

“Without the Old Testament, the incredibly amazing and mysterious book of Revelation wouldn’t make sense (or we may come to very strange conclusions). So what a unique, strategic, and wonderful thing to have Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman write this commentary. I seriously will never do a study on Revelation again without this being a primary guide. It brings us the lens of looking at Revelation through the original readers of Revelation.”

—Dan Kimball, author of *How (Not) to Read the Bible*

“As a young Christian disciple, reading the book of Revelation was mystifying and puzzling—and therefore ultimately discouraging! What did it all mean? I wish I’d had Tremper Longman’s volume as a reading guide. He presents the book’s enduring message clearly, and lays out a rich feast of Old Testament connections and Greco-Roman context. As an Old Testament scholar, I learned much from this excellent contribution by a seasoned and thoughtful colleague; as a Christian, my new understanding led to worship. This is a volume that pastors, scholars, and laypeople will find a valuable companion to reading and studying the canon’s final book.”

—Lissa M. Wray Beal, Providence Theological Seminary

“The message of Revelation has been an important one in my own life. I have extensively studied it and have taught it in non-academic settings. So I am pleased to recommend very highly this unique commentary by seasoned Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman. His volume is a rich, readable resource that will lead to a deepened understanding of this biblical book that is saturated with Old Testament quotations, themes, images, allusions, and echoes. Longman proves to be a sure guide on a book that many have ignored, misread, or found mystifying.”

—Paul Copan, Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics, Palm Beach Atlantic University; and author of *Is God a Moral Monster?* and *Is God a Vindictive Bully?*

“It is almost a truism that it is impossible to understand the New Testament without understanding the Old. Not so widely known is that the book of Revelation has more Old Testament allusions than any other book in the New. It follows that the key for understanding the symbols of Revelation is *not* the latest news cycle in the Middle East (as claimed by many so-called ‘prophecy experts’). It is the Old Testament! And there is no more sure-footed guide to this mysterious book than a premier Old Testament scholar like Tremper Longman. This exceptionally clear and cogent commentary will open your eyes to this capstone volume of the New Testament like never before.”

—Mark L. Strauss, University Professor of New Testament, Bethel Seminary

“In an age of increasing biblical illiteracy even in the church, and especially the lack of knowledge of the Old Testament in the church, it is refreshing to have a whole series of books dedicated to ‘seeing the New Testament through Old Testament eyes.’ Not only so, but we are invited to see it through the eyes of excellent, seasoned Old Testament scholars like Tremper Longman, who takes on the formidable task of reading Revelation in that way. There are few scholars I’d rather have do such a sensitive and sensible reading than Professor Longman. He is well aware of the nature of apocalyptic prophecy, understands the back and forth of the Christological use of the Old Testament by New Testament writers like John of Patmos, while at the same time doing justice to the way John has been influenced in his interpretation of the Christ event by the Old Testament, especially Isaiah. In short, to really get into a place where one can understand John’s Scripture-saturated mind (which involves many more allusions and echoes than Old Testament quotes) you need a guide who himself has a Scripture-saturated mind. Tremper Longman is your man, for he has labored long in the scriptural vineyard, and always provides us with the good fruit of careful interpretation.”

—Ben Witherington III,

Amos Professor of New Testament for Doctoral Studies, Asbury Theological Seminary

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A BACKGROUND AND APPLICATION COMMENTARY

REVELATION

THROUGH OLD TESTAMENT EYES

Tremper Longman III

ANDREW T. LE PEAU

SERIES EDITOR



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To my six beautiful granddaughters
Gabrielle Gagnon Longman
Mia Katherine Longman
Ava Rae Longman
Emerson Foster Longman
Samantha Tremper Longman
Lydia Eastwick Longman

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SERIES PREFACE

The New Testament writers were Old Testament people. Their minds were populated with Old Testament stories and concepts. Their imaginative world was furnished with Old Testament images, motifs, metaphors, symbols, and literary patterns. When Jesus came and turned much of their conventional wisdom on its head, they largely had Old Testament tools to understand what was going on in order to explain Jesus to others and to themselves. So that's what they used.

For many Christians the Old Testament has, unfortunately, become a closed book. It seems long, mysterious, and boring with a confusing history full of many strange, unpronounceable names. And then there are those sometimes bizarre prophecies populated with strange creatures. Yet my consistent experience in teaching the New Testament is that when I turn the attention of students to relevant Old Testament passages, the proverbial light bulbs go on. The room is filled with "aha"s. Formerly obscure New Testament passages suddenly make new sense in light of the Old. Indeed the whole of each book of the New Testament takes on fuller, richer dimensions not seen before.

The purpose of the Through Old Testament Eyes commentaries is to give preachers, teachers, and other readers this same experience. This series opens the New Testament in greater depth to anyone who wants to see fresh ways that Scripture interconnects with Scripture.

