

6-1988

Divine Judgment in the Book of Revelation

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Abstract

DIVINE JUDGMENT IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

by

James E. Shipp

Judgment themes in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament are described and classified. Special attention is given to recurring themes of remedial judgment and annihilation. John's Revelation is analyzed for consistency of judgment themes, and John's theology of judgment is compared and contrasted with other scriptural sources.

It is concluded that John described God as the active judge in human history. John's theology of judgment includes remedial judgment where physical or natural calamities are intended to lead people to repentance, and final judgment where lost souls are annihilated.

John's Revelation is seen to be devoid of forensic or courtroom judgment. Decisions about final outcomes seem to be in the hands of humans. God accepts the human decision to accept or reject the gospel of Jesus Christ, but reserves the right to set the time of final reckoning for himself.

Revelation is seen to be consistent with other New Testament books in that John's theology supports the importance of moral actions, but extolls faith in Jesus as the source of righteousness.

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Graduate School

DIVINE JUDGMENT IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

by

James E. Shipp

A Thesis in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts
in Religion

June, 1988

Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this thesis in his/her opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree Master of Arts.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

1 INTRODUCTION 1
 John's Apocalypse in a New Age

2 DIVINE JUDGMENT IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES. . . 5
 Final Judgment in the Old Testament
 The Case for Individual Judgment
 The Ultimate Punishment

3 DIVINE JUDGMENT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. . . .12
 The Apostles on Divine Judgment

4 REVELATION AS PARABOLIC LITERATURE.18
 The Difference

5 REMEDIAL JUDGMENT IN REVELATION26
 The Seven Seals
 The Seven Trumpets
 The Seven Last Plagues
 A Point of Decision

6 ANNIHILATION IN THE APOCALYPSE.42
 Annihilation as Contrast
 The Seventh Trumpet
 Three Angels
 The Earth's Harvest
 The Seventh Plague
 Judgment on Babylon
 The Divine Warrior
 The Last Battle
 Great White Throne Judgment
 The Throne Declaration
 Last Words about Annihilation

7 JUDGMENT THEOLOGY IN THE APOCALYPSE;
 JUSTICE, MERCY AND VENGEANCE59
 Judgment--A Divine Act
 The Basis of God's Judgment
 The Way God Executes Judgment
 Individual and Community
 "Going to Heaven"

Chapter

8	LITERARY STRUCTURE OF JUDGMENT PARABLES IN REVELATION.70
	A Linear View	
	Seven Seals	
	Seven Trumpets	
	Seven Bowls of Plagues	
	The Genius of the Forward Look	
	CONCLUSION.80
	ENDNOTES.84
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.89

INTRODUCTION

Does God intervene in human history to punish or reward humans? Will God someday intervene to change thoroughly the course of history, and bring evildoers to task for their evil doing? To modern people the answers are not clear, for several reasons.

First, many have inherited a popular belief in the immortality of the human soul, which allows people to pass directly to heaven or hell without reference to an eschatological judgment. Any such final judgment would only confirm what the saved or lost one already knows. We can take this one step further, to where a final judgment for each person happens at the time of death. Regardless of how it is viewed, an eschatological event such as the Last Judgment is superfluous when souls receive their reward at the time of death!

Second, many modern people find it hard to believe that God ever steps in to change anything radically. New Testament theologian Rudolf Bultmann labored to make the New Testament relevant for modern man, stripping it of those things which no longer work for us. He argued that the idea of God getting physically involved in the world simply doesn't make sense in a scientific, rational, de-mythologized world:

Modern men take it for granted that the course of nature and of history, like their own inner life and their practical life, is nowhere interrupted by the intervention of supernatural powers.¹

If, as Bultmann suggests, we pass over sayings which contain mythological "stumbling blocks" we will have nothing left of the idea of divine judgment. It is a practical impossibility to retain John's idea of a final judgment without using mythological language.

Nevertheless, the modern world is fascinated with mythology. Ancient classics are studied and compared, and new authors produce novels and screenplays about mythological beasts, lands, and powers. Perhaps what makes us more comfortable with mythology is that we no longer believe in it. We have conquered the world, surveyed its secrets, and we have not found hell and the devil, or heaven and God. Mythology is now safe to enjoy, since its fearful and powerful creatures and gods are simply characters in fanciful stories.

John's Apocalypse in a New Age

Some Bible students have gained a renewed interest in apocalyptic writings. A proper place to date the beginnings of renewal would be during and after the Second World War. H. H. Rowley argued in 1944 for The Relevance of Apocalyptic.² More recently the years of turmoil in the Sixties and Seventies seemed to spark additional interest in serious study of biblical apocalyptic.

Now, more than ever, Jewish apocalyptic writings have been compared to earlier Hebrew prophetic works and to non-Jewish writings. Paul D. Hanson has thoroughly tied the beginning of Jewish apocalyptic to Hebrew prophetic writings in his The Dawn of Apocalyptic.³ Adela Yarbro Collins has had considerable success in showing John's dependence on Graeco-Roman combat myths.⁴ In fact, Revelation's sources have been thoroughly investigated, and its origins speculated upon at length.

Textual and literary study has been supplemented by a renewed interest in the ethics and theology of Revelation, most notably by Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza.⁵

In this present study the author has a three-fold purpose: to see how John described judgment, to identify his theology of divine judgment, and to find its relevance for our modern time and experience.

We shall attempt to show that two strains of divine judgment dominate the book of Revelation: remedial judgment, and the execution of final judgment. We will define remedial judgment as those acts by God that punish evildoers but allow for evildoers to repent and change to favored status. Final judgment is that judgment which is essentially a declaration of status, followed by bestowal of either eternal reward or annihilation.

We aim to show that Revelation, patterned after other apocalyptic literature, is symbolic in nature, but we will

stop far short of allegorizing John's visions. We would prefer to speak of them as parables, used in very much the same way as Jesus' parables, but employing the imagery of myth.

Chapter 2

DIVINE JUDGMENT IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

While Revelation is a New Testament book, and thoroughly bathed in Christian theology, its theology of judgment is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. Because of that heritage, a study of divine judgment in Revelation merits a short survey of divine judgment in the Old Testament.

The Hebrew Scriptures do not simply present one single doctrine of divine judgment, but rather motifs and threads of thought that together enlighten us about God's relationship with his subjects.

The Hebrew sense of justice was not based on an idea of keeping or breaking laws, as we suppose, but on keeping or breaking relationships. Righteousness, expressed mostly as tsedeg, only has meaning within the bounds of human to human, or human to divine relationships. Righteousness is doing all that is necessary to care for a relationship.¹

Courts of law, often assembled on a day-to-day basis at the town gate, were charged with restoring peace, with bringing the community back into harmony.² This idea of restoring relationships is essential to understanding divine justice as the prophets portrayed it. Prophetic writers frequently described God as a judge, making a decision

between hostile parties, usually Israel and her enemies. The appeal was made, not on the basis of laws broken, but of damage inflicted and pain caused. The role of divine judge is actively to seek justice for the oppressed and bring help to those in need.

In Hebrew justice, one did not simply wait until a charge was levied by an oppressed person. A righteous or just person would actively take the case of the downtrodden, pleading on their behalf, and seeing that justice was accomplished.³

God's prescription for lawlessness was to "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Is 1:16,17).

Justice in the Old Testament is a duty. The one "who does mishpat seeks out the wrongdoer to punish him, and the righteous to vindicate his cause."⁴ When this is applied to divine justice, God becomes the plaintiff, pleading His case on behalf of His faithful ones and against the unrepentant oppressors and idolaters. In a system that functioned mostly to settle disputes, God's judgments never served only to condemn. Punishment of one party brought deliverance of another, and the condemnation of the guilty lead to the salvation of the innocent. Ultimately, all judgment, even in civil cases, was under God's authority.⁵ While the king had authority to settle cases, and the town-gate assembly could arbitrate, God was the only truly righteous judge,

authorized to judge the world.

At times God is pictured as bringing a lawsuit against his people for failing to meet the conditions of their covenant with him. This prophetic lawsuit finds a parallel in three of the seven letters to the churches in Revelation.⁶

Final Judgment In the Old Testament

Will God eventually put an end to this countless appeals for repentance? Will he put aside mercy, longsuffering and patience, and simply do away with the unrepentant? Having stated that he believes the theme of redemption outweighs retribution in Scripture, W. Sibley Towner asserts that the idea of final judgment has little value for us, living within the inaugurated Kingdom of God.⁷ Towner discounts the idea of judgment because it is just an apocalyptic theme. He hurts his case considerably by failing to take into account more than apocalyptic writings.

The biblical model of final judgment is found in Genesis 6:

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them; behold, I will destroy them with the earth" (Genesis 6:11-13).

From the story of the Flood we can determine some things about the judgment heritage of the Old Testament. First, the Hebrew writers were satisfied that God eventually loses

patience with wicked people. Second, that He calls the wicked to turn, before it is too late. Third, on the basis of righteousness ("Noah was a righteous man," Genesis 6:9) God will save some from destruction. Fourth, after Final Judgment the course of life and history is permanently changed, illustrated in the Flood story by the traumatic effects of the Deluge on the earth itself and the loss of human and animal life.

A second case, that of Sodom and Gomorrah, only confirms the elements of the Flood story. In Genesis 18:20, God discloses his intention to investigate the outcries against Sodom's wickedness. His goal was not necessarily to destroy the city, but to investigate and search for righteousness within the walls. After a fruitless attempt to persuade the city-dwellers to repent, and to lead betrothed sons-in-law away from the danger of destruction, only Lot and his family are saved.

