine is simply because this befits the Person, one saying. To speak of grammatical irregularity is rather pedantic." [F13](#)

The things which must come to pass hereafter ...

Among the things to be "shown" in the following chapters are the Second Coming of Christ and the final judgment of the living and the dead. It is a critical mistake, therefore, to understand this prophecy as already having been fulfilled in its entirety. Moreover, there is an overwhelming impression that a certain progression of events in the direction of that final assize, and culminating it, was surely intended to be revealed by the prophet. Thus it is wrong to understand Revelation as merely an abstraction of principles operative in history. "The close connection of the judgments (seals, trumpets, and bowls) with the earth and what goes on in it compels a more concrete explanation of them than an abstract idealism will afford." [F14](#)

Verse 2

Straightway I was in the Spirit: and behold, there was a throne set in heaven, and one sitting upon the throne;

Straightway I was in the Spirit ...

This seems to be out of place in the eyes of some, since John was already "in the Spirit" when he heard the voice out of heaven; but there were definite reasons for the statement here. The words "come up hither" in Rev. 4:1 have often been interpreted as a reference to "the rapture," in which all of the redeemed of earth (at the time) are caught up to heaven. Addressing himself to this misconception, Nee pointed out that all the theories of the "rapture" posit the resurrection of their bodies:

The rapture of the church is a bodily rapture, yet here it is in the Spirit ([Revelation 4:2](#)). And thus this verse cannot be interpreted as referring to the rapture of the church. [F15](#)

Thus, it is not hard to see why some object to the book as the sacred author composed it. After pointing out that "many commentators place the 'rapture' of the church between Rev. 3 and Rev. 4," entailing the inconsistency that John had somehow missed it and had to be called up in Rev. 4:1, Wilbur M. Smith stated that, "Inasmuch as the text itself is silent on such a subject, one questions the wisdom of even discussing it here." [F16](#)

And behold, there was a throne set in heaven ...

See chapter heading for further discussion of "The Throne of God." From first to last, John's vision is dominated by this symbol of divine sovereignty (the throne). [F17](#) It stands here at the head of all that John would reveal concerning the future; and, at last, when all is concluded, the throne alone will be all that is standing. Heaven and earth shall have disappeared, but the throne and its holy occupant are eternal. The word "throne" is used ten times in the eleven verses of this chapter, and "over forty times" [F18](#) in Revelation.

There was set ...

This means, "There was situated in heaven a throne. There is no action of setting up or placing." [F19](#) God's throne must not be understood as some kind of moveable headquarters, now appearing in one place, then in another. "The throne was not there for this vision only; it was set, established as the throne of heaven ([Psalms 103:19](#); [119:89](#))." [F20](#) "And one sitting upon the throne ..." Again, reference is made to the discussion at the head of this chapter. The personality of the supreme and universal Authority is gloriously affirmed by this. And this is exceedingly important! Interpretations of details in this chapter can hardly be affirmed with any dogmatic certainty, but the great and overwhelming

message of the throne with the Person of God himself upon it is impossible to miss. Being sure of this, one may well afford to hold judgment in abeyance concerning some of the details. As Lenski said:

Do not stress our conceptions of space and time in order to draw deductions from them, for they would be picayunely, childishly false ... Symbols can only show the ineffable realities in a degree for beings that are still on earth. [F21](#)

Verse 3

and he that sat was to look upon like a jasper stone and a sardius: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, like an emerald to look upon.

There is little that can be known positively about these symbols. Note that, "There is here no description of the Divine Being, so as to point out any similitude, shape, or dimensions." [F22](#) If there had been, people would probably have made idols of it and worshipped it. Regarding the stones here mentioned, we do not know exactly what they were, nor their color with any certainty.

The whole subject of the relation of precious stones named in the New Testament to those in the Old Testament, to those of classical antiquity, and of modern mineralogy is one of great obscurity. [F23](#)

The jasper ...

Phillips' New Testament translates this "diamond," and many accept this.

The sardius ...

The New English Bible (1961) translates this carnelian, which Ladd identified as "a fiery red stone." [F24](#) Some suppose that the rainbow encircled the throne horizontally and that it derived from the prismatic character of the rock crystal (the glassy sea on which the throne reposed) [F25](#) But what kind of rainbow could be described as "like an emerald to look upon"? This teases the imagination beyond reality. At any rate, taking the above as a good guess, we have the diamond, the ruby and the rainbow like an emerald, which three colors are supposed to represent God's purity (the diamond), God's wrath in judgment (the ruby), and God's mercy (the rainbow like an emerald). At best, such interpretations are fanciful and rest upon inadequate foundations. It is true, of course, that the rainbow ([Genesis 9:12ff](#)) is indeed a symbol of God's mercy and of his covenant with Noah that the earth would not again be destroyed by a flood, and that seed time and harvest, day and night, etc., would thenceforth continue as long as the earth stands. The fact of a rainbow encircling the throne of God recalls this, but the description of it injects a new element. Our comment here embraces references to such things because of the usual emphasis given to them in current, and even ancient, writings.