Scholars have long known that the Old Testament influenced the New Testament (an idea known as intertextuality). In fact, more than a millennia and a half ago Augustine famously proposed that we understand the relationship of the two testaments in this way: "The new is in the old concealed; the old is in the new revealed." Yet no commentary series is as devoted as this one is to seeing the richness of Old Testament allusions, references, echoes, and background to illuminate both puzzling passages and explain others in fresh ways.

Practices like baptism, meals, fishing, and fasting; concepts like rescue, faith, sin, and glory; and terms like “wilderness,” “Sabbath,” and “Lord” are just a few of the dozens of words in each New Testament book and letter with deep Old Testament resonances. Sometimes a narrative arc or an argument is also shaped by the Old Testament. An appreciation of this background enriches our understanding and helps us appropriately apply each passage.

In these commentaries you will find four repeating features which will enrich your encounter with the Scripture.

Running Commentary

Verse-by-verse or paragraph-by-paragraph commentary will include Old Testament background as well as other key information, to give readers an understanding of the text as a whole and to answer questions as they naturally arise.

Through Old Testament Eyes

Periodic summaries offer overviews of chapters or sections. These occasional pauses give the opportunity to step back from the detail to see the bigger picture of how Old Testament themes and motifs are being used by the New Testament authors.

What the Structure Means

New Testament authors often get their points across through the way they structure their material. The very organization of their writing conveys significant meaning in and of itself. How the events and teachings are linked makes a difference that, while not explicit, is an important part of the message. Again it is important to not take verses out of context as if they were timeless truths standing apart from their original settings, which affect how we understand them.

The authors of the New Testament also deliberately use, for example, repetition, contrast, hyperbole, metaphor, story, and other techniques so they can have the maximum impact on their readers. “What the Structure Means” will highlight these every so often and help us keep track of the overall flow of each book and letter so that the Old Testament background can be seen in its proper context.

Going Deeper

New Testament writers did not want merely to convey information. They wrote with the needs of the early church in mind. What should their attitude be toward family members who weren’t Christians? How should they respond to challenges from Jewish or Roman authorities?

What about internal disputes within the church? These and many other issues were on their minds, and the New Testament addresses them and many more.

Through Old Testament Eyes commentaries will not only leave readers with an enriched understanding of the text but with enriched lives. In “Going Deeper” the authors will unpack the practical implications of each book and letter for Christians and churches, especially drawing from the Old Testament dimensions uncovered in the text.

As much as this series champions the importance of understanding the New Testament’s use of the Old, two key points need to be mentioned. First, the Old Testament is not merely a tool for understanding the New. The Old Testament is important and valuable in its own right. It was the Bible of Jesus and the first Christians. They guided their lives by it. The Old Testament needs to be and deserves to be understood on its own terms, apart from the lens it provides for seeing the New Testament clearly. All the commentary authors in this series begin just here as they approach the text. In fact, our hope is that these commentaries will be a window into the Old Testament that will motivate many readers to look more deeply into what some have called the First Testament.

Second, the Old Testament is not the only interpretive lens we need to understand the New. Roman and Greek culture and history, for example, had a very significant influence on the New Testament era. So did the Second Temple period (from the start of rebuilding the temple about 537 BC to the destruction of the temple by Rome in AD 70). Where essential, these commentaries will reference such background material. But the emphasis will be on providing in-depth Old Testament background that readers too often overlook.

While these commentaries are grounded in solid scholarship, they are not intended primarily for an academic audience. For this reason many topics, approaches, and debates found in technical commentaries are absent. This series is for those who want to teach or preach, as well as any serious reader committed to understand Scripture.

The past is always present. The question is: Are we aware of how it affects us or not? The Old Testament was present with the New Testament writers. They knew that and treasured it. We can too.

—Andrew T. Le Peau
Series Editor

INTRODUCTION AND MAIN THEME OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ask most people who read the Bible, casually or seriously, and a large percentage will say that the book of Revelation is hard to understand. Not only that, but they find it strange, even bizarre. In one sense, I can't blame them. The first three chapters are relatively "tame," but even in the introduction and the letters to the seven churches we read about one "coming with the clouds" (1:7), "the mystery of seven stars" and "seven golden lampstands" (1:20). The glorified Christ rebukes a group called the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15), a "synagogue of Satan" (2:9), those "who hold to the teaching of Balaam," 2:14), and "that woman Jezebel" (2:20). Churches that resist the temptation to compromise are promised "hidden manna" as well as a "white stone with a new name written on it" (2:17).

When readers reach the visions that start in Revelation 4 and extend to the end, the imagery seems overwhelming. A short list includes a seven-sealed scroll, four horsemen bringing destruction and death, 144,000 people with a seal on their foreheads, horselike locusts from the Abyss with scorpion tails and faces like humans, a woman battling a dragon, a beast from the sea and a beast from the earth, and a great prostitute called Babylon the Great. This constitutes just a few of the things that confound most modern readers of the book.