This story confirms another element of Final Judgment: God is interested in redemption, but the facts are that the majority of people choose wickedness. God must choose between patience and permanent, decisive punishment. While we affirm that most prophetic warnings are redemptive in nature, we do not by that affirmation deny that Final Judgment is just as real as preliminary, remedial judgment.

The Case for Individual Judgment

Most of the prophetic warnings in the Old Testament

are directed toward groups or nations. It would be rather easy to conclude from that fact alone that judgment in the Old Testament falls on people simply because they are part of an offending city, nation or group. But we propose a rather strong case for individual judgment, in which each person receives punishment or reward based on his or her righteousness.

Jeremiah explains the new covenant in a way that opens the door for individual judgment. "But every one shall die for his own sin; each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge" (Jeremiah 31:30).

Jeremiah's theme is developed fully by Ezekiel, who explains in great detail the impossibility that anyone will suffer for someone else's sins, and that no one can be rewarded for the righteousness of another. Ezekiel asserts the absolute worth of a human being, and also the power of repentance. Since no one but God is truly righteous, all are condemned by their unrighteousness. Ezekiel affirms the true justice of God:

Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.'
Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not
just? Is it not your ways that are not just?
When a righteous man turns away from his
righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die
for it; for the iniquity which he has committed
he shall die. Again, when a wicked man turns
away from the wickedness he has committed and
does what is lawful and right, he shall save his
life. Because he considered and turned away
from all the transgressions which he had
committed, he shall surely live, he shall not
die (Ezekiel 18:25-28).

The Ultimate Punishment

Death seems to be the most permanent and complete punishment possible, but it seems to violate the concept of correspondence, that the punishment must relate to the crime. There is certainly nothing in eating a piece of fruit that justified a penalty of death, even in the most symbolic form of correspondence between act and punishment. Ezekiel warned that "the soul that sins shall die." Why? If, as Ezekiel assures us, God finds no pleasure in anyone's death (Ezekiel 18:32), why does God still plan the ultimate death of the wicked?

Is it because God has a plan to conclude judgment, to execute permanent decisions? If that is the case, He has but one penalty to exact. If God is to do anything about wickedness, He must take the most extreme action possible. Since God is righteous, He will provide a way so that no one needs to suffer ultimate death. That provision is forgiveness, His response to repentance. "Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:18,19).

Summary

There are numerous threads of judgment woven through the Hebrew Scriptures. Not all of them are relevant to our study of Revelation, and space will not permit a complete exploration. Several judgment concepts in the Old Testament

will find parallels in Revelation and will enlighten our interpretation.

First, the Hebrew writers knew God as an active participant in justice, the One who plans to eliminate injustice and unrighteousness personally. Second, although many of the final judgment writings in the Hebrew Scriptures describe the judgment of people in the plural sense, we have made a strong case for the judgment and redemption of individuals. Finally, redemption is a major Old Testament theme. Even though God intends to finally destroy all evil, His goal is to reclaim as many as possible. We will find these three themes echoed in our study of judgment in Revelation.

Chapter Three

DIVINE JUDGMENT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus was a teacher of peace and love, but he was also a prophet of divine wrath. He believed that his role included judge of the world. In the fullest sense he taught that he would fulfill the prophecies of divine judge:

The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son . . . and has given Him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:22,27-29).

Judgment, as used here, is clearly a condemnatory event. Those who are raised for life are not mentioned in the judgment. Only those who have "done evil" receive krisis, a sentence of condemnation.

Matthew's gospel more fully establishes Jesus' teaching of a selected day for divine judgment. While Jesus did teach a day of judgment, we should be careful that we do not attach more meaning to that term than the context allows.

Perhaps the most troublesome judgment statement by Jesus is the "rendering account" saying in Matthew 12:36. In it Jesus seems to imply that each person's words will be resurrected to either condemn or acquit him--and careless

words will be enough to condemn him.

The context of Jesus' attack was a claim by certain Pharisees that Jesus was healing by the power of Beelzebub. After considerable discourse about blaspheming God's Spirit, Jesus spoke of the good things that come out of good people, and the evil from evil men. His reference to the day of Judgment implies that sin, especially careless words against God, constitutes a debt that must one day be repaid: apodidomi (to pay an account). It is not that every word must be explained, but that every careless accusation which hurts God's kingdom will inflict a penalty on that Day--an example of the Old Testament idea of correspondence between crime and punishment.

Jesus left his mark on judgment theology with the parable of the Sheep and Goats. He pictured the Son of man coming in glory with all the nations, ta ethne, gathered before him.

The argument about who the nations/people/gentiles are has raged for some time. J. Dwight Pentecost represents a dispensationalist view when he urges that this describes a judgment of gentiles only, at the beginning of a millennial kingdom.¹ G. Campbell Morgan subverts the generality of panta ta ethne by suggesting that only representatives of the nations are gathered. It cannot be a Final Judgment, he writes, for there is no resurrection, and earth and sky do not flee away! Even in an obvious parable, some insist on

every detail being described to their satisfaction!² A minor argument can be made for individuals being gathered (rather than nations) on the basis of Matthew's use of a masculine rather than neuter pronoun.³

Some attempts to make the separation work as a literal event get tangled in their own machinery. A. C. Gaebelien insisted that Jesus was prophesying a literal event. The redeemed, of course, he argued, would be absent, for they have already passed out of judgment. This separation is only for the nations, the spiritual gentiles, those who have not accepted the saving blood of Christ. Gaebelien traps himself, then, by saying, without realizing it, that there will be non-Christians who will be saved by their works of kindness, while others will be damned for their lack of the same.⁴

Calvin disarmed the potential of the parable to maintain a works-oriented righteousness when he noted that the King invites the saved with this:

Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world (Matthew 25:34).

Calvin made two points in particular. First, that the blessed ones were not simply invited to possess the kingdom, but to inherit it. It is, in fact, bestowed on them as heirs. Second, that it has been prepared for them from before the beginning of the world.⁵ Calvin, of course, would use this as fuel for predestination, while we would be satisfied to say that Christ's victory has been assured

since before the world was. We agree with John Calvin that it would be foolishness to say that any of the blessed had earned this eternally-prepared inheritance by their good works!

This rather famous judgment scene is certainly not a forensic type of event. It has no witnesses and no proceedings, simply a pastoral dividing of the herd at night and a separate fortune for the two classes. It is not a question of deciding who are sheep and who are goats. The King, like the shepherd, simply separates them. I am satisfied that it portrays God's final act of judgment, the declaration of what has been obvious all along--that there are really only two kinds of people; those who honor God, and those who do not. Jesus put it simply, but unforgettably.

The Apostles On Divine Judgment

Paul reserved judgment solely for God, and warned the believers against taking judgment of any kind into their own hands. He wrote to the Romans of "storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Romans 2:5). When God judges, according to Paul, he will give each person what they have worked for:

to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury (Romans 2:7,8).
Later in the same epistle, Paul reminded the believers

that "we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God"

(Romans 14:10). That bema, a raised place from which a king or ruler makes official declaration, seems a fitting place for rewards or punishments, just as kings either rewarded or condemned their generals after a campaign.

Paul knows nothing of a forensic judgment. In his theological framework a believer passes from condemnation to eternal life at the point of faith in Jesus. The Day of Judgment for believers is a day of glorification, and not of examination. For Paul, the faithful are resurrected at the coming of Jesus and with the living saints "caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord" (I Thessalonians 4:17). Conversely, the return of Christ signals destruction for the wicked (II Thessalonians 1:5-10).

Peter wrote in his letter to believers that the wicked who oppress the followers of Christ will give an account on the day of judgment (I Peter 4:5). That day is a day of promise and hope for the believers, according to Peter, but for the wicked a "day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (II Peter 3:7). The consensus of the apostles is that followers of Jesus have nothing to fear for the Day of the Lord and will receive their reward for faithfulness at that time. The wicked, on the other hand, have a debt to repay, for which they must give account on the day of judgment. Vindication of the righteous and condemnation of the wicked dominate the apostolic view of divine judgment, which should

have been a great comfort to the church as it encountered oppression. At least God would come some day and free them from their troubles and trials. John's theology of divine judgment is consistent with apostolic teaching about God's judgments, as we shall see.

Summary

We have seen, first, that Jesus described a final day of judgment in which all people would receive rewards or punishment. Second, the apostles described the day of judgment, but with an increased personal, rather than corporate, emphasis. Finally, we have seen that neither the apostles nor Jesus described the judgment in terms of a courtroom trial or forensic event. We will see that many of the Revelator's visions describe events consistent with the rest of the New Testament. If we artificially inject Jesus' or the apostles' words with a forensic message, we may do the same injustice to John in order to maintain consistency and unity. While we hope to see unity between Revelation and the rest of the New Testament we will try not to force it to conform.

Chapter Four

REVELATION AS PARABOLIC LITERATURE

Revelation has been rightly identified as apocalyptic literature, a part of that family of writings prominent in Jewish and Jewish-Christian communities from about 250 B.C. until A.D.100. Revelation also borrows freely from Jewish prophetic writings¹, and from ancient combat myths.² We propose that John did indeed use the style and imagery of his apocalyptic predecessors and peers, but he carefully shaped existing myths and images for his own purposes. Where other apocalyptic writers clearly used their symbolic imagery allegorically, we propose that John used the same kinds of images parabolically, in much the same way that Jesus used more true-to-life images in his parables.

While much of apocalyptic writing is scattered and lacking in coherent themes, Revelation is tightly structured, with clear and simple objectives.³ John established his objectives at the outset. His book is "the revelation of Jesus Christ." Its purpose was to "show to his servants what must soon take place" (Revelation 1:1). So we might expect to find Jesus as the central character, and the action future.