While admitting that, "It is doubtful if any symbolical meaning is intended by the choice of these stones," [F26](#) Ladd went on to point out that they were in different positions on the high priest's breastplate ([Exodus 28:17ff](#)), and that they are numbered among the foundations of the new Jerusalem ([Revelation 21:19ff](#)).

Verse 4

And round about the throne were four and twenty thrones: and upon the thrones I saw four and twenty elders sitting, arrayed in white garments; and on their heads crowns of gold.

There are almost as many explanations of this as there are commentators. Who are these elders? They have been variously identified as symbolical of: (1) the "raptured" church which allegedly had already happened; [F27](#) (2) the twenty-four star gods of the Babylonian pantheon; [F28](#) (3) in the Targum the elders are interpreted as leaders of the Jewish people; (4) the twenty-four priestly orders enumerated in 1 Chr. 24:4ff; [F29](#) (5) a special order of angels, an interpretation rejected by Lenski on the grounds that angels are nowhere symbolized in Revelation; [F30](#) (6) an order of angel princes called thrones in Col. 1:16; [F31](#) etc. The interpretation received here is stated thus by Carpenter:

They are described as twenty-four in number; they are the twelve tribes of Israel doubled, to signify the union of the Gentile with the Jewish church; they are two sets of twelve, to represent the New Testament and Old Testament; they are the twelve patriarchs cojoined with the twelve apostles - These interpretations (alleged by many) are all different forms of the same thought, that the twenty-four elders represent the complete church of God in the past and in the future, in the Jewish and Gentile worlds; and, as such, the true spiritual successors, as priests to God, of those twenty-four courses (1 Chr. 26:1ff). [F32](#)

The great majority of the commentators we have consulted on this question, including Barnes, Earle, Hinds, Scott, and Wallace, accept the view advanced in the quotation above. Some have objected to it on the grounds of what they call "difficulties" in such an interpretation; and others merely avoid trying to answer the question: "One really needs no theory of their presence. They are heavenly creatures and are part of the heavenly scene." [F33](#) The views of Lenski are of particular interest. He objected to our interpretation on the grounds that "elders are not representative of the church." [F34](#) He referred them to "the ministry of the Word," which he believed to be the reality symbolized by the twenty-four elders. It appears to us, however, that this is a distinction without a difference. Since the church is entrusted with the ministry of the word of God in this entire dispensation, his interpretation still refers it to the church.

There are, however, more considerable objections to this interpretation which have given some scholars hesitancy in accepting it. Some of these are: (1) one of the elders performs an angelic function in Rev. 7:13-14, and is addressed by John as "Sir." If the twelve apostles were typified, John himself must have been included; (2) they seem to be grouped apart from the redeemed in Rev. 19:4; (3) these elders appear to be participating in the executive function of the throne of God itself; etc. It must be admitted that such things reflect against the interpretation we have chosen; but we simply set aside such alleged "inconsistencies" on the grounds that similar "inconsistencies" may be leveled against any interpretation. For example, how could human figures represent supernatural beings? There are compelling reasons that underlie the fact of the majority of scholars, especially the older ones, adopting the view presented here. They are:

(1) The number twenty-four cannot be interpreted at all, apart from the view here. (2) The very word "presbyters" connects with nothing else in heaven or on earth except the Jewish and Christian dispensations. (3) The elders' having crowns suggests Matthew 19:28. (4) They say that they reign on the earth ([Revelation 5:10](#)). (5) The KJV in Rev. 5:9 identifies them with the redeemed of earth; and despite this verse's having been changed in subsequent versions, Seiss emphatically insists that the KJV is correct, since "the Sinaiticus manuscript contains it." [F35](#)

Verse 5

And out of the throne proceed lightnings and voices and thunders. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God;

Thunder and lightning, etc. ...

"These announce the presence of God, as at Sinai ([Exodus 19:16](#)), and the seven burning lamps refer to the Holy Spirit." ^{F36} The combined symbols of this verse convey no meaning except that of "God's omnipotent power." ^{F37} Subsequent versions use "torches" here instead of lamps, and perhaps that is better. Carpenter found a suggestion in this of the "torch" that moved between the parted sacrifice in the account of the Abrahamic covenant ([Genesis 15:17](#)), indicating that both of God's covenants with Noah and with Abraham were symbolized in this chapter.

Verse 6

and before the throne as it were a sea of glass like unto crystal; and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, four living creatures full of eyes before and behind.

A sea of glass ...

If the sea represents populations of the earth, as in late chapters, the calmness of it here would indicate the tranquillity and peacefulness of souls in the service of God, and how his eyes can penetrate to the very bottom. The purpose of the crystal sea might have been simply the creation of an emphatic distance between the beholder and the throne itself. There is also the possibility that it is an inert factor in the vision, as are certain ingredients in the parables of the Master.

The four living creatures ...

The many eyes "before and behind" in these creatures have a suggestion of something approaching omniscience, yet their being "creatures" limits this. The visions in Ezek. 1 and Isa. 6 are so similar to this that we feel justified in accepting what is revealed there as having the same application here. For some time, it appears, Ezekiel wondered what the living creatures were; but a later vision (Ezek. 10) gave him the clue to the mystery. Then he said:

This is the living creature that I saw under the God of Israel by the river Chebar; and I knew they were cherubim ([Ezekiel 10:20](#)).