The difficulty, though, is not because of the complexity of the book of Revelation, but rather because we modern readers are unfamiliar with imagery that would have been known to its first readers. These images, for the most part, were not created out of thin air, but have a background not only in first-century-AD Greco-Roman culture but also in the Old Testament, which itself has its background in ancient Near Eastern literature.

Thus, it is important to familiarize ourselves with that background. This commentary has as its focus Revelation's Old Testament background. It's important to recognize that Revelation is not as esoteric as many assume, because some writers take advantage of a modern reader's (and often their own) lack of knowledge of the background to make all kinds of outlandish claims about the message of the book of Revelation. This includes those who might use the book as a source to predict the timing and nature of Christ's return.

Recent well-known popular treatments would include those by Hal Lindsey, Harold Camping, Tim LaHaye, and many Sunday morning TV preachers.

Truth be told, Revelation's main theme is as clear as day: despite present trouble, God is in control, and he will have the final victory. God wins in the end, even though his people at the present live in a toxic culture and are marginalized and even persecuted. This leads to a secondary theme: hope that leads to perseverance. Starting in the letters to the seven churches but continuing through the visions, the author's purpose is to engender hope in the hearts of his Christian readers so that they will have the resolve to withstand the turbulent present.¹ Of course, these messages are for those who respond to John's admonition to hear the book "and take to heart what is written in it" (1:3). Those who don't will find judgment or, as the glorified Christ warned the church of Ephesus, have their lampstand taken away (2:5).

Author and Date

The very first chapter of Revelation makes it clear that the book was written by John. He was the one who received the revelation that constitutes the contents of the book. God revealed the visions of the book "by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw" (Rev 1:1–2). John then writes a letter to the "seven churches in the province of Asia" (Rev 1:4; the letters themselves in Revelation 2–3 come from the glorified Christ). He further discloses that at the time he received the revelation from God and wrote the letter, he was on the island of Patmos (Rev 1:9), presumably in exile because of his faith (see note at 1:9). In this verse, he identifies himself with the recipients of his letter as their "brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus." At the end of the book, he summarily states, "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" (22:8). Though John only appears by name in these four mentioned verses, he makes his presence known through many first-person references.

Thus, the book clearly claims to have John as its originator and author. But who is John? Or another way to ask this question is, "Which John?" After all, John was a popular name during the first century after Christ. Besides some minor characters, there are at least two and more likely three Johns who play a significant role in the New Testament, though only two are likely candidates.

The first John mentioned in the Gospels is John the Baptist, but he is certainly not the author of the book of Revelation. He was the herald who announced the coming of the Messiah at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (Mt 3). But John was executed by Herod before the crucifixion of Christ (Mt 14:1–12), so he was not alive at the time the book was written (see below).

Perhaps the most likely candidate for the authorship of Revelation is John the Apostle,² who is also credited with writing the Gospel of John, though he is not so named in the Gospel. John was part of the inner circle of disciples (Lk 8:51) and was a witness, along with Peter, of the transfiguration of Christ (Mt 17:1–13). He also played a leading role in the development of the church after the resurrection of Christ, even being arrested along with Peter for his public witness to Jesus (Ac 4:1–22).

But in the modern era the idea that John the Apostle wrote Revelation has been challenged, mainly on the grounds that the language of the Gospel of John and Revelation could not come from the same person.³ Among those who reject the authorship of John the Apostle, many say that the book of Revelation was written by the author of the three letters of John, who is actually not named in these three letters beyond being called the “elder” (2 Jn 1:1; 3 Jn 1:1). Tradition, though, names the elder John, some thinking that John the Elder is the same as John the Apostle, and others who think they are two different people.

So who is the John who wrote Revelation? John the Apostle? John the Elder? A third man named John? No one knows for sure. Fortunately, the exact identity of John the author of Revelation is unimportant for the meaning of the book. We will simply refer to the author as John.

But when did John write Revelation? The answer to this question too is uncertain since no date is explicitly provided. Of course, since the church seems well established in western Asia Minor, as the reference to the churches in the seven letters in Revelation 2–3 make clear, we are talking some decades after the death of Christ. The book also indicates conflict between the church and Rome so that one of the main purposes of the book is to encourage its readers to persevere in the face of opposition and even persecution. Still there is no explicit mention of specific Roman emperors or specific historical events.

On the other hand, Revelation 13:18 (see commentary) informs the reader that the number of the beast is 666, which besides being a number of imperfection is suggestive of the name of Nero who ruled the Roman Empire from AD 54 to 68. In AD 64 a great fire broke out in Rome that Nero blamed on Christians, who were then persecuted. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote that Nero himself set the fire and used Christians as a scapegoat.

Nero died at the young age of thirty-one, likely having taken his own life. There then arose particularly in the eastern part of the Empire a myth that he would come back from the dead. Some scholars connect this Nero Redivivus myth to the statement that the beast “seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed” (Rev 13:3).

