

Revelation Previewed

2009 October 29th for December 1st

The Revelation to John is the only purely prophetic book in the New Testament and it is the final book of our Bible. This contrasts with well over a dozen such books, in various flavors, found at the end of the Old Testament.

Late in the first century, Christianity was becoming widespread. Also, the Roman government was beginning to enforce emperor worship, making Christianity (“Jesus is Lord”) criminal. The apostle John (thought to be the author) was exiled to an island, being one of the “dangerous” leaders of the Christian movement. While in exile he received this vision.

The book is of one revelation, not several “revelations.”

It is thought that the Revelation was meant as encouragement to the ever-more-persecuted Christians of the era. It begins with messages from God to seven contemporary churches. I have heard the interpretation that these churches, in addition to being real churches at the time, also represent various phases of the church through the ages from then to now. The final one is the church in Laodicea. Much is made of the Laodicean church in these interpretations, in that it supposedly represents the church of our own era and all that is wrong with it. We’ll cover this when we get to it.

Then the “end times” come. This is covered in detail as well, but it is not always clear what is being described.

As a book of imagery, metaphor, and prophesy, much is made of the Revelation. Since the first century, there have been varied and widely promulgated schools of thought about what it all means and how it predicts the end times and how we should prepare. With the expected second coming of Jesus, the end of history has been anxiously anticipated for 2000 years. So imminent that it makes one wonder why anyone has bothered to write these things down, then or now.

To paraphrase a joke, “The end times are at hand, and always will be!”

And, before we get into futurism, let me just say that the end times are indeed at hand. Everyone is within a hundred years of their own end time.

I have heard preaching from Revelation, have read it a few times, and have been involved in studies of this and other prophesies. After I left home, my mom and dad did a series on the book in the church at Wortham, Texas where they served. I saw a session or two of that. I remember it as being more remarkable for the format than for the content. Dad was prone to taking off, stream of consciousness with everything he knew and remembered, some of it relevant, some otherwise. This made didactic lecture problematic. Mother assisted by keeping time and place in the text, and dad would expound extemporaneously for some set interval. He had, after all, had courses in this and other Biblical material and some practice in preaching it.

As with most other books in the Bible we will find several familiar passages. Some are commonly used in church, in singing, or at funerals. It will be interesting to discover their context.

And so we begin ... the time is near.

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw -- that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.”

Revelation 1

2009 November 2nd for December 2nd

“John,

“To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

“Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father -- to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

“Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.

“So shall it be! Amen.”

God then speaks:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

John was on the island of Patmos, in exile due to preaching “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”

On “the Lord’s Day” he was in the Spirit and heard a loud voice behind him. The voice told him to write on a scroll what he was about to see and send it to the seven churches, “Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.”

John turned around and saw seven golden lampstands and “someone ‘like a son of man,’ dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”

When John saw this, he fell down as if dead at the his feet. He put his right hand on John and said,

“Do not be afraid, I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One, I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

“Write therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands in this: The seven stars are the angles of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

Revelation 2

2009 November 4th for December 3rd

These are the words from Jesus (red letters in my Bible) to the first four of the seven churches. The footnotes on all this consume about as much space as the text, giving background to the symbolism and sects mentioned. In particular, the “Nicolaitans” were an offshoot of the church that had apparently made a deal with paganism allowing idol worship and sexual and other forms of immorality.

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

“These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

We see that Jesus hates some things and that he holds some things against his own churches.

To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

“These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty -- yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”

Jesus mentions his chief enemies, Satan and death. The “second death” refers to death after death, the ultimate punishment.

“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

“These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live -- where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city -- where Satan lives.

“Nevertheless, I have a few things against you. You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.”

Here we see Jesus willing to fight and punish, even those who live and worship under extreme duress. Also, he sets up what seems like a secret society.

Next we meet the “other Jezebel.”

“To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

“These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

“Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come.

“To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations --

“‘He will rule there with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’ --

“just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Revelation 3

2009 November 4th for December 4th

Jesus continues with his messages to the other three of the seven churches.

“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

“These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

“Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Jesus returns loyalty fiercely. The fact that he will not “blot out” names from the book of life in some cases means perhaps that he will in others.

“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

“These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars -- I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.”