We may safely set aside, therefore, the ancient interpretations that interpret these as the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, or the symbols of the four divisions of Israel's marching formation in the wilderness, ^{F38} "the countless living earthly agencies of God's providence," ^{F39} "the entire animate creation," ^{F40} or "the four chief signs of the Zodiac," ^{F41} etc. There is practically nothing that can be fully known about these living beings in God's presence. John's description of what he saw in this vision of God's throne is not a photographic depiction, but an impressionistic view.

Verse 7

And the first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face as of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle.

Of course, everyone is familiar with the adoption of these figures in church architecture to stand for the Four Gospels, but this has no foundation in the Bible. Roberts did not hesitate to identify these with the "seraphim" in Isa. 6:2, and the "cherubim" of Ezek. 10:20. ^{F42}

Verse 8

And the four living creatures, having each one of them six wings, are full of eyes round about and within: and they have no rest day and night, saying: Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.

Six wings ...

The use of these, as indicated in Isa. 6, was: two covered the face (reverence), two covered the feet (humility), and "with twain did he fly." No such employment of the wings is mentioned here.

It would appear that the big point of this was properly ascertained by Barnes:

All these creatures pay ceaseless homage to God, whose throne they are represented as supporting; emblematic of the fact that all the operations of the divine government do, in fact, promote his glory, and, as it were, render him praise. [F43](#)

Holy, holy, holy ...

In commentaries, now and then, one finds this referred to as the Trisagion; but the designation is not accurate.

The Trisagion is the hymn which is sung, according to the rite of Constantinople, in connection with the Little Entrance In the Roman liturgy, it is sung on only one day of the year, Good Friday, in the special office called the Reproaches. [F44](#)

Who was and who is and who is to come ...

On this reference to Exo. 3:14, see comment on similar words in Rev. 1:4,8.

Verses 9, 10

And when the living creatures shall give glory and honor and thanks to him that sitteth on the throne, to him that liveth for ever and ever, the four and twenty elders shall fall down before him that sitteth on the throne, and shall worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and shall cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

Now the big thing in view here would seem to be the counterpart of that cited by Barnes above on Rev. 4:8. Seeing that celestial and supernatural beings spend their time in the worship and adoration of God, there could not possibly be any better activity for mortals. This could well be the significance of the "when" standing at the head of these two verses, also translated "whenever." It is only a quibble to enquire, "If these spontaneous outbursts of praise contradict the continuous worship of Rev. 4:8!" [F45](#) Such an attitude reminds this writer of the occasion when a concert artist gave a harp solo at a meeting of the Rotary Club. It took four men to bring in the harp; and Willie Weinberger, owner of a local ladies' store, said, "If we're all going to have to carry around harps in heaven, I don't want to go!" What one gets out of Revelation depends to a great deal upon the attitude which he brings into the study of it.

Cast their crowns before the throne ...

The twenty-four elders enjoy kingly authority, but it is due entirely to their relation to God, all of their authority being derived from him. This is beautifully symbolized by the action here.

Verse 11

Worthy art thou, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power: for thyself didst create all things, and because of thy will they were, and were created.

Worthy art thou, our Lord and our God ...

"These are the words that greeted the emperor in triumphal procession; and `our Lord and our God' was introduced into the cult of emperor worship by Domitian," [F46](#) the exact words of this passage being used. With characteristic `wisdom' the scholars immediately proclaim that John borrowed this expression from Domitian! Indeed, indeed! Our book says that John heard the heavenly chorus "saying" this; are we to suppose that they copied it from Domitian? It is evident that Domitian borrowed this from the Christians, not the other way around.

Thyself didst create all things ...

Repeatedly, the broadest and most fundamental doctrines of Christianity are given dramatic and powerful emphasis in this prophecy. This chapter is full of this. Note the description of God in Rev. 4:3, where the likeness of God is mentioned. "In the author's refusal to describe God in anthropomorphic terms, he declares that "God is Spirit,"" [F47](#) exactly as the author does in John 4:24. The Christian doctrine of Creation is explicit here.

Because of thy will, they were, and were created ...

God only is exalted upon the throne. The universe and everything in it came into being because of his will. "This is a conception basic to Jewish-Christian monotheism." [F48](#) Since the world, with all of its marvelous complexity, was made by God, and made according to his will, it follows that much must be right with it. As Caird expressed it:

We shall be misled by the cumulative visions of destruction that follow unless we do full justice to this opening affirmation that the world is God's world and fundamentally good. [F49](#)

Of course, there are also terrible things wrong with it; but God has addressed himself to that problem also. The great redemptive plan of the Father for the salvation of his human creatures appears in the person of the Lamb in the very next chapter; and it is most appropriate that, in view of the epic destructions about to take place, that this initial emphasis upon the merciful God and his plan of human forgiveness should be made.

Great and wonderful and terrible as the throne of God appears in this chapter, the really good news is in Rev. 5. Without the vision of what is revealed there, despair would wipe out every human hope.

Coffman Commentaries on the Old and New Testament

Revelation 5

Verse 1

And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the back, close sealed with seven seals.

A book ...