Thus, some scholars believe that Revelation was written soon after the time of Nero, perhaps in the late 60s. But even if, as seems likely, these

references in Revelation do allude to Nero, that does not require that the book be written that early.

An argument is also to be made that the book was written in the 90s during the reign of another persecutor of Christians, namely Domitian who ruled the Roman Empire from AD 81–96. The arguments in favor of this later date include the fact that emperor worship, about which John warns in Revelation, was more developed by this time. Also, as Metzger and deSilva point out, the church at Smyrna, according to the testimony of Polycarp who served as bishop in that city in the early second century, did not form until after Paul, making a date in the sixties unlikely. Also, they point out that Laodicea, described as wealthy in 3:17, suffered an earthquake in AD 61 and so it is unlikely that they regained their status as early as the end of that decade.⁴ This view is the majority view not only today but among the leaders of the early church (e.g., Irenaeus writing around AD 180).

The weight of the evidence tilts toward a later date in the first century AD for the composition of the book of Revelation, though we cannot be dogmatic. Fortunately, as with the exact identification of the author, the specific date of composition also does not bear on the meaning of the book.

Genre Triggers Reading Strategy

Authors send signals to readers as to how to take their words. A commonly cited and obvious example of such a signal is a story that begins “once upon a time.” Unless an author is trying to be mischievous, readers know that what follows is a fairy tale.

This is not the place to develop a nuanced genre theory which would take account of fuzzy boundaries between genres, the acknowledgment that literary texts actually participate in multiple genres (though some are more influential on our reading than others), the pros and cons of using modern literary categories to describe ancient genres, and so forth.⁵ For our present purpose, it will suffice to focus briefly on the main genres of the book with a focus on how it affects our reading strategy. Interestingly, the book rather obviously communicates its genres through its form and through self-identification.

The form of the book is a letter. There are seven individual letters in which the glorified Christ writes to different churches in Asia Minor (Rev 2–3), but we should not miss the signal that the entirety of the book—the seven letters and the visions—is a letter written by John “to the seven churches in the province of Asia” (Rev 1:4), which has a benediction upon the recipients of the letter typical to letters of the time period. That the whole book is a letter is confirmed by the ending benediction on the reader, again typical of letters of the time.

That the book of Revelation is in the form of a letter is a reminder that the contents of the book address the existential issues of the church at the

time of its writing. We can see also from the contents of the seven letters that the churches were marginalized and threatened by the wider culture. We also learn that some of the churches and individual Christians were tempted to give in to the pressure and compromise their faith. They needed to hear a message of hope and receive encouragement to persevere.

And that is where the second genre comes in. The very first verse of the book identifies it as a “revelation from Jesus Christ” (Rev 1:1). The word “revelation” translates the Greek word *apokalupsis* and gives us our English word “apocalypse.” Revelation is an apocalypse. True, the book identifies itself as a “prophecy” (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19), but an apocalypse is a prophecy of a distinct type. Revelation is such an apocalypse bearing formal and content similarities with Daniel and other Jewish and Christian apocalypses of antiquity.

Again, this is not the place to give a lengthy definition of the apocalyptic genre. Here I will just list the leading features of an apocalypse which we see manifest in the book of Revelation, followed by a brief statement of how that should guide our readerly expectations. We begin with the statement that an apocalypse like Revelation shares with other prophecy like, say, Jeremiah, an interest in the future. They also both are interested in the future not for its own sake but to generate a response from their contemporary readers. However, the reason for this future orientation differs between them. Jeremiah presents a picture of the future, which is largely conditional, with the hope that his hearers/readers will repent. John in Revelation presents the future, indeed including a much more distant future, to evoke hope in his readers who are in sore need of it.

Another feature of apocalyptic literature is how the future is portrayed, and this may be the most important matter for modern readers to keep in mind. As Revelation looks to the future, it pictures that future using highly figurative language, indeed much of it derived from the Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern mythic language (beasts from the sea and a divine figure riding a cloud are two obvious examples). Thus, it becomes important for readers to realize the figurative nature of the language to understand the message of the author. We do not need to dwell on this feature since that is the heart of this commentary: to recognize and explain how Revelation uses the Old Testament to communicate its important message.

Even though this discussion will be carried on in the commentary itself, it is important to provide a few general observations to prepare us for what follows. How are we to take the figurative language of the book of Revelation? There are three main options: literally, as symbols pointing to a concrete literal reality, or as pointing to a more general literal reality. To illustrate, I will refer to the description found in Revelation 9:3–11 of locusts that emerge from the Abyss when the fifth angel sounded his trumpet. These locusts are

described as having the tails and power of scorpions. They wear crowns and have human-like faces with hair like women and teeth like lions. They have breastplates like iron and wings.