That last statement is one of the lynchpins of “pre millennial rapture” theology. The Christians would be taken out before the tribulation for protection. It doesn’t seem to exactly mean that to me.

“I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Apparently the “Synagogue of Satan” refers not to all Jews, but just to the Jews who turned in Christians to the government as not being Jewish and therefore not exempt from emperor worship. This led to their unfair persecution in which Jesus again shows fierce loyalty.

The last church is Laodicea, the one that supposedly corresponds to the present age, at least the age in which I heard it preached, the 1960s through 1980s. Note the famous and well known phrases: “I stand at the door and knock...” a common communion invitation.

It is interesting the number of famous, comforting, individual verses in the Bible that come from the midst of such diatribes. We then reconstruct the character of God to be all accepting in this lack of context.

“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

“These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other. So, because you are lukewarm -- neither hot nor cold -- I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich: I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

This word to Laodicea is often applied to the church of today: lukewarm, uninteresting, pitiful. This must certainly be true of some churches today, but not all. There are always the older churches that are less alive than they have been, and the upstarts who supplant them.

Revelation 4

2009 November 6th for December 7th

After the messages to the churches, John saw a door standing open in heaven and was invited to come up and see what was to come. “In the Spirit,” he saw a throne. “And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian.” There was a rainbow around the throne, and twenty four other thrones occupied by the twenty-four elders. They were all in white and had gold crowns. The throne emitted flashes of light and peals of thunder.

The seven lamps were there. “These are the seven spirits of God.”

The four living creatures that Ezekiel had seen were also there. They were covered with eyes and were like a lion, an ox, a man, and a flying eagle. They had wings and “Day and night they never stop saying:

“Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.”

This is the basis of our hymn, number one in some hymnbooks.

The twenty four elders also fall down and worship he “who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power;
for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”

Revelation 5

2009 November 6th for December 8th

The one on the throne had a scroll in his right hand. The scroll was sealed with seven seals and no one was found worthy enough to open it. It had writing on both sides. John was sad that no

one could open the scroll, but one of the elders told him not to be sad because there was someone worthy.

“Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.”

They sang a song, a new song, about how the slain Lamb was worthy because his blood had purchased men for God.

There were thousands and ten thousands of angels in attendance in addition to the elders and the living creatures. Loudly, they all sang,

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!”

They were joined by “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”

(We sing this in church. Do you recall the tune?)

“The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.”

I do not recall ever hearing preaching on or being taught about the “seven spirits of God.” Online references say it may just have to do with the perfect number seven, or it may be some list such as: wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge, and fear of the Lord.” Others claim that it is most likely just a magnified reference to the Holy Spirit. Some claim it is a mistake to go further and try to make the trinity into nine godheads this way. Perhaps we take such numbers from such texts too seriously.

Revelation 6

2009 November 9th for December 9th

This chapter is already compact. I quote verbatim, inserting a few comments.

“I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

“When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, ‘Come!’ Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.”

(This behavior is something that needs to be commanded or authorized from heaven?)

“When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, ‘A quart of wheat for a day’s wages, and three quarts of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!’”

(I think this refers to famine and war-driven scarcity, a time when food, if available, is very expensive. This would not have been an uncommon experience to the contemporary readers.)

“When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.”

(Common as these things are, a fourth of the earth, if by population, is a huge number.)

“When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.”

The rapture isn’t mentioned here, but the part about joining the saints in the clouds is derived in part from this. The martyred saints are out for vengeance, not usually thought of as a Christian virtue. Not only are they waiting for vengeance, but they are waiting for more to be killed for the same reasons they were! God is in control, but what he does isn’t always, well, choosing life....

“I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”

There are those who can't resist seeing this as an apocalyptic world war with nuclear missiles flying around (like stars falling out of the sky) and mushroom clouds and whole geographic features being changed. Or maybe it is the dreaded impact of an asteroid or comet.

“Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand!’”

This is not the Jesus that we are used to. One wonders what he is doing. Bringing all justice for everything that ever happened all at once? Terrible indeed!

Revelation 7

2009 November 10th for December 10th

John saw angels standing at the “four corners of the earth” holding back the winds so it was calm everywhere. An angel came from the east with a seal from God and told the four angels who had “power to harm the land and the sea” not to do anything “until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.” The number sealed was 144,000, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel.