It is natural to assume that the book was of the scroll type familiar to the people of those times. Books were made of papyrus pith sliced exceedingly thin and carefully joined together in vertical strips and reinforced by an additional layer with the strips laid horizontally, then bonded with glue and water. They were pressed flat and sandpapered for smoothness, giving a sheet of "paper" similar to ones seen today. The scroll was made by piecing many of these sheets together, side to side, to form the roll of required length. In reading, the roll was transferred from the roller in one hand to another roller in the other. Barclay tells us that a book the length of Romans would have required a roll 11 1/2 feet long. ^{F3} A characteristic of the scroll was that the strips of papyrus caused a horizontal grain on one side and a vertical grain on the other, called the recto and verso. Usually, scrolls were written only on the side with horizontal grain, because that provided easier writing. Longer writings, however, utilized both sides. From the fact of the scroll in view here having been written "on the back," a rather extensive communication is indicated.

What is the meaning of this scroll? From its being "in" or "on" the right hand of God, the exceedingly great importance of it must be deduced, but what is it? Many different answers are given: "It contained the whole of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven." ^{F4} "It is God's redemptive plan for the denouement of human history, the overthrow of evil, and the gathering of a redeemed people." ^{F5} "It is the New Covenant, since the New Covenant tells how God will save the church, Israel, the world, and the universe." ^{F6} "This is a book of the future of the world and of mankind." ^{F7} "It is some kind of legal document relating to the destiny of mankind." ^{F8} "The book is surely that which contains the world's destiny." ^{F9} There is perhaps a measure of truth in all these answers. Certainly, there is some bearing which the book had upon the mystery of redemption, and the long-secret device by which God would achieve it in the death of his Son. Human salvation, together with God's purpose of achieving it and the mystery of how it would be done, is included in it because we cannot agree with the notion that John's weeping in Rev. 5:4 was due merely to disappointment at not seeing the future revealed. See comment on Rev. 5:4.

Sealed close with seven seals ...

Especially important documents were sealed with multiple seals; and the appearance of seven seals here indicates the inviolate nature of the document. The thought that as each seal was broken a portion of the scroll could be read is not correct. In fact, the scroll was not read at all in this prophecy! Only as the seals were broken, the visions conveyed part of the information to John. As Lenski pointed out:

The seals sealed the entire roll; all would have had to be broken to ready any of it. The opening of each seal is not undertaken to reveal seven successive lengths of the roll, each length then to be read. Nothing whatever is read. When each seal is opened, it releases the revealing symbolism of what the book contains. ^{F10}

Verse 2

And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a great voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?

Who is worthy ...

The key for unlocking the mystery written in the scroll was not power only, but morality, righteousness, holiness, and justice - in a word, worthiness. The great problem to be solved in human redemption was simply this: how could God injustice do it? Paul stated it thus: "That he might be just and the justifier of him that is of the faith of Jesus" ([Romans 3:26](#)).

Inherent in this interpretation is the fact that the vision at this point is retrospective in time, looking to the period when the salvation of Adam's race appeared to be absolutely impossible. As Caird said, "Some of the contents (of the scroll) are already past." [F11](#)

The situation in this verse appears to be almost identical with that described in Psa. 40:6-8, in which Christ, in his pre-existent state before the Incarnation, responded to the challenge of redeeming mankind in the words:

Then said I, Lo, I come (In the roll of the book it is written of me) To do thy will, O God.

This is the remarkable passage in which the preexistent Christ spoke of "the body" God had prepared for him. For fuller comment on that remarkable passage, see my Commentary on Hebrews, p. 213.

Verse 3

And no one in the heaven, or on the earth, or under the earth, was able to open the book, or to look thereon.

The apostle John, at this juncture in his experience "in the Spirit," was permitted to share in the perplexity, dreadful uncertainty, and helplessness that encompassed the heavenly host in their contemplation of the seemingly impossible solution of human redemption. Of course, this uncertainty did not pertain either to the Father or to the Son; but the helplessness, even of the supernatural creation, in matters pertaining to human salvation is clearly evident here. This was the same mystery pondered by the angels gazing intently into the mercy seat of which Peter spoke ([1 Peter 1:12](#)).

Heaven ... earth ... under the earth ...

Even some of the great scholars are unbelievably naive in their reference to what they call the concept of a three-story universe. No such concept ever existed, except in the minds of some of the critics. The New Testament clearly speaks of three different heavens, the second and lower heaven being that of the stars and constellations, and the third being the presence of God himself, as in this vision. Paul used this same expression ([Philippians 2:9,10](#)), evidently meaning "beings" in heaven (angelic), earth (human), or under the earth (demonic). Adam Clarke commented, "Neither angels, men, nor devils can fathom the decrees of God." [F12](#) Hinds pointed out another important meaning in this:

Men and women yet claim to reveal secrets in the book of the future by some mysterious power or by communicating with the dead, but this vision is proof that the future belongs to God. All the revelations he wants us to have are now recorded in the Bible. [F13](#)

Verse 4

And I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open the book, or to look thereon:

Many scholars accept the interpretation of the apostle's weeping as being due to his disappointment over not getting to see the visions he expected.