It stretches the imagination that this describes a literal locust plague considering the hybrid nature of these locusts and, as we will observe in the commentary proper, the figurative use of even ordinary locusts in the Old Testament. Some, though, believe that the metaphors of Revelation, including this one, point to a specific reference that bears what they consider to be similarities to these locusts. That these locusts fly, have hardened shells, and are here described as having stingers led Hal Lindsey to say that they predicted a future helicopter attack. This type of reading results from a faulty belief that the referent can be found at the time of the interpreter, in this case Hal Lindsey.

It is much more reasonable to understand the analogy in more general terms. These fearful, hybrid locusts stand for horrific devastation that could take many different forms. They could point to war or to environmental devastation or any number of things. The main teaching is that God will bring judgment on sinful humanity.

But is the book of Revelation talking about the past, the present, or the future? The short answer is yes. All of the above. While some people think that Revelation is all about the future and indeed all about the end times, the book speaks to its contemporary audience by describing what they are presently experiencing, namely marginalization and even persecution, and encouraging them to remain faithful and obedient in the present. While the letters clearly address the issues confronting John's contemporary church, the visions do as well. That said, Revelation is not all about the present and the past; the book does look to the future and indeed to God's final intervention in history to defeat evil and bring his church to himself.

Thus, the original readers would have recognized the relevance of the letters and the visions to their present situation even as John speaks about the future. But what about us? In particular, what about the church in the twenty-first century? One of the reasons why the church recognized Revelation as canonical, and thus part of our standard of faith and practice, is that the church knew that the book of Revelation would remain relevant throughout the ages.

Why? Because the church will always to the end of the history be under threat of marginalization and persecution. Christians have always and will always live in a culture that is toxic to their faith. Western, and particularly American, Christians sometimes lose sight of this because they live with the fiction that our culture or our nation or our government is or should be Christian. First, this belief is false as is becoming increasingly clear; and second, this belief is dangerous, as the wedding of political power and Christian

faith has time and time again led not to the strengthening of the church but to its weakening.⁶ Indeed, the message of Revelation is to not give up on the faith by falling in lockstep with the culture. This message, by the way, is not a call to culture war but rather to faithful living in the midst of the culture.⁷ But of course, the church is global, not western. I start with the American church because that is my social location and will almost certainly be the location of most of my readers. I will simply say, though, that as Americans we should never lose sight of the fact that many of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world live in a context that is more like that in which John lived. They live in nations where they are the minority and/or marginalized and perhaps even persecuted. They will not share the myth that they live in a Christian context. They know their culture is toxic and even dangerous to the faith. Revelation's message of present perseverance and future hope will be readily and encouragingly received.

OUTLINE OF REVELATION

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Superscription and Blessing (1:1–3)

Greetings and Doxology (1:4–8)

The Glorified Christ Commissions John (1:9–20)

The Letter to the Church in Ephesus (2:1–7)

The Letter to the Church in Smyrna (2:8–11)

The Letter to the Church in Pergamum (2:12–17)

The Letter to the Church in Thyatira (2:18–29)

The Letter to the Church in Sardis (3:1–6)

The Letter to the Church in Philadelphia (3:7–13)

The Letter to the Church in Laodicea (3:14–22)

Christ Opens the Seven Seals of the Scroll (4:1–8:5)

The Lamb Worthy to Open the Scroll? (4–5)

The Heavenly Throne (4:1–11)

Who Is Worthy?—the Lion of Judah, the Root of David! (5:1–5)

The Lamb of God Takes the Scroll (5:6–7)

The Four Living Creatures and the Twenty-Four Elders Sing a New Song (5:8–10)

Thousands of Angels and Every Creature Join in the Worship (5:11–13)

Four Living Creatures and the Elders Say “Amen” (5:14)

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and the Sea Beast (12–13)****The Dragon Pursues the Woman (12:1–17)****The Sea Beast (13:1–10)****The Second Beast from the Earth (13:11–18)**

The 144,000 (Again), Three Angels, Harvesting and Trampling (14)

The 144,000 Sing a New Song (14:1–5)

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Reaping the Harvest (Salvation) and Trampling the Grapes (Judgment) (14:14–20)

The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath (15–16)

Presentation of the Bowls and Angelic Commission (15:1–16:1)

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The Demise of the Great Prostitute (17:1–19:10)

The Great Prostitute Riding the Beast (17:1–6)

The Mystery Explained (17:7–18)

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The Kings of the Earth (18:9–10)

The Merchants (18:11–17a)

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The End of Babylon the Great (18:21–24)

Hallelujahs over the Destruction of Babylon (19:1–10)

The Final Telling of God's Ultimate Victory (19:11–20:15)

Jesus the Warrior Wins the Final Battle (19:11–21)

The Dragon Bound a Thousand Years (20:1–6)

The End of the Devil (20:7–10)

The Final Judgment (20:11–15)

The Future World (21:1–22:5)

A New Heaven and a New Earth (21:1–8)

The New Jerusalem (21:9–27)

A Return to Eden—Only Better (22:1–5)

Conclusion (22:6–21)

Final Angelic Instructions (22:6–11)

Jesus' Final Announcements and Warnings (22:12–21)

Structure

The outline above makes clear the general contour and major sections of the book of Revelation. I have included the elements of this outline throughout this commentary to indicate key sections, but a few comments are in order as to how the various major parts relate to one another.