Within the letters to the Seven Churches are simple sketches of the scope of Revelation. Each letter begins

with the present (a time of trial and persecution), moves through a time of judgment, and ends with a promise of eternal rewards for the faithful. Beyond the letters, John followed essentially the same pattern.

C. H. Dodd was correct when he characterized Jewish apocalyptic writings as "gloomy pessimism."⁴ There is little rejoicing in II Baruch, II Esdras or the Sybelline Oracles. The authors did seem preoccupied with the destruction of people and lands.

Revelation includes destruction and judgment, but its goal is obviously to move beyond the usual scope of apocalyptic. John keeps the focus clearly on the ultimate future, when God and his people are victorious and the present world has passed away.

Historically, Revelation has been treated as a secret book of codes which, if solved, will reveal the history of the world. This hermeneutic, while long-lived, does great disservice to John's Revelation. First, it ignores John's major goal in sharing his stories. John was preoccupied with the lordship of Jesus, but most popular interpretations of Revelation dwell far more on earthly kingdoms and politics than on the power and glory of Christ! Second, the "secret code" method of interpretation implies that one cannot understand the meaning of the book without a "key" that will unlock its mysteries. John, though, claimed to be revealing Jesus, not hiding him!

For our purposes we will treat each vision as a parable, a story with a specific message. We will not go so far as Adolf Julicher, who insisted that Jesus' parables could only contain one lesson, and only the most general lesson possible.⁵ But we will be looking for major theological assertions, rather than predictions of historical events.

Why refer to the visions as parables? Parables such as those told by Jesus were in common usage. They conveyed a general message without being too specific about details. John, writing after the time of Jesus, was clearly aware of Jesus' theology and teachings. Out of all the literary styles available to John, he seems to have chosen the parable as his basic style. There are differences between the parable as John used it and Jesus' use, as we shall see. The similarities have convinced us that John intended us to listen to and interpret his visions as parables. Let us explore the common properties of Jesus' and John's parables.

1. Integrity. Each vision can stand on its own and make a powerful statement about God and His Kingdom. The vision of the Seven Seals is a literary classic in its own right, as is the vision of the Seven Bowls. While we can learn from comparing and contrasting the visions, the message of each is clear and succinct. Like Jesus' parables of the Kingdom, no one single vision-parable describes divine justice completely, but gives a simple argument about

some part of God's plan.

2. Clarity. When there is conflict in Revelation, no one can avoid noticing who are the good people and who are bad. There are no in-between people or kingdoms. David L. Barr described the world of Revelation as "a world characterized by near-total dualism, with no consideration of a middle way."⁶ The visions remind us of Jesus' absolutist ethic.

3. Their claim to truth. Jesus told parables which seem true to life. Whether the stories were really true or not is insignificant. What is significant is that both Jesus and John told their stories without preamble or explanation. John related his visions as if he had actually seen them take place. We need not be concerned whether he was actually in vision, or if he collected, revised or originated spiritual scenes for his purposes.

What separates this from allegory is its apparent faithfulness to fact. Pure allegory, the kind where each detail symbolizes something else, is usually easy to spot. Details are stretched and construed so that every part fits neatly as a package. Parables are far looser, with thread and corners hanging out. The allegorist must cut the offending thread and explain the loose corner. The parable teller ignores them and moves on, since his purpose is more basic.

4. Their purpose. Like the parables of Jesus, the

stories told by John have a highly spiritual goal: to explain the relationship God has with his oppressed people. Any references to historical facts or events had something to do with the relations between God and his subjects. Inflation in the land is not mentioned so that people can stock up for hard times, but so they will know that God will provide for them during difficult times.

The Difference

What separates Revelation from Jesus' parables, of course, is the literary style. Jesus told stories from life, from nature, from common experiences, "true to nature and to life."⁷ John adopted the style of the apocalyptists, with an eye to explaining cosmic truth with mythological beasts and battles. Even here, though, John's writing is entirely Christian. We must agree with David Barr when he analyzes John's use of stories to describe the Christian experience.

Thus while John draws his images from the traditional apocalyptic stock and a central symbol is the myth of cosmic combat, his experience of Jesus has led him to radically transfer these symbols in order to express the conviction that faithful witness brings both salvation and judgment. But this conviction is not argued, or even stated; it is portrayed. It is enacted in a story.⁸

In his analysis of scriptural "clouds of heaven," Paul Minear raised the question of the literalness of images in eschatological writings. Are the clouds of heaven real? If they are symbols of something, to what do they refer?

Minear reflects on how certain things call up images or ideas in the human mind. The cloud in the wilderness reminded Israel of God's invisibility and his glory. Minear wisely refrains from pontificating on whether or not the clouds in Scripture are real.⁹ We would also caution against trying to decide if descriptions in revelation refer to real things. This writer would prefer to speak of Revelation containing imagery, rather than symbols.

A symbol generally carries a one-to-one relationship with another thing, person or event. When one has found the thing the symbol stands for, he has solved the deepest secrets of the symbolism. Imagery, on the other hand, evokes attitudes and feelings in the hearer. He is moved emotionally and spiritually. The writer who excels in imagery is able to say far more to his reader than the author who describes the feelings in detail.

When John wrote that "the angel swung his sickle on the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God" he was not concerned with factual problems, but with drawing out a feeling from his audience. Never mind that no one harvests grapes by swinging a sickle, but by carefully selecting ripe bunches for the press. John was describing a carnage of immensely tragic proportions. There is no care here, no loving attention to the quality of the fruit, only destruction.

Revelation contains many pictures that do not sit right, that are not even or explainable. The reader who is looking for a message will not be disturbed by apparent contradictions or difficult images, but will let the author speak to him of God, his people, and a consummation of justice in the world.

If we can take John's bold introductory statement at face value, then Revelation is a story about Jesus and what he is about to do. It is not, apparently, a story about kings and earthly history, although some of that will enter the story to make it relevant and understandable.

Rather than Revelation being about the Roman Empire and its treatment of Christians, it is about God's Kingdom. The Roman Empire is merely an example, an illustration, of a totalitarian empire under demonic control.¹⁰

Revelation is far simpler than interpreters gave it credit for in its first seventeen-hundred years. It is also far greater in scope than many current interpreters allow. While it is appropriate to study it within its life situation, we must give John credit for having a vision of the world far bigger than the problems of Christians in Asia Minor.

By treating Revelation as a closely-structured collection of parables we can look for the general lessons and spiritual concepts presented. We can save time by looking for meaning rather than trying to match symbols with

realities. Finally, we can leave room to apply John's theology of judgment beyond the historical specifics that have so frequently limited Revelation's usefulness. John told stories of the universe behind the news, stories that describe God's soon-to-end conflict with evil. We must let John tell his story, without looking too closely at the props and sets in the theater!

Chapter Five

REMEDIAL JUDGMENT IN REVELATION

Interpreters of Revelation have often described the "final judgment", as the judgment, trial, or other scene where final rewards and punishments are bestowed upon human beings. The Apocalypse also offers another kind of divine judgment, referred to in this study as "remedial judgment".

We would define remedial judgment as any act of God which brings trouble or suffering to people in the hope that they would change their behavior or allegiance.

God's purposes are not simply to tally the good and evil deeds of the world, but to woo, encourage, and shock the population into worshipping and obeying him. He wants to rule living people rather than destroy potential subjects.

Modern people, even modern religious people, find it hard to conceive of a God who tortures people into submission. Various writers have suggested "softeners" to make the whole idea palatable. Perhaps God merely means that he will withhold blessings to the unrepentant until they ask for His help. Or perhaps He is powerless against evil forces until requested by the unrighteous. Every such argument makes the idea less barbaric, but hides and distorts a basic biblical fact. God is a mover, a divine

being of ultimate power, who is credited throughout Scripture with the greatest and most trivial of phenomena. To say that God merely stands back and lets nature take its course is to forget that God is nature. He is the divine mind that controls and dominates all of nature. To say that He allows misfortune denies His role in the biblical universe.

We would perhaps prefer a God who is not directly involved in remediating the wicked. We would construct, if we could, a mild and peaceful god who speaks only with a still, small voice. But we are stuck with the biblical God--a God who shouts and thunders on occasion, and even rains fire and other destructive plagues down on people who defy Him.

The loving parent or caring teacher is not cruel to punish the child who defies his or her authority. Neither is God pictured as a cruel God when he lovingly and/or threateningly woos His own.

In several cases God is pictured as pouring out terrible plagues upon the earth. John's description gives us clues to these divine judgments, clues that help us identify and describe remedial judgment with some confidence.

The Seven Seals

The seven seals of Revelation 6 follow a pattern typical of John's literary style. Seals one through four are remedial in nature, not intended to punish, but to

convert, to show God's power and lordship. Bollier labels these "preliminary judgments", recognizing that they are not the final judgment of God, but he fails to describe their purpose in the narrative.¹

This classification as remedial judgment rests upon several points. Each has limited weight in itself, but together point rather unitedly to a call for repentance.

1. Limited Destruction. In the first seal, a solitary rider is sent out to conquer, rather than an entire army. Arguments from silence do not carry much weight, but since other warring creatures in the book are not alone, we may safely say that this is not a huge war, of universal proportions.

The second seal's significance rests on a similar basis. The horseman, although armed, does not destroy the world's inhabitants. Rather, he is permitted "to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another" (Revelation 6:4). Although the lack of peace is significant, it is a war between people--rather natural in human history, after all. Even though this war is divinely instigated, it cannot be considered a divine punishment. Rather, it is simply another argument by God that the world cannot have peace without his leadership.

Wheat and barley are inflated in the third seal--not enough to cause complete starvation, but to make it impossible for people to afford any of the luxuries of life.

A container of wheat or three quarts of barley for a denarius--a day's wage--would provide subsistence eating for a small family, but nothing more. We might expand on the bare circumstances to suggest that people turn to God more readily when they are suffering than when all their needs and wants are easily supplied.