Barclay's comment is typical:

The voice had made the promise to him, "I will show these things which must be hereafter." It now looked as if the promise could not be kept, and as if he had been frustrated. The seer weeps because the promised vision, as he thinks, is not to be. [F14](#)

This interpretation is rejected here, because frustration is a totally inadequate grounds for such overwhelming grief as that manifested by the apostle in this verse. Excessive weeping for such a reason would hardly appear commendable in such a character as John. No! Something far more important is in view. Newell caught a glimpse of it thus:

It was as if sin and Satan were to go on forever in the usurped control of affairs in this world. It was as if it still must be written:

Right forever on the scaffold,

Wrong forever on the throne.

The apostle was broken-hearted about this. The Greek word is the same as that for Christ weeping over Jerusalem. [F15](#)

This clarifies the retrospective throw-back in the vision to a period before redemption was achieved by Christ. But John's grief was quickly assuaged. God has already progressed far beyond the hopeless condition apparent at first. Indeed, the victory had already been won, and the victorious Lamb of God was already seated on the throne. The time was then far later than the heart-breaking glimpse of the past had indicated.

Verse 5

and one of the elders saith unto me,, Weep not; behold, the Lion that is of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath overcome to open the book and the seven seals thereof.

Weep not ...

Many commentators have quoted the beautiful words of John Wesley in this connection: "The Revelation was not written without tears; neither without tears will it be understood." [F16](#)

One of the elders saith unto me ...

We agree with Mounce that, "The fact of an elder's addressing John is of no particular significance." [F17](#) It appears to be an inert factor in the vision.

The Lion that is of the tribe of Judah ...

This expression occurs nowhere else in the Bible." [F18](#) Despite this, the conception is nevertheless found

in the patriarchal blessing of Judah ([Genesis 49:10](#)), who earned the right to have his name stand in a title of the Messiah when he unselfishly offered himself as a ransom for his brother Benjamin ([Genesis 44:18-34](#)).

John's application of this glorious title to Christ, or rather its being so done in heaven, confirms Jesus Christ as the true occupant of the throne of David. Jesus Christ is now the true and only King of the true Israel, "the seed of David" who sits upon David's throne exalted in the heavens. David was the first "Lion of the tribe of Judah," although not so-called in Scripture; but Christ, David's greater Son, became the true Lion. David, as ruler of the temporal kingdom of Israel, was the type or forerunner of Christ the ruler of spiritual Israel forever. As Wallace pointed out, the adoption of this title by Christ is but a continuation of the New Testament pattern of ascribing to him all of those glorious things of David, such as "the tabernacle, the throne, the mercies, the blessings, the key of David, etc." [F19](#) For a further discussion of these things see under Rev. 3:7b.

The Root of David ...

This title goes back to Isa. 11:1ff, in which it was prophesied that, "A rod out of the stem of Jesse ... there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people ... his rest shall be glorious." As Barclay noted, "This means that Jesus Christ, the son of David, was the promised Messiah." [F20](#)

Verse 6

And I saw in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, having seven horns, and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent forth into all the earth.

A Lamb standing ...

Beyond all controversy, the Lamb is Jesus Christ the Son of God, and significantly he is in the midst of the throne, sharing eternal and omnipotent authority with the Father himself. This is the grand truth of this chapter and of the whole book. Everything depends upon this. Some young students may be aware that unbelieving critics have tried to eliminate this passage; but as Beckwith said:

The Lamb once slain forms the very heart of the whole scene. The attempt of Vischer and his followers to expunge the idea destroys the entire paragraph; it is criticism run riot. [F21](#)

"Only in the Johannine writings is Jesus called 'The Lamb.'" [F22](#) This, of course, affords strong evidence of the same author for all of them, the expression being used "twenty-eight times in Revelation." [F23](#)

As though it had been slain ...

Scholars point out that this actually means, "as though it had been newly slain." [F24](#) or that the Lamb was standing in heaven "with its throat cut." [F25](#) Thus, the vision proves that the death of Christ was a historical fact, as was also his resurrection from the dead.

Having seven horns, and seven eyes ...

Horns were familiar symbols of honor, power, authority, and glory in the Biblical and other Hebrew literature. Caird said of the horns, "By this symbol, John undoubtedly invests Christ with the attributes of deity." [F26](#) But not merely this symbol does so; they all do. A Lamb standing in heaven with its throat cut undoubtedly does the same thing! In such symbols the character of the vision is evident. Things accounted to be totally impossible in reality are present everywhere in Revelation.

The presentation of Jesus Christ as the Lamb, while being stressed particularly in John's writings, is nevertheless a thoroughly Biblical representation. There was the entire institution of the Passover built around the sacrifice of the lamb; there was the identification of Jesus as "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world" by John the Baptist. Paul's reference to "Christ our passover," and the great Suffering Passage of Isa. 53, wherein Jesus was compared to the "lamb dumb before its shearers," - all of these references show the Biblical foundation of the words here.

Some scholars have made quite a point of a different word for "lamb" in this passage; but Lenski discounted this as having no significance at all. "It is merely a linguistic matter in the Greek." [F27](#)

Seven eyes ...