The book has a clear beginning, opening with a superscription (1:1–3) that names its genre or contents, a “revelation (or apocalypse) from Jesus Christ.” The superscription also names the human intermediary of this revelation, since John received it from an angel. The opening concludes with a blessing pronounced on the one who reads the prophecy aloud and those who hear it and take it seriously. David deSilva highlights the fact that this book was supposed to be read out loud and heard rather than read.⁸

The opening then moves to a greeting by John to the addressees of the book, namely the seven churches in the province of Asia on which he pronounces a doxology. This introductory section ends with an exclamation that Jesus is coming on the clouds and a solemn first statement from the glorified Christ himself that he is the “Alpha and Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (1:8).

John, as many prophets in the Old Testament do, also tells the reader the story of his divine commissioning, which intends to bolster his claim to authority (1:9–20). Like Moses at the burning bush (Ex 3), Isaiah in the temple (Isa 6), or Ezekiel by the Kebar River (Eze 1–3), John gives a vivid picture of his encounter with the glorified Christ on the island of Patmos where he is living, presumably in exile. Christ commissions him to write what he sees and send it to seven churches in Asia Minor.⁹

Not surprisingly, then, in the next two chapters (Rev 2–3), we read seven letters to churches in cities which, when plotted on a map, suggest the route

a messenger would take to visit those seven cities. (For detail, see “What the Structure Means: The Letters to the Seven Churches [Rev. 2–3].”) Since the seven churches were different in their responses to the faith challenges that they faced, the letters are quite different from each other in content, but all seven share a common purpose and a common structure. (See “What the Structure Means: The Outline of the Seven Letters [Rev. 2–3].”) The purpose was to encourage the Christians in these churches with hope, while also exhorting them to remain faithful, or in some cases to repent.

A significant transition occurs between Revelation 3 and 4. The seventh and final letter is read to the church in Laodicea, and the remainder of the book contains visions that John has experienced. As we will remark again when we consider the closing of the book, it is clear, though, that these visions were also addressed to the seven churches. It is equally clear, thanks to the symbolic nature of the number seven which implies completeness or totality, that these seven churches represent the church universal of the time. These visions that show God’s ultimate victory over evil serve to encourage the churches to remain faithful.

In terms of contents, the transition from letters to reports of visions is abrupt and marked by a simple connective “after this” (4:1). Still the visions themselves support the main message that runs throughout the book, which is that despite present troubles God is in control, and he will have the final victory. Therefore, persist in your faith and remain obedient to God. Don’t succumb to the evil forces in the world.

Right away John is caught up into the heavenly throne room, which he describes in its magnificence. God’s throne is in the center of the picture, surrounded by four living creatures and twenty-four elders (representing the Old Testament and New Testament people of God). They give God honor and full-throated worship (Rev 4). The throne is the control center for all the activity that the visions describe.

After taking all this in, John’s attention is drawn to the right hand of God which holds a scroll. A mighty angel asks whether there is one who is worthy to open the scroll that has seven seals. While at first John believes that no one will be found, one of the elders tells him to look at the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David (5:5). His worthiness is rooted in his triumph, which points to his death and resurrection. When John sees him, he calls him, not the Lion of Judah, but the “Lamb, looking as if it had been slain” and standing at the center of the throne, thus closely identified with God who is sitting on the throne, and receiving worship (5:6–14).

At that point, the Lamb opens the seven seals one by one. With the first four seals, judgment comes on the earth via the famous four horsemen with increasing in intensity. The opening of the fifth seal does not bring judgment,

but a description of the martyrs who cry out for justice (6:9–11), followed by the sixth seal (6:12–14), the opening of which results in territorial and cosmic convulsions leading to fear on the part of the wicked. Surprisingly, an interlude occurs between the sixth and the seventh seal. Revelation 7 speaks of the 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel who receive a seal on their forehead to preserve them from the judgment. After this John looks and he sees a great diverse multitude before the throne and the Lamb worshipping God. These were those who persisted in “the great tribulation” (7:14) and now are with God and the Lamb. In the commentary we will present arguments that suggest that the 144,000 and the “great multitude” are the same group of people, God’s faithful followers.

After this interlude, the Lamb opens the seventh climactic seal (8:1–5). But notice that before the seventh seal is opened, John saw “seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them” (8:2). In this way, John presages the next major section, raising the question of how the trumpets relate to the seals. Once the glorified Christ opens the seventh seal there is momentary silence before an angel throws a censor to the earth which produces “peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake” (8:5)

By narrating the emergence of the seven trumpet-bearing angels before the seventh scroll, we see that there is overlap between the picture of judgment: as the unsealing of seven scrolls, and as the blowing of seven trumpets. Indeed, it is best to understand the trumpet judgments not as seven additional and subsequent judgments but as a recapitulation of the same judgments (not new ones)—but perhaps moving closer to a crescendo. This understanding is furthered by some parallels found between the seal and the trumpet judgments, including the first four trumpets forming a unit, the presence of interludes, as well as similarity in the seventh judgment.