There were more people than could be counted in white robes and holding palm branches, symbols of victory and salvation. They all worshiped. At the same time all the angels, elders, and living creatures bowed down and worshiped. One of the elders asked John if he knew who the people in white robes were. John answered, “Sir you know.”

“And he said, ‘These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore,

“they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple, and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.

Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.

For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.””

This is the reward for those who have suffered greatly in this life, the life we are in now. There is support here for both pre-millennial and post-millennial theories. All those in white robes are the saved who have gone through a terrible tribulation, that is a “post-millennial” judgment. On the other hand, the angels are holding back the tribulation and the ones in white robes are already in “heaven” seeming to indicate that they have been taken out pre-tribulation.

Actually, even our interpretation that we are seeing events in heaven from a heavenly point of view is an interpretation. But whatever the case, the people and beings described are not in “this” life.

Revelation 8

2009 November 11th for December 11th

As it turns out, the point of narrative *is* heaven, and now things start to get thick.

“When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

“And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.

“Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel’s hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

“Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them.

“The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.

“The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

“The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water -- the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter.

“The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night.

“As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: “Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!”

I must say it is hard for me to read of this vision without imagining that John is seeing visions of missiles and asteroids, plagues and fires, nuclear winter and U.S. military helicopters that could happen in our own times, or anytime hence. And this is only the first four of the seven troubles!

Revelation 9

2009 November 14th for December 14th

When the fifth angel sounded his trumpet, John saw the star fall from the sky to the earth and it was “given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth.” They could harm only people, not plants or animals, and the people suffered like they had scorpion stings, but they did not die, though they wanted to badly.

“The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women’s hair, and their teeth were like lions’ teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months.” Their king was the “angel of the Abyss,” “Abaddon.”

Then the sixth trumpet was sounded. A voice behind the altar commanded that the angels who were on the ready at the Euphrates be released to go and kill a third of mankind. There were two million of these warriors. John also describes their “horses.”

“The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshipping demons, and idols of gold, silver bronze, stone and wood -- idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.”

Although some interpret the “horses” and angels as helicopters with special equipment for killing or injuring, what is described here seems beyond that.

We also see here a hint that all this punishment has to do with getting the people to turn from their sinful ways. Some preach that the idols of false worship are anything that comes between a person and God, such as money or possessions. Some take such texts more literally, condemning only overt worship.

Revelation 10

2009 November 14th for December 15th

“Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars.” He had a little scroll and he stood with one foot on land and one in the sea. He spoke like “seven thunders” but John was commanded not to write down what he said.

This angel then raised his right hand and swore by everything everywhere that there would be “no more delay! But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.”

If we are supposed to know what this mystery is, it is not told here.

John was then commanded to take the little scroll and eat it. It was predicted that it would taste like honey but would be sour in his stomach, which turned out to be true.

“Then I was told, ‘You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.’”

Revelation 11

2009 November 17th for December 16th

John, now the prophet, was given a measuring stick and told to go measure the temple grounds, but not the outer court. The outer court is given to the Gentiles and they will “trample on the holy city for 42 months. And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days [which is also 42 months], clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.”

These are not “wouldn’t harm a fly” street evangelists.

When they were finished, the beast came up from the Abyss and attacked and killed them. Their bodies lay in the “street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.” People looked at their bodies for three and a half days but did not bury them, a serious insult. “The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth.”

I thought the Lord was crucified outside Jerusalem. “Sodom” and “Egypt” mean evil places throughout the Bible. Perhaps the crucifixion reference implies that the whole earth is evil or maybe there is a special meaning to “city.” I’m sure there is much interpretation about this but I am not familiar with any of it.

Also, much is made in apocalyptic interpretation of the “two witnesses” but I don’t know much about these interpretations nor do I think I would put much stock in such interpretations.

“But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven

saying to them, 'Come up here.' And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on."

After the "witness death celebration" party, this must have been unnerving indeed!

"At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven."

And that is announced as the end of the "second woe."

"The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said:

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever."

"And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying:

"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry; and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great -- and for destroying those who destroy the earth."

Then the temple in heaven opened up and the "ark of *his* covenant" (emphasis mine) was seen and there was a great show of thunder and lightning, hail and earthquake.

With this great drama, the Final Judgment has arrived.