These are interpreted for us as "the seven Spirits of God, sent forth into all the earth," another symbol of the omniscience and divinity of the Son of God. There is nothing in this whole passage that does not proclaim this same essential fact. For example, who but God could be in "the midst of the throne" and "in the midst of the elders and the living creatures also? It is childish to draw diagrams and propose to locate any of these symbols as unalterably in one place or another. By Christ's having "the seven spirits of God," the quibbles of Jeremias and Windisch, etc., to the effect that in part of the New Testament it is God who sends the Holy Spirit and that in others it is Christ who does so, are refuted. What is done in this respect is done by either or by both.

Verse 7

And he came, and he taketh it out of the right hand of him that sat on the throne.

The scene here is still in the past tense from the standpoint of the apostle John. "The moment is that of his appearance in heaven, fresh from the suffering and triumph of the cross." [F28](#) This was, of course, some decades prior to the writing of Revelation. The tense of the verbs here, as noted by Carpenter, bears this out: "He came, and he has taken the roll out of the hand of him that sat on the throne." [F29](#) Mounce and many other interpreters of the same school do not apply this to a past event but "to an event yet to take place at the end of time." [F30](#) This we consider to be incorrect. Hendriksen's correct view of this is:

The Lamb has taken the scroll out of the hand of him who was seated on the Throne. This very clearly refers to the fact that Christ, as Mediator, at his ascension received authority to rule the universe. [F31](#)

Any doubt that this is the proper view of this passage is forever removed by reading Matt. 28:18-20. It is impossible properly to interpret Revelation without a thorough knowledge of what the rest of the New Testament teaches. People who expect Christ to be enthroned at some future time have forgotten that he is already enthroned. "Psa. 110 indicates the date (when this occurred); it was the moment when Christ sat down on the Throne at God's right hand." [F32](#) See also Heb. 1:3,6,8,9; 2:9.

Verse 8

And when he had taken the book, the four living creatures and the four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

As Morris said, "Worship is reserved only for God ([Revelation 22:9](#)); that the Lamb is worshipped is evidence of his full divinity." ^{F33} This verse has a very important bearing upon the mediatorial office of Christ, as revealed in the New Testament. Bruce was of the opinion that "the elders perform priestly functions in heaven"; ^{F34} but such a view must be rejected. That view became popular early in post-apostolic times; and from it, in time, developed the conception of the Virgin Mary as a heavenly mediator; but nothing like this is known to the New Testament. Barclay traced this superstition back to the Testament of Dan (6:2), which reads, "Draw near unto God and to the angel that intercedeth for you, for he is a mediator between God and man." ^{F35} However, as Barclay proceeded to point out:

That is exactly the feeling that Jesus Christ came to take away, for He came to tell us that God is closer to us than breathing, nearer than hands and feet. He came to be the living way by which for every man, however humble, the door to God is open. ^{F36}

That such is indeed true is not possible of any contradiction, because, as Paul expressed it:

There is one God, one mediator also between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all; the testimony to be borne in its own times ([1 Timothy 2:5,6](#)).

Thus, we must not look for any priestly service, nor any mediatorial function whatever, being performed by those four and twenty elders in heaven. As a matter of fact, they were not offering any prayers at all in the vision. As Barnes pointed out, "It is not said that they offered prayers, but incense representing the prayers of the saints." ^{F37} The incense they offered in this vision stands for the prayers of actual living saints on earth at the time, which is further proof that these twenty-four elders are to be understood as representing the universal church on earth. What the elders were doing in heaven only portrays symbolically the true significance of the prayers of Christians on earth.

Having each one a harp ...

This also is grossly misunderstood as some kind of support for the proponents of instrumental music in the worship of Christ; but the harp here is purely symbolical, not of mechanical instruments of music, but of singing, an action in which the heavenly host immediately engaged. As Hinds expressed it, "From any viewpoint, the pas sage absolutely excludes the mechanical instrument." ^{F38}

The triumphal enthronement of the Son of God in this chapter no sooner takes place, Christ having accepted the office of King of the Universe, "than there is a great burst of triumph and exuberant joy in three doxologies." ^{F39} See next verses.

Verse 9

And they sing a new song, saying, Worthy art thou to take the book, and to open the seals thereof, for thou wast slain, and didst purchase unto God with thy blood men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation,

The glorious outburst in heaven extolled the triumphant death of Christ on the cross, that being where the purchase of a people from all classes and kindreds was actually paid. Very clearly, it is not some far-off millennial morning which is in view here but the scenes of Calvary, the garden of Gethsemane, and the post-resurrection meeting with the apostles in the upper room.

They sing a new song ...

This is the new song of redemption in Jesus' blessed name, the "new song" prophesied by Isa. 42:10. In this connection, it is proper to note that "forgiveness of sins" is the newest thing on the planet earth,

being never before possible until the death of Jesus on the cross. See extensive discussion of this in my book entitled "The Mystery of Redemption." Christianity is the truly new thing. In it are the new creation, the new name, the new song, the new heaven and the new earth, the new birth, the new life in Christ, etc.

Strangely enough, the widespread references in sermonic literature to the "song" which the angels sang the night Jesus was born find their only corroboration in what is written here. This passage says "they sang a new song," introducing it by "saying." It is plain that this verb is consistent with song as well as speech? [F40](#)

Purchase with thy blood ...