Like the first four seals picturing the emergence of the four horsemen, the judgments following the blowing of the first four trumpets are briefly told and form a unit (8:1–12). This section is also separated from what follows by an interlude of an eagle announcing the woes of the following three trumpet blasts (8:13).

The fifth trumpet announces a star that represents an angel that falls into the sea, who opens the Abyss, loosing fearful hybrid locusts that torture those they sting with their scorpion-like tails (9:1–11). John announces that this is the first of the threefold woes announced by the angel, with two more to come (9:12). The sixth trumpet blast announces the release of four angels who kill a third of mankind. They bring three plagues on humankind (9:13–19); even so, the survivors chose not to repent (9:20–21).

As we saw with the seals, interludes delay the reporting of the seventh trumpet blast. In the first interlude John sees an angel come down from

heaven with a little scroll in his hand. After declaring that there will be no more delay, the angel gives John the scroll and obeys the angel's instructions to eat it, thus signifying that John will prophesy to the diverse peoples of the earth (10:11).

Next comes a second interlude concerning two witnesses who represent the church as it testifies to the world (11:1–13). They have great power, but still a beast that comes up from the Abyss is able to kill them. However, though their bodies are put on display to the joy of those against whom they spoke, they were soon raised from the dead, like their Lord, and taken up into heaven.

After this vignette, we hear that the second woe (referring back to the sixth trumpet) has passed and the third woe comes soon (11:14). The seventh angel then blew his horn followed by worship (rather than the silence of the seventh seal). But like the seventh seal, the seventh trumpet produces “flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and earthquake and a severe hail-storm” (11:19). The similarity supports the idea that the relationship between the seals and the trumpets is that the judgments are being recapitulated.

Revelation 12–13 presents what appears to be a separate and discrete vision that connects to the previous section with a simple “and” (*kai*; 12:1). But it bears similarities to the vision of the two witnesses that served as an interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet blasts (Rev 11:1–13). The two witnesses represent the church who come under attack from the beast that comes up from the Abyss. While not escaping suffering or even death, the two witnesses are ultimately protected by and cared for by God and those who celebrated their demise were punished. In the vision found in Revelation 12–13 a pregnant woman described in cosmic terms now represents the church. Her evil adversary is a seven-headed red dragon with ten horns and seven crowns who represents Satan (12:9). As the woman (who may also stand for Mary) gives birth to a male child, representing Jesus, the dragon tries to devour the child. God takes the child into heaven and sends the woman to a safe place he prepared for her in the wilderness.

Revelation 13 turns attention to the emergence of beasts that are allies with the dragon in its war against God's people. The first is a beast from the sea, also with multiple heads, horns, and crowns (13:1–10), which represents Rome and other worldly powers. This beast will wage war against “God's holy people” as it rules over “every tribe, people, language and nation” (13:7). This beast becomes the object of worship (13:4).

The second beast emerges from the earth. It had a benign appearance (“two horns like a lamb”), but “it spoke like a dragon” (13:11). Later in Revelation this second beast is called a false prophet (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). The false prophet's goal was to compel people to worship the sea beast, for

whom he erected an image which he then animated, and marking converts by putting a mark on their right hand or forehead that would allow them to participate in the economic life of the community. As explained in the commentary, the dragon, the sea beast, and the earth beast form a kind of unholy trinity, mimicking the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Revelation 14 provides a counter-picture to the description of those who follow the unholy trinity and in particular worship the image of the sea beast. Rather than the mark of the beast on their hand or forehead, the 144,000 who worship the Lamb on Mount Zion have the Lamb's name and the Father's name written on their foreheads (14:1–5). Three angels then fly across the sky, the first calling on people to fear God in the light of the coming judgment, the second announces the fall of “Babylon the Great,” a soon-to-be developed symbol for Rome and other evil human kingdoms (16:19; 17:1, 5; throughout 18), and the third announcing fearsome judgment against those who worship the beast and his image and receive his mark (14:6–13). The chapter ends with two heavenly beings each with a sickle, the first reaping the harvest (a positive image of gathering the faithful), while the other gathers clusters of grapes and throws them into the winepress out of which blood freely flows (a negative image of judgment).

We come to the third and final cycle of seven judgments, this time depicted as angels who pour out the contents of their bowls that lead to devastation. The second cycle (trumpets, 8:6–11:9) followed quickly on the heels of the first (seals, 6:1–8:5). They were also linked by the angels, with trumpets coming out immediately before the opening of the seventh seal. However, the cycle of seven bowls does not come right after the trumpets but after a separate vision. Still there are connections of this third cycle with the first two, as we will see. There is also a link with the immediately previous vision when it is introduced as “another great and marvelous sign,” which refers back to the “great sign” that introduces the vision of the pregnant woman and the dragon and his beastly underlings (12:1; 15:1).