Revelation 12

2009 November 17th for December 17th

Now a cosmic battle occurs between good and evil. I don't know about the symbolism, but the face value seems pretty clear.

"A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was

snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

“And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down -- that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

“Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ.

For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.

They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them!

But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you!

He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.”

“When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring- those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea.”

So there are several symbolisms I don’t claim to know. The woman, the child. (Is this Christ?) The moon and the sun, the twelve stars, the seven heads and seven crowns. The eagle’s wings and the red dragon. Michael and the battle. Furious Satan on the earth spewing water, not reaching the woman. The woman. The offspring of the woman. The earth helping. The desert. War against the saints. The shore of the sea. Forty two months and destruction of a third of everything. Forty two months in round Biblical numbers is 1260 days.

One thing I have learned somewhere. As opposed to yin and yang, where “good” and “evil” are equal and opposite, the dragon or serpent here and elsewhere in the Bible only controls, overcomes, and destroys a third of everything, leaving two thirds for the side of good. Good overpowers evil two to one.

It is a wonder that no one has made an action movie out of all this.

Revelation 13

2009 November 18th for December 18th

We now meet two beasts, one from the sea and one from the earth. I cannot do any facet of the text justice with a summary.

“And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, ‘Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?’”

So this beast has ten horns and seven heads and ten crowns with blasphemies on them and a fatal head wound that had healed.

“The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast -- all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.

“He who has an ear, let him hear.

“If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go.
If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed.

“This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.

“Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.

“This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man’s number. His number is 666.”

The two beasts, under the dragon (the devil) create an image that lives, or seems to live. Everyone worships it except the Christians, with whom they fight. The beasts deceive. Everyone receives the “mark of the beast.” The number of the beast is 666.

Much is made of 666. The simplest interpretation is that 6 is imperfect because it does not reach the perfect number 7. (I don’t know why the number 7 is perfect.) Three sixes is a trinity of imperfection. It also bears saying that in Greek, the same symbols are used for numbers as for letters so that linguistic numerology is a literary device, much more common in the original text than to us here now.

Revelation 14

2009 November 21st for December 21st

John saw Jesus standing on Mount Zion with 144,000 of those who belonged to him. They had his name and God’s name on their foreheads. They were singing a new song that only they could learn. The sound was like thunder, rushing water, and harpists. The 144,000 were “those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.”

Interpretations of “defile with women” vary widely from traditional Israelite preparation for battle to marital fidelity (i.e., lack of immorality) to complete monastic celibacy, depending on one’s tradition.

Three more angels flew by. The first said, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

The second angel said, “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.”

The interpretation of “Babylon” also varies widely. Some think it means Babylon, the ancient city “noted for its luxury and moral decadence.” Some say it means Rome, that is, the political center of the world at the time, and, at the time, the center of opposition to Christianity. Some extend “Rome” to anything having to do with the Pope or the Catholic church up to this day. Some say it is the world’s corrupt political and economic system in whatever era, including ours. Is it that one sees what one wants to see in this highly symbolic narrative? Is John’s vision a useful predictor or instructor *even now? Especially now?*

“A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of

God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.' This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus."

In contrast to the "carrots" of faith: inclusion, lovingkindness, belonging to God and each other, and so forth, this is the "stick" of Jesus. Choosing the wrong side is not overlooked.

This is, incidentally, where we get our phrase, "No rest for the wicked." (And, dad used to add, "and the righteous don't need it.")

"Then I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.'

"Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.'"

Much of our theology of heaven and eternal reward appears to come from this proclamation.

Three more angels then "harvest" the earth. The first was seated on a white cloud, looked "like a son of man" having a gold crown and a sharp sickle in his hand. An angel called out, "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe."

The two other angels (one of whom "had charge of the fire") had sharp sickles and they too are instructed to reap. "The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of [300 km]."

Revelation 15

2009 November 21st for December 22nd

"I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues -- last, because with them God's wrath is completed. And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb:

"Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways, King of the ages.
Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come and worship before you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed.'

“After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.”

Revelation 16

2009 November 23rd for December 23rd

The seven final angels are commanded to pour out their bowls of wrath.

The first caused ugly, painful sores to break out on people who had the mark of the beast.

The second caused the sea to turn to blood “like that of a dead man” and everything in it died.