When a fourth of the earth is killed by war, famine, pestilence and wild beasts, that constitutes immense suffering. Some students of Revelation would deny that God is the moving force behind this destruction. The immensity of the pain and horror in the fourth seal has prompted some to ascribe it to Satan, or to the evil forces in the world. To be consistent with the patterns of prophetic and apocalyptic writing, though, we must allow John to speak as he wishes. Echoing Isaiah, who described God's remedial judgments upon people and nations, John is retelling the story of a God who wants universal obedience, and who is willing to use extraordinary force to remind people of their humanness.

We can be entirely certain that these events in the seals vision are not final judgments because of the saints' question during the opening of the fifth seal. They ask "how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?" (Revelation 6:10). They are told to wait a little longer so that their number might be increased. This is our strongest argument for remedial

judgment under the seals. God will not simply destroy those who deserve punishment. First, He will try to convince them to join the saints, then judge those who resist His sovereignty.

2. Evidence of a Chance for Repentance. From very nearly the beginning, Revelation is a book about how repentance changes man's standing with God. Just as in Isaiah 1, the letters to the seven churches contain a promise-threat. "Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent" (Revelation 2:5).

In fact, the pattern of the seven churches follows like this:

Ephesus	Repent
Smyrna	Be faithful
Pergamum	Repent
Thyatira	Repent/Hold fast (two classes of people)
Sardis	Repent
Philadelphia	Hold fast
Laodicea	Repent

God's final message to Laodicea establishes remedial judgment as firmly rooted in the Apocalypse;

Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with

him, and he with me (Revelation 3:19,20).

It would be a mistake to suppose that there is only remedial judgment in Revelation. Final, irrevocable, totally destructive judgment certainly has a place in the Apocalypse. But we would argue that the remedial judgments of God predominate, and since they are generally ignored, require some detailed attention.

Revelation 4 and 5 set the stage for judgment to follow. They establish that God rules on his throne in heaven, and that judgment and ruling power has been given to the Lamb, universally recognized as Jesus Christ.

With the opening of the first seal, judgment begins. But of what kind? A Dispensationalist writer, Walvoord, sees this white horsed rider as a clever counterfeit of Christ. "He is Satan's masterpiece, and the counterfeit of all that Christ is or claims to be."² He and others who identify the horsemen as oppressors of God's people ignore the obvious fact that it is heaven that calls these horsemen out. It is heaven that gives them their power to destroy a fourth of the earth, to bring famine and pestilence. "its rider was permitted" (Revelation 6:4). "A crown was given to him" (Revelation 6:2). ". . . they were given power" (Revelation 6:8). Rowley believed that apocalyptic writers saw earth's troubles as "the final fling of evil."³ This ignores the apocalyptists' belief that world tragedies were commissioned by God, and misses much of John's message.

The purpose of the judgments in the first four seals is remedial, to lead an unrepentant world to turn to God. Bollier's label of "preliminary judgments" is accurate as far as it goes, but it fails to give a reason for preliminary (that is, before final) judgment.⁴ Patrick D. Miller suggests that much of God's judgment in the Old Testament prophets is "purifying, reclaiming and renewing", intended for discipline and chastisement.⁵

Defending the remedial status of the first four seals, Bollier considers sufficient evidence that only a fourth of the earth is under destruction (Revelation 6:8), and that verse 11 contains a time element, time for unrepentant people to repent.⁶ Whereas the Letters to the Seven Churches contained threats of judgment against unfaithful Christians, the judgments of the seals, trumpets and bowls seem destined only for those who have failed to respond to Christ. The reason for judgment in Revelation is not simply individual sin, but failure to worship and follow Jesus.⁷

The troubles of the first four seals are not the "Final Judgment". The wars of the first two horsemen would not kill everyone. The famine conditions of the third seal are horrible, but most would survive. If the first four seals describe God's remedial judgments, does the seal vision lead ultimately to final judgment, or to more preliminary judgment?

The fifth seal is clearly a break in the vision. It

explains the previous four seals and why God waits to vindicate his people. Time for more martyrs also gives more time for repentance.⁸

Walvoord's approach to the fifth seal misses the message and concerns itself with the trivial. He allows his literalism to carry him into a discussion of whether the souls under the altar have bodies or not. Ignoring the apocalyptic nature of the book, Walvoord says that Revelation should be studied with "normal" rather than "special" hermeneutics. Therefore, "stars are stars, earthquakes are earthquakes."⁹ Being literal, then, the robes God gives the souls must hang somewhere! "A robe could not hang on an immaterial soul or spirit," hence the souls must have bodies, but not resurrection bodies, since that has not happened yet in Walvoord's scheme. He concludes that the souls under the altar have been given temporary bodies to hang their robes on, just for this occasion!¹⁰

Our point here is not to ridicule his interpretation, but to warn against over literal approach to Revelation. Since many others also arrive at Revelation with a pre-conceived outline of final events, they must push and squeeze the book into their eschatology. When combined with literalism, this can result in a disconnected jumble of beliefs. While searching for a ecology of judgment, we shall try to treat the visions as part of a literary whole, and to seek parallels of idea and structure.

The primary emphasis in the Seals Vision is on the early, remedial judgments, although the series follows judgment through to completion in the seventh seal. As we shall see, John shifts his emphasis more and more toward completion of judgment as the visions progress.

Because the Seventh Seal is opened just before the Seven Trumpets, many commentators have placed them end-to-end in a continuous line. The seals are treated as the introduction to the Trumpets. But since the remedial judgment of the first few seals is followed by the Day of the Lord, we cannot say that God will again drop more remedial judgments on the earth. The Seals can be considered a closed unit, sufficient in itself to explain God's judgments on earth. The details are naturally sketchy, because of its parabolic nature, but the overall plan of judgment is there.

The Seven Trumpets

Revelation 8:1-11:19

The progression of events in the Trumpets seems quite like that in the Seals, but the difference in intensity could mislead us into thinking that new or different events are pictured. Since destruction happens in thirds, as opposed to quarters in the Seals, some have viewed the Trumpets as a further escalation of remedial judgments on the earth. This would coincide with a "straight-line" interpretation. But since we have already noted that the

Seals comprise a closed unit, the change in intensity must serve another purpose. Perhaps the intensity changes because the warning, rather than the judgment, is more severe.

God is clearly in charge of the plagues and woes under the seven trumpets. The locusts of the sixth plague are not allowed to harm God's people. John's editorial comment shows that these are, indeed, remedial judgments; "the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent. . . ." (Revelation 9:20).

Did the author mean that God was hoping they would repent? Walvoord calls such a conclusion "wishful thinking."¹¹ He asserts that God is not so foolish as to think that he can induce them to repent. If Walvoord were right, then God would simply be punishing them for the sake of punishment. Scripture gives us a clear and humane alternative:

Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; If any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me (Revelation 3:19,20).

Miller writes of a divine judgment that burns away impurities (refining fire), straightens out people (plumb line), and washes or wipes them (like cleaning a dish).¹² If judgment is thought of in constructive or remedial terms, rather than always as punishment, God can appear far more merciful.

Remedial judgments must end somewhere; and after the sounding of the Sixth Trumpet, an angel declares that there shall be

no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, should be fulfilled (Revelation 10:6,7).

By the time the Seventh Trumpet sounds, we find that final judgment has already taken place!

Oel Ray Fassett, a Millerite writer of the nineteenth century, concluded that final judgment is fixed "at the sounding of the seventh trumpet of the apocalypse."¹³ His conclusion puts him at odds with later Seventh-day Adventist interpreters, who favored a more linear view of Revelation. Fassett seemed to recognize the recapitulation of events in Seals, Trumpets and Plagues.

Our interpretation of the seventh trumpet may well hinge on a proper translation of the aorist form of erkoimai-ethen. The Revised Standard version gives proper force to the past tense:

We give thanks to thee, Lord God Almighty, who art and who wast, that thou has taken thy great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but thy wrath came, and time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear thy name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth (Revelation 11:17,18, emphasis mine).

The King James Version, by using "is come," "should," and "shouldest," imparts another meaning to the whole vision,

throwing the final judgment from the past, where it belongs, to the present and future. Tenney argues, correctly, that when the seventh trumpet blows, judgment is completed in every sense.¹⁴ Emphasis here is on the consummation of judgment, on its completeness. Since the authors of the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary could not fit a consummated judgment into the trumpet series, the aorist tense of erkomai (came is quietly ignored, and the faulty KJV meaning preserved).¹⁵

The Seven Last Plagues

Revelation 15:1 - 16:21

Ladd asserts that historical judgments and eschatological judgment "are often blended together in apparent disregard for chronology" in Revelation.¹⁶ We cannot agree, for we have not seen different types of judgment blended together. Perhaps Ladd confused himself by bringing a pre-decided chronology to his study of Revelation. When a theology of judgment is first developed, then the chronology will fall into place without herculean efforts to shove wayward visions into line!

The seven last plagues are unique in that few scholars have ever allowed them the privilege of being "last". Various means have been used to keep them from being final. Ladd calls them final "in the particular context of the plagues which anticipate the final judgment. These words cannot be interpreted to mean that these plagues exhaust the

totality of God's wrath."¹⁷ Walvoord, agreeing that they cannot be last, argues for a difference of intensity between the two Greek words used to describe God's anger or wrath. Thumos, used here, is the anger (not wrath, according to Walvoord) of God, anticipatory of his orge (wrath). When his anger is exhausted in the seven last plagues, Walvoord writes, he begins to pour out his wrath.