This third cycle recapitulates the judgments of the first two cycles in a kind of spiral fashion. In other words, they are not twenty-one separate sequential judgments, but rather a rehearsal using different imagery of the same judgment, though the case can be made that this third sequence of seven does take matters further. First there are no delaying interludes, giving the impression of rapidity. Further, we read by way of introduction that these are “the seven last plagues—last because with them God's wrath is completed” (15:1) and with the pouring of the seventh bowl, we hear a loud voice from the heavenly throne, presumably God's, announcing “It is done!” (16:17).

Just before the angels initially come with their bowls, those saints who had persisted despite their persecution worship God (15:3–4). Afterward, they

pour out the contents of their bowls one by one. Similar to the first four seals and trumpets, the first four bowls form a unit by virtue of their brief narration (though the third is a little longer) and by the sequence of bringing harm to the earth, sea, rivers and springs, and celestial bodies, similar to the trumpets.

The fifth angel poured out the contents of his bowl on the throne of the beast (another linkage to the previous vision), so that its kingdom was plunged into darkness and its worshippers suffered agonizing pain. Still they did not repent (16:11; cf. 9:20–21). The pouring out of the contents of the sixth bowl dried up the Euphrates (the river that at the time separated the Roman Empire from the feared Parthians). Three frogs then come out of the mouth of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. These demonic spirits perform signs that result in the gathering of the kings of all the earth to a place called Armageddon, “for the battle of the great day of God Almighty” (16:14).

The seventh bowl produces meteorological and terrestrial convulsions reminiscent of the seventh seal and the seventh trumpet: “there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake” (16:18). However, there is an escalation in the damage that these phenomena cause on the earth.

The next vision is simply introduced in the Greek (not translated by the NIV) by *kai* (“and” or “then”). Still, the link to the previous episode of the pouring of the seven bowls is provided when John tells the reader that “one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls” served as his guide during the vision.

The vision, the subject of 17:3–6, starts with a description of a decadent prostitute, who is later identified as Babylon the Great, a cipher for Rome. Revelation 18 contains reactions to the fall of Babylon the Great (and is connected to the vision by the simple “after this”). An angel first announces the fall followed by another voice from heaven, likely the glorified Christ, urging his people to leave the city and thus avoid being collateral damage (18:1–8). A second and much different negative reaction comes from those kings, merchants, and sea captains who benefited from the prostitute who represents Babylon the Great, which represents Rome (18:9–17). The tone changes yet again from sadness to joy as we hear the heavenly and earthly followers of God rejoice over her downfall (18:20). Then an angel picks up a boulder and throws it into the sea to doom Babylon the Great (18:21–24).

The transition from Revelation 18 to 19 is again marked by a simple “after this,” which then leads to a great multitude in heaven singing praises; they are joined by the twenty-four elders and four living creatures (19:1–8). At the end of this section an angel blesses those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb (19:9–10).

But the wedding supper does not take place immediately.¹⁰ The scene shifts, marked by John saying, “and I saw,” to a new vision of the final battle

between Christ and the combined forces of evil (19:11–21). In Revelation 12 the dragon was defeated in heaven after which he was hurled to earth, where he enlisted the sea and earth beasts in his unholy cause (13). Now we learn Christ's victory on earth as he rides out on a white horse, leading his angelic army and defeating the evil people and evil spiritual powers, represented by the beast and the false prophet being thrown into the lake of fire.

Attention then shifts to the dragon, representing Satan (20:2), who is initially seized and imprisoned in the Abyss. After a thousand years he is freed, but then he is judged and thrown into the lake of fire (20:7–10), followed by all the dead and even death and Hades themselves being thrown into the lake of fire. Evil is once and for all definitively defeated (20:11–15).

After this final and climactic picture of judgment, the next sections present three major pictures of life for God's people after the eradication of evil. The first, drawn especially from Isaiah (see commentary), speaks of the new heavens and the new earth (20:1–8). In this context we also return (see 19:7–9) to wedding imagery (21:2), as we do in the second picture of a New Jerusalem (21:9–27, for wedding imagery see 21:9). The third picture surrounds that of a new restored Eden, only this Eden is better than the original (22:1–5).

The conclusion of the book of Revelation has two parts. First (22:6–11), John's guiding angel gives him final assurance of the truthfulness of the visions and the command to not "seal up its words" (22:9) because the time is near. John, tempted to worship this glorious heavenly creature, is told to worship only God. Then second, Jesus himself announces that he is coming soon to judge and confirms that he is the one who sent the angel to John (22:12–21). The book signs off with a benediction typical of a letter, thus reminding us that the book as a whole is a letter to the churches.