The third turned the rivers and springs into blood and the angel in charge of the waters said,

“You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged;
for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.”

The altar responded,

“Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.”

This is affirmation in the highest sense.

The fourth angel enabled the sun to scorch people. “They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.”

“The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness.” Men cursed this and “gnawed their tongues in agony” but refused to repent.

The sixth angel dried up the Euphrates river and “three evil spirits that looked like frogs” came out of the mouths of the dragon, beast, and false prophet. They were demons that went out and performed wonders to prepare the world for battle against God.

Jesus said, “Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.”

The kings gathered at Armageddon.

“The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘It is done!’ Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible.”

If local, this is a cataclysm such as is expected in the tectonically active middle east sometime in the coming decades or centuries. If global, such a cataclysm is indeed unprecedented.

Revelation 17

2009 November 24th for December 24th

This chapter deals with the great prostitute. It has explanatory text, but I find the explanations as bewildering and ambivalent as the mysterious visions themselves.

“One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.’

“Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. This title was written on her forehead:

“MYSTERY
BABYLON THE GREAT
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES
AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

“I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

“When I saw her, I was greatly astonished. Then the angel said to me: ‘Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns. The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because he once was, now is not, and yet will come.

“This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.

“The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings -- and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.’

“Then the angel said to me, ‘The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God’s words are fulfilled. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.’”

To first order, the only symbolism I recognize is the seven hills, which probably refers to Rome, the city on seven hills. The tens and fives and “great city that rules over the kings of the earth,” I don’t know. Maybe the great city is Rome too, or Babylon.

Revelation 18

2009 November 26th for December 28th

Perhaps Babylon the Great represents the world economic system, or perhaps it represents the Roman Empire’s economic system. If we take this chapter literally do we, as Christians, remove ourselves from the economic system in which we find ourselves? Some do, but most of those who take the Bible “literally” do not.

“After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. With a mighty voice he shouted:

“Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird. For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.’”

I understand adultery to mean unfaithfulness. I don’t understand therefore how people who have never attached themselves to God can be adulterous. Maybe there is no distinction with fornication in this usage, or maybe the attachment is unilaterally from God to the people.

“Then I heard another voice from heaven say:

“Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues;
for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes.
Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done. Mix her a double portion from her own cup.
Give her as much torture and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself.
In her heart she boasts, “I sit as a queen; I am not a widow, and I will never mourn.”
Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her: death, mourning and famine.
She will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.

“When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry:
“Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power!
In one hour your doom has come!”

“The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more -- cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men.”

I read the footnote here to see if the “bodies and souls of men” referred to slavery. This was not directly addressed. The footnote includes: “Rome’s problem may have been not its wealth per se but unequal opportunity. The luxury items listed here represent status symbols or a squandering of resources at the expense of others’ essential needs.” To this, I ask, when and where has this not been true? When has there ever been equality? Where is economic equality written in the Bible? God is always concerned with the needy but which “luxury” in a given system is responsible for their need? Is all “luxury” forbidden until all need is met? Don’t people work in luxury industries too and therefore benefit from them? Where are the lines drawn that define “necessity,” “luxury,” and “excess?” Certainly there is condemnable excess in this example. I wonder if the footnote is just projecting modern American pseudo-morality onto John’s ancient vision?

We deal with this in the space business. Should world hunger be eradicated before people leave the planet? Was the world perfected before Columbus set sail? Did his discovery just make bad things worse?

Continuing:

“They will say, “The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your riches and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.” The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn and cry out:

““Woe! Woe, O great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls!
In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!”

“Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, “Was there ever a city like this great city?” They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out:

““Woe! Woe, O great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin!
Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets!
God has judged her for the way she treated you.””

“Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said:

“With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down never to be found again. The music of harpists and musicians, flute players and trumpeters, will never be heard in you again.
No workman of any trade will ever be found in you again.
The sound of a millstone will never be heard in you again.
The light of a lamp will never shine in you again.
The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again.
Your merchants were the world’s great men. By your magic spell all the nations were led astray. In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints, and of all who have been killed on the earth.””

Reading this, I am sure there are interpreters who cast the United States as Babylon.

Revelation 19

2009 November 26th for December 29th

There was great praise to God in heaven for the overthrow of Babylon. “He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.” The twenty four elders and four living creatures worshiped God.