The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary approaches the plagues with a disadvantage, for Adventists have traditionally viewed those plagues as falling between the close of probation and Second Coming of Christ. The plagues are not really last, but "the last with respect to their kind; there will be no more plagues as such, although the ultimate destruction of Satan and sinners is still sure."¹⁸ Since, in the commentators' view, the plagues are neither remedial nor final, they offer no justification for God sending them. It is too late to repent, they claim, but also too early to be destroyed!

In our view, the plagues span the distance between the remedial judgments of God in the first five plagues to the final judgment in the sixth and seventh plagues.

The introduction to the plagues shouts "last" loudly enough for anyone but the dogmatically deaf to hear. They are the eskatas (last, final) for with them God's thumos (wrath, anger) is etelesthe (emptied, gone, nothing to follow).

This is not to imply that the entire vision is final judgment. The first five plagues are clearly remedial, since John remarked that they "did not repent" after the fourth and fifth plagues (Revelation 16:9,11). The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary errs in suggesting that the wicked here cannot repent, that it is too late in prophetic chronology.¹⁹ Revelation only declares that they do not repent. There is no basis for saying that these plagues are meant to punish but not to motivate repentance.

A Point of Decision

God's mercy, and his remedial judgments must end someday. God can warn and reprove the earth, but the massiveness of wickedness ultimately precipitates a final solution.

But when God himself and the Lamb actually intervene in history in the final judgment, then the divine longsuffering has passed. The final judgment confirms irrevocably the verdict men have passed on themselves by their attitude toward God and his saving purpose in Jesus Christ.²⁰

Six times in Revelation John describes a point of decision when God determines to make an end of mercy and to finish judgment.

1. **Opening of the Fifth Seal.** God declares that when the proper number of martyrs has been reached, he will execute judgment for the righteous and against those who oppress them (Revelation 6:11).

2. **Time of the Harvest.** An angel declares that

"the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe" (Revelation 14:15).

3. **Pouring of the Seventh Bowl.** A loud voice from the throne, probably God's voice, declares "It is done!" (Revelation 16:17) This declaration inaugurates the annihilation of the wicked and the destruction of the earth.

4. **Condemnation of Babylon.** A voice from heaven declares sentence on Babylon, double payment for her evil deeds (Revelation 18:4-8).

5. **The Books are Opened.** At the end of several unnumbered visions, the heavenly record books, including the book of life, are opened. Although there is no trial as such, the presence of names in the book protects the righteous from destruction. The opening of the books constitutes the inauguration of final divine judgment.

6. **Throne Declaration.** God, speaking from his throne, declares a reward of eternal life to the conquerors (believers) and eternal death to the immoral.

We are still here, and final judgment has not yet come. But the fact that it is delayed does not minimize John's message that God is merciful and waits to destroy. In fact, time only makes the message more forceful and real.

Summary

Remedial judgment is a strong theme in Revelation. In fact, John pictured most of God's judgments as remedial. God called repeatedly for repentance, and sent punishments

and troubles to convince the wicked. There is a limit to God's patience. At some point in time or point in wickedness God stops pleading for repentance and issues a declaration of judgment. We have not seen a forensic judgment anywhere among the remedial judgments. We conclude that John was firmly convinced that God sends judgments on earth to turn the wicked to repentance, and when that fails he accepts their decision to be destroyed.

Chapter Six

ANNIHILATION IN THE APOCALYPSE

If it is difficult to think of a God who plagues and torments people to get them to repent, it seems even harder to imagine him annihilating people. American society has mixed views on capital punishment; but even when we do execute a criminal we pray for his soul!

Most Christian theologies attempt to solve the problem of annihilation by inserting what seems to be a more humane punishment in its place--eternal torment for the wicked. And the dogmatic belief in a human immortal soul allowed for one to pass to eternal pleasure or pain immediately upon death. The apocalyptic concept of divine annihilation became surplus; an unnecessary bit of baggage on the road to eternity.

There are at least two major problems for us if we should choose to follow the more orthodox path, each significant enough to serve as a stop-sign for us.

1. Revelation emphatically describes annihilation as God's final act against his enemies. Keeping in mind all the while that the descriptions are parabolic, we avoid attempting to extract too much information from the stories. Even so, we cannot help but believe that the consuming fire in Revelation 20 does indeed describe a final end of evil

nations (souls, bodies and all!). We shall examine in detail Revelation parables that seem to describe annihilation as part of divine judgment.

2. Putting sinners on ice (or fire) does not constitute a total solution to the conflict. Revelation 21 and 22 describe a new heaven and earth, "for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4). We do not know exactly why John included pictures of eternal torment for the devil, beast and false prophet. In the final picture of Paradise, no such suffering or torment is to be found--in fact, it is specifically denied: "neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more" (Revelation 21:4).

Annihilation as Contrast

Revelation is a book of extremes, of contrasts. The righteous are generally pictured as safely under God's care, even during tribulation. The unrighteous are plagued and destroyed by God. As in Jesus' parable of the Sheep and Goats, there is no middle ground. The unrighteous share no characteristics with the redeemed, not even eternal life. It is no accident that the saved are often pictured as a group, worshipping God. They are resplendent in their white robes, gathered around a merciful and loving God. Pictures of the unrighteous are dark and foreboding. They are fearful, hiding amongst the rocks, hoping that the nightmare will soon be over (Revelation 6:15-17).

The Seventh Trumpet

The remedial nature of the seven trumpets has already been discussed in Chapter 5. The seventh trumpet blast brings divine judgment to completion, although without much description or lingering. In fact, the execution of divine judgment is not even seen by the prophet--only a second-hand reporting by the twenty-four elders who sit on thrones before God!

"The nations raged, but thy wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear they name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth"
(Revelation 11:18).

Although this climax to divine judgment is brief and unadorned with violence, it speaks of finality in God's wrath. The destroyers have been destroyed, and God's kingdom has arrived in power. There is not even a hint here of punishment or torment, as there was during the previous trumpets, just destruction. Because the apparent purpose of the seals and trumpets was to direct attention to the remedial judgments of God, final execution is neglected somewhat. But in judgment scenes to follow the matter of ultimate punishments will be dealt with several times, with a recurring pattern.

Three Angels

Without becoming entangled in apocalyptic numerology, we can easily see that the one-hundred, forty-four thousand

stand in direct contrast to those who allow themselves to be marked with the beast's name and number. As the marked ones worship the beast and its image, the band of the redeemed are marked with the Lamb's name and his Father's name. They are the ones who only worshipped him, and would not consent to worship the beast.

What is difficult about this vision is that it ends in the very thing we have wanted to avoid--eternal torment! The stage is set for the final annihilation of the wicked. An angel flies through the heavens proclaiming the time of God's judgment. A second announces the fall of Babylon, the source of power for the evildoers. The final angel warns that any who have worshipped the beast, or have been marked with his mark, will drink the cup of God's wrath.

Forcing one's enemies to drink a cup of poison was fashionable long before Socrates. And the biblical writers as early as Job pictured God destroying the wicked with a cup full of "wrath". "Let their own eyes see their destruction, and let them drink of the wrath of the Almighty" (Job 21:20).

The psalmist described God's deadly cup of foaming wine, a draught intended for his enemies:

But it is God who executes judgment, putting one down and lifting up another. For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup, with foaming wine, well mixed; and he will pour a draught from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs (Psalm 75:7,8).

In a passage which seems to serve as a model for John,

Jeremiah was given a cup and told to make the nations drink from it. The last king to drink the cup is the king of Babylon, apparently God's greatest enemy. Jeremiah prophesies "Drink, be drunk and vomit, fall and rise no more, because of the sword which I am sending among you" (Jeremiah 25:27).

What follows is clearly a final execution of judgment, in which the Lord of hosts slays all the wicked on earth with the sword. The cup of wrath, then, is only a prelude to utter destruction.

After drinking the cup of God's wrath in Revelation 14:10, further punishment is in order.

"And he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name" (Revelation 14:10,11).

Like those who would latch onto Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus as some accurate description of final rewards and punishment, Christian interpreters have attempted to literalize this awesome picture. Robert Mounce characterizes those who straddle the literal/symbolic fence: "That we are dealing with a rather obvious apocalyptic symbol should not lead us to take it lightly."¹ Fiery torment was certainly a popular idea in ancient myth, and it remains today as a powerful image of God's wrath. Mounce would like to keep the severity of God's judgment, while

also retaining the fire of hell.

We would do well to assign the fiery torment to the collection of powerful images John employed in his book. The fact that it was a commonly-believed idea does not give it weight, nor does the fact that Jesus told a parable with fiery hell in it. The key word is "parable", and we must look for a practical meaning, through the smoke and sulphur!

Notice that verses 9-11 do not constitute a vision of action as such, but a description of the speech made by the third angel. John does not see anyone being tormented by fire. He only hears an angel warn about the consequences of worshipping the beast and its image, and receiving its mark. This is a divine threat--a warning to those who might be tempted to give in to this terrible power. The remedial warning about eternal torment is a device used to get a desired effect--faithfulness to God. It was never intended to describe the actual final outcome of the wicked, any more than the descriptions which follow.

The Earth's Harvest

Revelation 14:14-20 contains a fairly simple retelling of parables told by Joel and by Jesus. A two-fold harvest of the earth is described, where, apparently, some people are harvested as weeds and others as grain.

Joel's version of the harvest includes every element of John's harvest story: a sickle which harvests the earth, then a winepress to press the wicked (Joel 3:13). It is

Jesus' use of harvest imagery in the parable of the tares that leads us to believe in a two-fold harvest. At the close of the parable the landowner declares that the weeds and wheat will both be harvested, the wheat to be saved in barns and the weeds to be burned (Matthew 13:30).