The conception of the church as a possession, bought by the blood of Christ, is everywhere in the New Testament. "Ye are not your own; ye are bought with a price" ([1 Corinthians 6:19,20](#)). "The church which he purchased with his own blood" ([Acts 20:28](#)), etc.

Of every tribe ... tongue ... people ... nation ...

The universal characteristic of the church is stressed by this. It is the church of our Lord Jesus Christ that actually concerns every man ever born on earth.

Verse 10

and madest them to be unto our God a kingdom and priests; and they reign upon the earth.

This is a disputed text, there being even some question of the translation; but despite this, the meaning comes through with absolute clarity. The saints of Jesus Christ, the Christians of all tribes and nations, are now reigning upon the earth with Jesus Christ. Some people do not wish to believe this, but the dogmatic power of this verse refutes the unbelievers. The Christians in this current dispensation reign with Christ. Their reign is exactly in the same sense as that of the apostles "reigning with Christ" ([Matthew 19:28](#)), a reign which Jesus Christ himself affirmed would occur during "the times of the regeneration"; that is, the "times of the new birth," meaning the current gospel age. Now, for some of the problems.

The KJV renders this passage: "And hast made us unto our God kings and priests; and we shall reign on the earth." There are two significant changes in the ASV. "Us" is changed to "they," and "we shall reign" is changed to "they reign." We shall take the first change first.

That the "us" here means Christians of the present times is obvious, and since that is the true meaning of the passage, no matter how it is translated, the KJV should be retained. We do not suppose that modern scholarship is any better qualified to solve this than the KJV translators. Furthermore, their translation (1611) is further corroborated and confirmed by the Sinaiticus manuscript, discovered in 1859. Bruce and Seiss both confirm this; [F41](#) and Seiss elaborated his opinion thus:

Some critics and expositors have rejected this (us), for the reason that it is omitted in Codex Alexandrinus and from the Ethiopic version; though the latter is not much more than a loose paraphrase. The Codex Sinaiticus is of equal value and authority with the Alexandrinus, and it has it. So also do the Codex Basilanus (in the Vatican), the Latin, Coptic (Memphitic), and Armenian, and all other manuscripts and versions. We regard it (the "us") as indubitably genuine. [F42](#)

This writer does not pretend to be able to resolve this question, but certainly there must be some basis for the supposition that the KJV may indeed be correct in this instance.

The other problem regards the tense: "We shall reign" (KJV) vs. "they reign." Here the later translations are obviously correct, because that is what the passage means. Even if "shall reign" is read here, it means, "they shall continue to reign, as at the present time." "The context seems to demand the present tense"; ^{F43} but even if the future tense is what John wrote, "it would refer to the future immediately subsequent to the appointment of each king and priest." ^{F44} Wallace also agreed to this thus, "We shall reign, literally rendered is are reigning, referring in the Revelation context to their continuing conquests in the trials that were present." ^{F45} As Caird summed it up:

Any suggestion that the reign of the Christians belongs to an ultimate future is beside the point, since we have now been twice told that they are already kings and priests. ^{F46}

The apostle Peter spoke convincingly of this in the first epistle ([1 Peter 2:9](#)), where he called Christians a "royal priesthood," which is exactly what is affirmed here, adding that they are now offering up "spiritual sacrifices" to God, thus also "reigning" with Christ.

THE EARTHLY KINGDOM VIRUS

The first and greatest mistake ancient Israel ever made was rejecting the theocratic government of God and demanding a king like the nations around them (1 Sam. 8); and this mistake was likewise their last, for it blinded them against the coming of their hoped-for Messiah. At the time of the First Advent, the Jewish nation, especially its leaders, wanted nothing either in heaven or upon earth as ardently as they wanted the restoration of their earthly monarchy, obliviously ignorant of the fact that a secular kingdom was contrary to God's will from the first. By the times of Jesus, their hopes of a Messiah had degenerated into a carnal malignant patriotism; and when they knew that Christ had no intention of organizing an army and chasing the Romans, they crucified him!

People of our own times who long for some earthly, secular appearance of Christ to establish some kind of a literal kingdom on this earth are guilty of the same mistake as that of ancient Israel. Christ's kingdom is not of this world. It is a reign over the passions and appetites of the body, a reign over the lusts and vanities of the flesh, a spiritual reign of a people who, in a sense, are "called out" of the world with its secular value judgments. The very word "church" means "called out." Every line of the New Testament denies that Christ ever intended or that he ever plans to rule in any temporal sense on this earth. The church age is not to be followed by any so-called "kingdom age." The church is the kingdom; and the thousand years reign refers to the whole time between the First Advent and the Second Advent of Christ. Many people are not satisfied by the type of kingdom established by Christ, resulting in the projection of all kinds of bizarre and unscriptural notions regarding some "future" kingdom. If people can bear to hear it, the "kingdom" has already been in existence since the first Pentecost following the resurrection of Christ. The saints of the New Testament were baptized into that kingdom; and there is none other.