“Then a voice came from the throne, saying:

“Praise our God all you his servants,
you who fear him, both small and great!””

It does not say who is speaking from the throne. This is a little confusing.

“Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

“‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.
Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.’

“(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)”

“Then the angel said to me, ‘Write: “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’” And he added, ‘These are the true words of God.’

“At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

Then John saw a white horse whose rider was called “Faithful and True” standing in the open heavens. “His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.” The armies of heaven followed him, all on white horses and dressed in fine linen. “Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

“KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”

I don’t know what the relevance of secret names (the one known only to he himself), of of multiple names, or of names written on certain places on clothing.

“And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, ‘Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.’”

Here, slaves are just another form of people, but the leaders are the hated ones who would be destroyed and eaten by birds.

Then the decisive battle:

“Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.”

Although things are always bad in all eras. This seems particularly aimed at the Roman Empire.

Revelation 20

2009 November 27th for December 30th

This chapter describes the “millennium,” the thousand year reign of Christ at the end of time, plus the final judgment and the criteria used in that judgment.

Schools of thought about the end times are named according to their views of the rapture with respect to the millennium, i.e. “pre-millennial” or “post-millennial” depending on whether the rapture occurs before or after. The rapture is not mentioned here (or ever by name), but it is implied in Thessalonians. Some details that are usually associated with the notion of the rapture are given. My opinion is that too much interpretation is made out of too little text while too much other text with clear meaning is ignored.

This is where we get some of our theology of the Final Judgment and our picture of eternal hell. Note the distinction between Hades or the sea, which to us are mere graves, and the lake of fire, which is the second death.

“And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

“I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) [post-millennial?] This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

“When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth -- Gog and Magog -- to gather them for battle.

In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

“Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

Note that death itself, the first death, is thrown into the lake of fire, the second death.

Revelation 21

2009 November 27th for December 31st

The New Jerusalem is described. This is familiar language from our own funeral rituals and is also reminiscent of the final chapters of other prophets. Everyone straightens up, God is good, they all get along, and everything is perfect from then on. The distinction here is that we are not talking about some future of the nation of Israel which is in our past, we are talking about the “future” after the final judgment for all nations of the world, after the current imperfections and the current imperfect, have passed away. All have experienced the first death and are judged by their acts from their first life. All who are worthy, by virtue of their sinless life, will inhabit the New Jerusalem. The others will experience the second death by falling into the lake of fire.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’

“He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’

“He said to me: ‘It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the

idolaters and all liars -- their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.'

“One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

“The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man’s measurement, which the angel was using. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.”

John has proven to be quite the geologist!

Elsewhere we have seen the conversions to our own units of measure. The New Jerusalem is about 1,400 miles square and the walls are about 200 feet thick. These are huge numbers by the standards of pre-industrial construction. I calculate the area of the New Jerusalem to be about two million square miles. This is about half the area of the fifty United States.

“I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

Revelation 22

2009 November 30th for 2010 January 4th

The red letters are the words of Jesus.

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

“The angel said to me, ‘These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.’

“Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.”

“I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. But he said to me, ‘Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!’

Then he told me, ‘Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near. Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy.’

“Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.’

“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.

“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

“He who testifies to these things says, **‘Yes, I am coming soon.’**

“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.”

Thus ends the Revelation to John. Thus ends the Bible.

John was told not to seal this up but to go ahead and let us all know because, “the time is near.”

My question for today is, “What is near? What is soon?” A thousand years is as a day to God, and a day as a thousand years. “Soon” in time seems unpredictable and inestimable here. It is clear why some have given up long ago and why others feel (and always have throughout the ages) that Christ’s return is still imminent.

Concluding Thoughts on Revelation 2009 December 2nd for 2010 January 5th

Like Song of Songs, Revelation has much in it that does not paraphrase well, nor have I understood it well enough to fill in what is not directly stated in the translation. Thus, for your edification, I have quoted much of it verbatim.

I would outline Revelation into three parts:

Messages to the seven churches,
The apocalypse to end all apocalypses, and
Heaven.