In John's Apocalypse there are two distinct images or parables of the harvest. In the first, comprising verses 14 through 16, the earth is harvested with a sickle. No mention is made of what is to be done with the harvest. In the second vignette, an angel harvests the earth with a sickle, and the harvest is trod in a great winepress.

A literalist must admit that placing people in a great winepress and squeezing them until their blood pours out is neither humane nor Godlike. We have yet to observe anyone who seriously believes that God will destroy the wicked in this manner. But most have literalized the lake of fire in Revelation 19, 20 and 21.

Those who choose fire as the instrument of final judgment have failed to produce an hermeneutic that allows one to arbitrarily choose fire over sword, winepress, death in battle, hailstones, or lightning. To be consistent with our assertion that the visions should be interpreted as parables, none of the descriptions of final destruction are meant to be literal. The method God uses will be unlike any described in apocalyptic literature.

Does the sickle and winepress sequence show two views

of final destruction, or both rewards and punishment? Two words are used to signify the harvest's ripeness: skiraino in verse fourteen, and akmazo in verse eighteen. The first means "dry, withered", ripeness by condition, while the second means "ready, in their prime", signifying ripeness determined by time. No serious argument can be made for the first harvest being of the redeemed on the basis of the Greek words used for ripeness.

What does give some credibility to the idea is the parallel with Jesus' two harvest references, where the wheat is harvested after the weeds are destroyed (Matthew 13:24-30), and his reference to the already ripe harvest of the world (John 4:35). Although the evidence is rather weak, we tentatively interpret this small section as a description of the harvest of the whole world, righteous and wicked.

The sickle and winepress scenes are obviously not remedial, since there is neither call for, nor opportunity for, repentance. God presents here no further chances for mercy or change of heart. From this point onward John will pinpoint more and more the details of the final decision, execution and rewards. Major visions still begin with their roots in the remedial judgments, but continue to close with a completed judgment. The sickle and winepress sequence explain rather fully what the seals and trumpets weakly described.

The Seventh Plague

Following the Final Impossible Battle of the sixth plague comes a rather peaceful conclusion to the world (as compared to the harvest parables!). Yet the voice from the throne booms "It is done!" (gegonen, "It has come" or "It has arrived").

The seventh plague seems anemic and weak, since it lacks the fires of destruction that we might expect. But the sickle and winepress visions had no fire either! Even though the destruction here is accomplished by a great earthquake and by hailstones, we can be confident based on two counts, that this last plague denotes annihilation.

1. The promise at the start. John indicated in Revelation 15:1 that these were the last plagues, for with them God's wrath in ended, filled-up, consummated. When we read the description of the last plague, we have seen God's cup of wrath drained to the dregs. It is not fair to find a hidden supply of divine wrath later on!

2. The voice from the throne. God's voice, speaking at the beginning of the seventh plague, reminds us of Jesus' own words in John 19:30, Tetelestai, "it is finished". Just as Jesus proclaimed the completion of something, the consummation of his salvation act, God's voice proclaims the end of divine judgment at the outpouring of the seventh plague.

Judgment on Babylon

Revelation 18:1 - 19:8

Whatever John may have specifically meant by Babylon (Rome or non-Christian Judaism), all interpreters can agree that it represents the group and government of those who have fiercely opposed God and his people. Babylon is that force responsible for persecuting and slaying the true believers. If John had a larger view of history than his own place and time, then the general identification of Babylon is most helpful and relevant.

In Scripture, evil typically begets evil. An evil act reaps an evil reward that is equal to the evil done. Miller considers it an equation, "Going after hebel leads to becoming hebel."² Worthlessness makes one worthless. That is the normal course of divine judgment, the natural result of sin. But in the bigger-than-life world of John's Apocalypse, God intervenes in the natural consequences of sin. He commands that Babylon's punishment exceed the crime.

Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed (Revelation 18:6).

God's threat against Edom in Obadiah 15 is stiffened here; no longer "As you have done, it shall be done to you," but now the punishment is double the crime. This is certainly no remedial judgment, for when it is all over Babylon is wasted, burned, and forever empty.

In a great resolution of the conflict between the wicked world and God's own people, God declares a judgment in favor of his own. God did not just destroy a wicked city, but vindicated his people, and judged in their favor. Literally, he has "judged your judgment against her" (Revelation 18:20). In a book that is generally interpreted to include numerous references to a General Assize, this is one very short reference to any sort of judicial proceeding. Even here, though, God's role is more of officiating ruler than court judge.

The Divine Warrior

Revelation 19:11-21

Perhaps no scene in Revelation is so moving as this picture of Christ as the Divine Warrior. John sees him mount a white horse, doing battle with the armies of the world, slaying all the proud warriors with the sword that comes from his mouth, and throwing all their leaders into a sulphurous, fiery lake. Destruction by fire is an old biblical concept,³ and the idea of God wielding a sword is mirrored in other apocalyptic writings. The Sybilline Oracles declare "Judgment shall come upon them from the mighty God and all shall perish at the hand of the Eternal. From heaven shall fall fiery swords to the earth . . ." ⁴ Perhaps the chief development here is that the sharp sword comes from Christ's mouth, indicating that his conquering power is through his word, not physical strength.

Hanson carefully examined Jewish writers' use of the Divine Warrior Hymn, an ancient ritual literary form. He suggested that where their neighbors centered attention on the "cosmic activities of conflicting deities, in Israel Yahweh's saving acts were recognized in historical events."⁵ Since this battle involves people, earth is the focus. In this example of the Divine Warrior Hymn, as adapted by John, we see the outcome of the final impossible battle. Since the opposing forces choose to fight God rather than surrender, they are destroyed. Their decision to fight kills them!

In this version of final annihilation, only the beast and false prophet are thrown alive into the lake of fire and sulphur. We are not told their condition in the lake; but since no mention is made of any eternal (or even extended) torment, we may assume they expire quickly. The Warrior on the white horse quickly slays the rest of his enemies with his sword, and the birds consume their flesh.

It is significant that nothing remains of the opposing forces. No prisoners are taken, no quarter given. Again and again, regardless of how he describes the end of the wicked, John leaves us with a profound impression that nothing remains of them to blot the landscape of the new world.

The Last Battle

Revelation 20:1-10

We shall not try to answer all the difficult questions that could be raised about the thousand years, such as Why have a millennium if everyone bad is already dead and everyone good is already reigning with Christ? And, if the wicked already showed their disloyalty to God by fighting Christ as the Divine warrior before the thousand years, why give them another chance to do the very same thing? Let us simply say that the millennium is another study, and admit that we have two options open to us. Either this last battle is a recapitulation of the one in Chapter 19, or there are two last battles in which all the wicked are destroyed and their leaders end up in the lake of fire.

Given that few people have ever worried about being the beast or false prophet themselves, our greatest concern here must certainly be for the people who follow them. In both last battles the followers of the deceiving ones ended up dead. In the Divine Warrior story they were killed by the sword. In the post-millennial battle they are consumed by fire from heaven. Regardless of the length of torment one might imagine for the deceiving ones, the rest of the wicked world is destroyed and annihilated at the close of the battle(s).

Great White Throne Judgment

Revelation 20:11-15

This judgment has been terrifyingly portrayed by numerous artists. One lone man stands before the white throne of God, while the whole universe looks on. The logistics of trying billions of people, one by one, has never kept this judgment parable from being interpreted as literal.

The idea of one's entire life being opened before all creation echoes the pseudepigraphal IV Ezra, "the books shall be opened before the fact of the firmament" (IV Ezra 6:20), and Daniel "the court sat in judgment and the books were opened" (Daniel 7:10). Here is the only real case of any sort of forensic proceeding in the entire book of Revelation, and yet within it we find no hint of a real trial for anyone. In this judgment God (or someone) has already made up a list of the innocent. Those whose names do not appear on the list are destroyed.

Reminding ourselves once again that there is only a parable, we can be certain that the main goal is not to tell us exactly how God arrives at His decision (for it seems to be entirely his). It seems more likely that our eyes should be directed to the outcomes.

1. **Death and Hades are destroyed.** This "second death" seems to carry weight of ultimate finality. If there is no more place of the dead, or power to bring death, then

there is no further existence for anyone in a state of death. This brings us to a real dilemma. Either the wicked are now to be finally extinguished into nothingness (beyond Hades, which has been destroyed), or kept alive in eternal torment, as more traditional interpretation has maintained for centuries.

2. Those not found in the book of life are destroyed. The dilemma is solved, since the lost suffer the same fate as death and Hades. There are neither any dead remaining, nor any place for them to be dead. Death, its subjects, and its dominion have been utterly erased.

Is this great judgment scene to be taken as a literal prophecy for the last day? We cannot see why it alone would stand as a faithful representative of reality. We would concur with Ladd that

Apocalyptic pictures are not meant to be photographs of objective facts: they are often symbolic representations of almost unimaginable spiritual realities. In fact, God does not sit on a throne; he is an eternal Spirit who neither stands or sits or reclines.⁶

What we can take away from the scene is a deep sense of the seriousness of our lives. What we do does matter, and will matter on an eternal scale someday. If it makes us uncomfortable to know that there is a God recording our lives and deciding our fates, then John succeeded with his Great White Throne scene. We should all tremble some inside, and realize that sin will not go unpunished forever.

The Throne Declaration

Revelation 21:1-8

One kind of judgment is a kingly "ruling" where a ruler proclaims his decision on a civil matter, reminiscent of the days of Saul, David and Solomon. In this judgment we have an official proclamation, made by God from his throne. An angel-herald announces that God now reigns with his people. God himself proclaims that He will take care of his own, remake the world, and will punish evildoers with complete annihilation in the lake of the second death. This is the last and final judgment scene in Revelation, it is perhaps the most beautiful of all, since it describes in detail the plan for a new world and a new order, and only lingers on the destruction of the wicked for a moment.