Verse 11

And I saw, and I heard a voice of many angels round about the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands;

These words introduce the great doxology which follows. Significantly, none are silent in the hosts of heaven, the praise and adoration of the Father and of the Son being unanimous, full, spontaneous, and overwhelmingly joyous. "Needless to say, the numbers are not to be taken literally; they are simply employed to express the countless throng of that innumerable company." ^{F47} See Heb. 12:22.

Verse 12

saying with a great voice, Worthy is the Lamb that hath been slain to receive the power, and riches, and wisdom, and might, and honor, and glory, and blessing.

It is hardly profitable to dwell upon each one of the seven "receivables" in this overwhelming doxology; because even they do not exhaust the worthiness of the Lamb; but rather, in there being seven of them (the number of perfection), they stand for the infinite perfection and worthiness of Jesus Christ our Lord. Practically all of the qualities mentioned in this doxology are ascribed to Jesus elsewhere in the New Testament.

Saying with a great voice ...

This passage being introduced with "saying" and a very similar passage being introduced as "singing" ([Revelation 5:9](#)) suggest that the angels' "saying," "Glory to God in the highest, etc.," ([Luke 2:13,14](#)) may also be understood as a song.

Verse 13

And every created thing which is in the heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and on the sea, and all things that are in them, heard I saying, Unto him that sitteth on the throne, and unto the Lamb, be the blessing, and the honor, and the glory, and the do minion, for ever and ever.

In these great doxologies Rev. 5:9,12,13, the first two are addressed to the Lamb, but in the last, the Father is also included. This linking of the Father and the Lamb continues throughout Revelation, in their aggregate, providing overwhelming evidence that in the early church Christ was honored in every way as fully God, co-reigning with the Father in heaven and upon earth. These magnificent passages show that there could not possibly be any subsequent honors or glories that Christ could be conceived of as possessing, which he does not already possess. This is one of the great facts of this marvelous prophecy.

Many scholars have a tendency to tie in what is said here with the passage in Romans where Paul said, "the whole creation travaileth" ([Romans 8:19-21](#)), but that passage refers to people, not to animals. A different meaning is here; namely, that the lower creations, in their proper way, honor and praise God through their continuity as he directed them. Foy E. Wallace expressed the thought here thus:

The whole creation in antiphonal response joined the symphony of praise "unto him that sitteth on the throne" - God, the Creator, and "unto the Lamb" - Christ the Saviour. As the host is enlarged to "every creature," the praise is expanded to include both the One on the throne, and the One in the midst of the throne - God and the Lamb. ^{F48}

This writer has attempted to express the idea of this verse poetically; and it is included in this series of commentaries, in Commentary on Galatians, p. 14.

Verse 14

And the four living creatures said, Amen. And the elders fell down and worshipped.

Amen ...

"This word confirms the preceding doxology, and is one of three ways in which the word 'Amen' is used in Revelation." ^{F49} These are: a final "Amen" is used with no change of speaker ([Revelation 1:6,7](#)); the "Amen" as a name of God ([Revelation 3:14](#)); and the detached "Amen," as here. It is also used as both the beginning and the ending of a passage ([Revelation 7:12](#)).

Moffatt's comment on this chapter is:

By prefacing the struggle on earth ([Revelation 6:1](#); 6:1) with a vision of the brilliant authority and awe of heaven, the prophet suggests that all the movements of men on earth, as well as the physical catastrophes which overtake them, are first foreshadowed in heaven and consequently have a providential meaning. ^{F50}

The apostle Paul fully agreed with the things the apostle John indicated here; namely, that:

God made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitation ([Acts 17:26](#)).

From the beginning to the end, all things are foreknown and foredetermined by the Father; and yet, mystery of mysteries, this does not conflict with the principle of the freedom of the human will.

Before concluding the exciting and most profitable study of this magnificent chapter, it is not amiss to note that:

In the antiphonal singing, in the Amen, and in the silent worship at the end, we not improbably have some reflection of the usages in the public worship of the Church at that time. ^{F51}

MERCY ON THE THRONE

We cannot leave this great chapter without stressing the fact of the Son of God's enthronement with the Father and the implications of it regarding the mercy it symbolizes. Weak and sinful mortals may contemplate the eternal righteousness and justice of the Almighty God and find but little comfort in the thought until the vast significance of what is revealed in this chapter is realized. Jesus Christ who walked on earth, hungered, grew weary, suffered, struggled with earth's problems, and at last died on the cross, that One, like ourselves, with the scarred hands and the pierced side, HE is on the Throne! He stands there, represented in this vision not in resplendent robes of glory but as a sacrifice for our sins. Mercy and forgiveness are in the control center of the universe. The God-man is reigning, but still a man, still loving those for whom he died. This incredible truth overshadows everything else in the Bible, being the unique fact that endows human life with cosmic meaning, sheds the light of hope in darkness, dispels the terror of the tomb, and supplies the only strength men have in their struggles with temptation.

The Old Testament exhibited the Mercy Seat above the covenant and the Law, but the New Testament reveals Mercy on the Throne. The Old Testament worshipper remembered his sins, but the New Testament worshipper remembers Him whose blood cleanses us from all sin. The law of sin and death has been replaced by the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

For the suffering and persecuted church of John's day, nothing could have provided for them anything more necessary and helpful than this precious vision of the Lamb on the Throne.

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