What John saw in the apocalypse is devastation on such a grand scale that it defies description even to those of us today who are used to adventure movies, skyscrapers, jet aircraft, and atomic bombs. A third of the world is destroyed, and third of the fish in the sea die. Mountains and islands are flattened out. When he says “world,” one wonders if he is looking at the whole earth as we understand it, or just the known world of his time which, though much smaller, still stretches beyond the horizon in every direction. Language, although it makes humans what they are uniquely, is quite limited in describing the unusual. Second hand experience is always problematic.

We have also noted the just side of Jesus (as opposed to the merciful side, which is the favored theology of our time and place). While we think of Jesus as gentle and accepting, suffering and giving, this Christ sits in judgment on the creation, and a very rigorous and vigorous judgment it is. He is the only one worthy of doing so and under his command his enemies and all those who follow him are not only destroyed but they are punished with searing punishments for all eternity. Meanwhile a third of everything and everyone in the world dies. It is tempting to see

this as wishful thinking on the part of faithful sufferers predicting the end of and the rectification of the universe.

The beast and the mark of the beast are introduced but God also has his mark he puts on people. All the people are pawns with marks on their heads in a cosmic battle. Babylon, the harlot, the world economy, is destroyed much to the consternation of everyone in it.

Those who have chosen Christ and have suffered greatly for it are greatly rewarded and they live in an enormous, crystalline city forever, a city that needs no light and has no night because God and Jesus are light and are always there. These residents are the bride of Christ.

I don't know if John's vision is allegorical or true to the physical reality of the heavenly city (whatever that might mean) but there are aspects of it that have never been very appealing to me, not that I relish the opposite reward, burning in the lake of sulfur forever! Lack of night means lack of rest to me, though this is probably not the intent. I've never much wanted to be a permanent resident of any big city. And, just speaking for myself, I've never wanted to be anyone's "bride."

As for the messages to the churches, the overarching message I see in them is that, even for those who belong to Christ and for whom he loves and cares greatly, he has anger, disappointment, and hard corrective words for all, even the most oppressed. This is not what we think of as a shepherd, but maybe that's more because we are not very agrarian and really don't know much of what a shepherd does. David, the shepherd boy, spent his youth killing wild animals that threatened the flocks, and he probably spent some time dragging his sheep around by their ears to bring them where they needed to be. And in the end, David would have sacrificed and/or eaten his sheep. That's all the other side of shepherding. In Revelation we see the other side of Christ.

We see the ins and the outs, the good and the evil, and we see the tables of favor turn from the bad to the good in this narrative. Interestingly, there is that one place where the angel instructs that no one should change their stripes. If you're good, stay that way. If you're bad, stay that way. It's the sheep and the goats, though that image itself is not used in Revelation (that I noticed. I think that image of the final judgment is in Matthew.) It's not evangelical.

Christians have always had a fascination with the Revelation. As I've pointed out before, in the fantastic parts of it, it is similar to some other prophesy in which the prophet is carried around in the Spirit to different places to witness various fantastic things. This is to say that Revelation is not unique in the Bible as a type of literature, but it goes further than any of the others, and it is the only ecstatic utterance in the New Testament, the other prophets being Old Testament.

I have had trouble separating the straight text and possible meanings from the interpretations and explanations of Hal Lindsey who was author of "The Late, Great Planet Earth" in which he predicts that Christ will return by or before 1988, one Biblical generation after the restoration of

Israel in 1948. I read this as a teenager in the 1970s and believed, I suspect wishfully like people in all generations, that right now really was the end times. After all, things were unprecedentedly bad, it must be the ultimate climax of history, and what an adventure that would be for a young man! Maybe so, but nothing much unusual happened by 1988, unless you want to count the election of the first President Bush, or 1914, or 1812, or 1700, or any of the other “end” times predicted or calculated by anybody.

And things are worse today than they were in the 1970s. Or do they always just seem worse today?

Since our culture has favored these literalist interpretations because we are scientifically literalist about everything, I have probably missed out totally on whatever it is that this type of literature with this particular placement in the Bible is actually meant to offer. But, I no longer expect to sit watching the heavens peel apart at the end of history, referring to the ancient Revelation to John as a guide to what is happening.

There are many other places we could go for explanations and interpretations of this book, but for our purposes here, to survey the plain text without a lot of extraneous help and just see what it really says, we have done enough. If we have failed to really pick up on what it is all about, if it really does describe the end of history which is imminent, it doesn't seem like it will be hard to tell.

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