Last Words About Annihilation

There seems to be no doubt that the destruction of choice in Revelation is a burning lake, the lake of the second death. It is by no means the only way that John described the final death of the wicked. Winepress, sickle, sword and hailstones all do the job just as well. Ultimately, of course, we have no idea how God might choose to end the existence of those who have utterly and eternally rejected his love.

Is it ethical for prophets of God to frighten people? Most certainly! It is part (a big part) of their job. Without some measure of fear, a prophet's message lacks the

power to bring repentance. It was not Jonah's sincerity that brought Ninevah to its knees, but the possibility that a powerful God would reduce their fair city to ruin.

Fear is only a prompter, though, and should never remain as the prime motivator for the believer. The promise of rewards is sweeter, and the simple joy of trusting in a fair and loving God moves people more earnestly than fear of hellfire. But the red light and siren on a police car do remind the wayward speeders of the consequences of their unlawful behavior.

What is unique and truly Christian about John's Apocalypse is that descriptions of terror are followed by a beautiful picture of Paradise. And where other apocalyptic writers left the wicked to uncertain fates, John consistently allowed them to expire in humane annihilation.

Chapter Seven

JUDGMENT THEOLOGY IN THE APOCALYPSE: JUSTICE, MERCY AND VENGEANCE

Ideally, Hebrew justice worked out day-to-day problems quite well. Provisions were made for settling arguments over property, for punishing people who committed anti-social acts, and for repaying victims of crimes. When the system worked, which may have been for many generations, life, if hard, was at least fair. To the citizens of an Israelite township during the good years (pre-exilic, for instance), the idea of an end-of-the-world, apocalyptic judgment would have seemed outlandish and unnecessary.

Apocalyptic ideas do not surface during times when things are going well and justice is active. They surface during the worst of times, when justice is absent, and when only an act of God can return the world to order. We concur with Carl Braaten, who described why eschatology exists:

If the human condition were flawless--if there were no sin--one would have good reason to hope for the final realization of the human potential without the intervention of the power of God. We have the need for eschatological statements precisely to keep the vision of the essential future of man alive under conditions of human existence which make its realization impossible.¹

While apocalyptic literature as such may not have developed fully until the last hundred years or so before Christ,

apocalyptic ideas sprang up during times of national distress and hardship.

A characteristic reason for the growth of apocalyptic thinking was oppression from foreign powers, powers that suppressed true worship and demanded allegiance from the oppressed that amounted to idol worship.

The earliest and most notable apocalyptic event in Israel's history was the Exodus. God's people were trapped in a strange land. Forced to live as slaves, they had no opportunity to practice the faith of their fathers and had no hope of releasing themselves. The story of Moses, who attempted to right things himself and then allowed God to work miracles to restore justice, is, without a doubt, the germ of apocalypticism. It is no wonder that John chose to use the plagues of the Exodus as a model for God's final act against a rebellious world in the Last Day.

Certainly the apocalyptic idea of the end of the known world was not developed at all in Moses' story. What is clear is that God was described as a powerful actor in the story, stepping in to settle injustice, to persuade stubborn people to repent, and to change the course of history.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures are scattered apocalyptic scenes. The general pattern is that God steps in to make things right. He punishes the evildoers and then steps back out again to let life go on as it should have been before. Although there are "new earth" ideas in

Isaiah, no one until John captured the totality of a new creation, a world without evildoers or corrupt powers. John alone saw an end to all evil and an end to the world as humans know it. Just as he used images from the myths and from other apocalyptic writings, John used ideas of justice and judgment from Hebrew Scriptures and common life. But since this intervention by God was to be the last, the shape of divine judgment in Revelation is unavoidably different than all descriptions that came before.

Judgment--A Divine Act

In the Hebrew Scriptures everyone was obliged to practice mishapat, to "seek out the wrongdoer to punish him, and the righteous to vindicate his cause."² Righteousness, rather than being a passive "not doing evil" as we sometimes imagine, was an action. No one was exempt from helping the weak, the poor, the helpless.³

In the final judgment imagery of Revelation, though, no part of judgment is in human hands. God is the decider and the destroyer. There cannot be any doubt that it is God himself who finally ends the cycle of wickedness:

And the rest were slain by the sword of him who sits upon the horse, the sword that issues from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh (Revelation 19:21).

And they marched up over the broad earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city; but fire came down from heaven (from God and consumed them (Revelation 20:9)).

We give thanks to thee, Lord God Almighty, who

art and who wast, that thou has taken thy great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but thy wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear thy name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth (Revelation 11:17,18).

The judgment in Revelation is a divine mishpat. God is the only one capable of acting out righteousness to this extent, and John used other-worldly imagery to make certain that his hearers would understand. The judgment of the world in Revelation is neither humanly inspired nor initiated. In fact, humans have only to wait patiently until God does his part.

Revelation is a book of patience, of waiting. God frequently is pictured as comforting his people, and exhorting them to be patient, to wait, to remain faithful. For the oppressed believers in Asia Minor, John's first hearers, there was little else to do. They could, of course, give in to the demands of a heathen empire; but that would bring divine wrath. There is not the slightest hint in Revelation that God's people can do anything to change the course of eschatological history. They can only choose to remain faithful and wait patiently for God to act, or they can defect to the side of the enemy and face God's wrath.

The Basis of God's Judgment

Since Revelation is a collection of parables about God's acts, it is unlikely that we will find one simple

formula for divine judgment. But by analyzing patterns we may arrive at an approximation of the standard by which God judges.

First, John made it amply clear that there is only one kind of final negative judgment--annihilation. For those who failed to remain faithful, or who did not repent during times of preliminary (remedial) judgments, there is only one end. Just as Jesus in his parable separated the world into two classes, the Sheep and the Goats, John separated the world into two groups, the annihilated and the redeemed.

We can surmise that John had a theology of righteousness by faith, given his statements about Christ's blood:

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood(Revelation 1:5).

Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou was slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth (Revelation 5:9,10).

Freedom and ransom are only available to those who "conquer," a euphemism, we suspect, for staying faithful to Christ through times of oppression and persecution. There seems little room in John's theology for perfectionism of the sort that requires the redeemed to be free of any sin in order to enjoy the new earth.

Contrary to images handed down by generations of revivalists in the faith, Revelation is primarily not about judgment of Christians! It is primarily how God tries to

woo the world to follow him, and then how he destroys those who will not. For those who are annihilated, several crimes damn them:

1. They have murdered the saints. At the opening of the fifth seal, the souls of the martyrs cry out for vengeance for their murders. Bollier correctly states that the crime here is not simply murder, but murder of God's people.⁴ To murder godly people for religion is to affront the god they worship.

Murder of the saints is also the charge against Babylon, for "in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on the earth" (Revelation 18:24).

2. They have worshiped idols. When the sixth trumpet blows, the crimes of the unrepentant are itemized. They worship demons and idols, they murder, practice sorcery, are immoral and steal (Revelation 9:20,21). Beyond general badness, the charge here is primarily crimes against God. The people who allow themselves to wear the beast's mark can also be called idolaters, since worshiping the beast and its image goes hand in hand with wearing its mark (Revelation 14:11).

John made no attempt to delineate the basis for judgment. In its simplicity Revelation describes people who will be saved. They trust God, keep his commandments, and live moral lives. But what ultimately decides their fate,

according to John, is whether their names appear in the book of life. Conversely, the wicked are "the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted . . . murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, . . . liars" (Revelation 21:8), but what condemns them is that their name does not appear in the Lamb's book of life.

It is not necessary to make a list of those acts or traits which lead to condemnation. The descriptions are given for color, to show just how bad the wicked are. The "good guys" are very good and the "bad guys" are very bad in John's imaginative world. We resist the very idea of such a division because it seems to require such goodness from the good and throws such a bad light on sinners. But if God truly means to annihilate a portion of the earth's populace someday, he will have to make just such a distinction. John's contribution is to remind us that the distinction rests with God and not with any of us. That should comfort and assure those who live in fear of impending judgment!

The Way God Executes Judgment

We have studied God's remedial judgments and ultimate annihilation. The other perspective is the positive side of divine judgment. During the times that demonic powers control governments, God's people are the outlaws, the accused, the executed. Unfairly condemned for "false" worship, they have been beaten and killed for their faith. Christ promised the believers in Smyrna

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life (Revelation 2:10).

The vindication of God's people is a less-developed theme in Revelation than remedial judgment or annihilation, but to the believers in Asia Minor it was probably more valuable. It is a terrible thing to be tortured and killed for believing in something that you know is right, and how comforting to know that someday the whole world will see that you were right all along! What a joyful time the believers must have had as they listened to the judgment against Babylon: "Rejoice over her, O heaven, O saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!" (Revelation 18:20).

John carefully integrated the Hebrew idea of taking a dispute to a court or king. With ultimate power God is pictured as deciding in favor of the oppressed, the wrongfully accused, the faithful ones.

Are the saints only vindicated and never judged in Revelation? If John intended a connection between the thousand years and the Great White Throne judgment in Revelation 20, then there is no judgment of or against the saints. If the saints have been raised to life to reign with Christ during the thousand years, then the dead who are raised at the Great White Throne judgment are already destined for the lake of fire.

Glasson sharply criticizes the idea of a Last Judgment as an actual event, preferring to think of it "as a pictorial representation of a transcendent reality."⁵ While the idea is rather deeply etched in Christian tradition, it, too, is a parabolic idea. But there is nothing in the parable to make us think that believers are judged at the Great White Throne.

Individual and Community

John walked a thin line in his encouragement of the believing community. They needed a sense of community, of togetherness, of belonging to a group. Yet at the same time he had to live within the boundaries of Christian theology which stated that individuals, not groups, are saved and lost. With images that seem at times to conflict, he described both the redeemed and the destroyed as both groups and individuals.

Individuals are given the promises in the Seven Letters. Individuals have their names written in the Lamb's book of life. Conversely, individuals are destroyed for not having their name written there. Salvation and damnation are definitely individual matters in Revelation. Yet groups dominate the visions.

John placed the believers together in groups so that they might feel the strength of community. He also described the wicked in groups so that the faithful could realize that they were not simply fighting individuals, but

a coalition of God's enemies. It is easier to fight and endure when you can identify your enemies!

Even though individual people decide their own fate by their faith or lack of faith, the entire world must ultimately be grouped into two classes. If that seems dehumanizing, it is far less so than the dehumanizing effects of sin.

John's believers, individually saved by the blood of the slain Lamb, emerge victorious at the end, united in a community of faith that has overcome every obstacle-- oppression, the pain of waiting, and their own weaknesses. They enter God's kingdom as a group, for they have endured as a group. The Apocalypse has something to say to us about the necessity for the Christian community to strengthen the members of the Body of Christ, and to begin to act more like a body of believers than a collection of individuals.

"Going to Heaven"

The popular conception of "going to Heaven" suggests an eternity away from the corruption and trouble of this world. It also indicates a lack of faith in God's promise to make a new earth, first verbalized by Isaiah (Isaiah 66:22). Ladd remarks that earth is our home, that we were created to live on this earth, and that "man's ultimate destiny is an earthly one."⁶

This earth that mankind inhabits at the close of Revelation is not the same earth that they lived on before.

Just as their bodies are changed and resurrected, God recreates the world, and perfects it.

Judgment is not complete until every problem has been solved, and every injustice reversed. When all has been corrected, John is able to picture God at long last living in direct contact with his people. Rather than the redeemed going to be with God, Revelation ends with God coming to live with his redeemed ones. "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them" (Revelation 21:3). John repeats the idea over and over, as if it is so strange and new that it must be repeated or it will not be believed!

Chapter Eight

LITERARY STRUCTURE OF JUDGMENT PARABLES IN REVELATION

Adela Yarbro Collins has identified three constant elements in John's visions:

- a. Persecution of the believers
- b. Punishment of persecutors
- c. Salvation of the persecuted

We concur that those are present in nearly every vision, but would insist that it is short sighted to look only for elements that exist in all visions. If the visions can be taken as parables, it is reasonable to expect that each might vary in its details, and vary in the message taught through it.

In fact, if the various elements of the visions are overlaid, two things happen. First, the number of significant elements is increased. Second, a remarkable pattern begins to develop, a pattern that demonstrates John's amazing ability as an editor and psychologist.

How many elements are consistently presented throughout Revelation? If we include persecution, which is not present in all Revelation parables, we can identify nine kinds of images which make up John's judgment theology.

1. Persecution. John reminded his hearers regular-

ly throughout the letters to the seven churches, and occasionally through the rest of the visions, that their persecution came from Satan and his followers. It was essential for John to involve his hearers in what he was telling them, for the action moves quickly beyond the present, visible world, to a world of cosmic struggle.

2. Christ Reigns. For believers under attack, it is essential to know that Christ is indeed risen, and that as a reigning king he has power and authority to vindicate them and to judge their oppressors. Since God alone is able to consummate final judgment, John pictured Jesus again and again as a king of power and glory.

3. Remedial Judgments. Lest his hearers give up on the world and the God who seemed to delay his return to save them, John pictured God struggling with an obstinate humanity. The Revelator did not want to think that annihilation was God's only solution to the problem of injustice. It is easy for the oppressed to begin to hate their oppressors and lose the love in their hearts that could change the hearts of the wicked. John's descriptions of remedial judgments are difficult for us to accept, but they play a powerful part in the story of God's redemptive plan.

4. Final Battle. Three times in Revelation John pictured the armies of the evil battling God. Not only do the images help us picture the very real struggle between

God and Satan, they also fit into the remedial judgment scheme. Faced with a patient God with unlimited power, led by demons, false prophets, and Satan himself, the wicked choose to fight rather than to repent. In each of the three such parables, that decision to fight God is their final act. Mercifully, they are destroyed. Open rebellion to God does not always bring immediate death, but the ultimate end is the same as John pictured in his Final Battle parables.

5. Decision. The forensic model of judgment is sorely lacking in Revelation, but it is often confused with a declarative sort of judgment where a ruling king announces a decision of condemnation or vindication. That point of decision marks the end of God's patience with the wicked and the end of waiting for the redeemed. It is, in Seventh-day Adventist eschatological terminology, a "close of probation".

6. Rewards. While rewards and punishment are actually two parts of the same event, John chose to describe them as separate events. Some visions include both elements, while others emphasize only one or the other. Rewards vary in their description from reigning as kings with Christ to living in the New Jerusalem.

7. Punishment. Since this is a final solution to the problem of sin, there are no fines to pay, no prison sentences. For all those who refuse to worship God, there is only one penalty--eternal death. John used a variety of

ways to describe that death; but all share a single quality, the finality of that death.

8. Judgment Complete. In several visions John included clear indications that the struggle was over, that judgment had come, and that the new order had been instituted.

A Linear View

With a scope as large as Revelation's it is easy for a study to become fragmented and specific even while we attempt to be general. To help us understand how John used parables to explain his theology of judgment, we will review how John developed judgment ideas in three of his major visions: the Seven Seals, the Seven Trumpets and the Seven Bowls of Plagues. We shall summarize how each vision progresses through the various forms of judgment that we have already described.

Seven Seals

The parable of the seven seals is the first to encompass the entire length of redemption history to come. The prelude to the actual opening of the seals shows christ's right to judge the world: "Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals" (Revelation 5:9).

As the first four seals are opened, four horsemen are told by the four living creatures to conquer, take peace from the earth, to damage agricultural economics and to

bring pestilence and famine to earth. While the nature of these plagues is severe, the opening of the fifth seal assures us that these are not final judgments, for the souls under the altar cry out "how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?" (Revelation 6:10).

Within the fifth seal is a decision by God to execute judgment as soon as enough believers have been martyred, perhaps a reflection of Joel's idea that at some point the wickedness of the wicked reaches a point of ripeness (Joel 3:13). Ford discusses at some length how God delays judgment until wickedness is ripe and the wicked have been adequately warned of impending final judgment.¹

At the opening of the sixth seal the presence of God is dramatically described. Earth and sky depart, the stars, sun and moon darken and disappear in the face of the Almighty One. There can be little doubt that John intended here to describe the final judgment when he wrote, "the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?" (Revelation 6:17).

Since judgment against the wicked is always the other side of judgment for the righteous, John followed the negative judgment with two scenes of rewards. Just prior to opening the last seal, the one-hundred forty-four thousand are sealed (marked) with God's mark, and John describes all the redeemed standing and worshiping God and the Lamb.

We would suggest that the vision of the seven seals ends with Revelation 8:1; "When the Lamb opened the seventh seal there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." F. F. Bruce and others consider this a pause before final judgment. We would argue that final judgment has already been given, and the silence is a way of reflecting on the enormity of what has just happened.

The danger of connecting the seals and trumpets visions is that some will see them timewise as one continuous vision. It is more accurate to see them as parallel visions, each describing the same span of time but with different emphasis. The vision of the seals can be charted like this:

CHRIST REIGNS	REMEDIAL	DECISION	JUDGMENT	COMPLETE
Throne Scene	Seals 1-4	Seal 5	Seal 6	Seal 7
5:1-14	6:1-7	6:9-11	6:12 - 7:17	8:1

Seven Trumpets

The vision of the seven trumpets is very much like the seals. It begins with remedial judgments in which the earth is plagued by hail, fire, a sea of blood, foul water and dim sun, moon and stars. For a populace that claims to control the world, God must remind them that he is in charge of nature. The judgments continue to fall until the sounding of the sixth seal, at which time a heavenly angel calls out, apparently, a declaration of final judgment. The final

judgment is consummated and finished at the sounding of the seventh trumpet. This vision is the only of the series that does not contain a picture of Christ reigning or of the glorified saints. The vision is almost entirely devoted to the negative side of judgment and contains nothing positive until the very end. Even at that point only the twenty-four elders rather than the assembled body of saints proclaim the end of judgment.

CHRIST REIGNS	REMEDIAL	DECISION	JUDGMENT	COMPLETE
Absent	Trumpets 1-6	Trumpet 6	Trumpet 7	-----

Seven Bowls of Plagues

Perhaps to make up for neglecting the redeemed in the vision of the trumpets, John began the vision of the bowls with a scene of the redeemed worshipping God and the Lamb. The prophet obviously wanted his hearers to know that they had nothing to fear from these preliminary, remedial judgments, so he placed them with Christ during the pouring out of the bowls. This does not imply that events might occur that way chronologically in the real world, but it certainly would comfort the hearers, who might fear the results of the devastating plagues.

The first five plagues are clearly remedial in nature, although they do not produce repentance but rather cursing from the plagued. The sixth plague introduces a final battle scene, which seems to precipitate final judgment.

John used Joel's imagery to show that the wicked will not turn from evil, even when faced with the impossibility of winning their battle. In the Appendix we refer to this last battle as the Final, Impossible Battle.

When the angel pours out the seventh-bowl, the entire earth is destroyed, and nature turns upside down in God's presence. Although the end is somewhat anti-climactic, ending as it does with a hailstorm, there can be no doubt that this is truly a final judgment by God. The reasons for ending the vision so abruptly have already been discussed. What is most significant at this point is that John still used most of the vision to describe God's remedial judgments. God still wants the ungodly to repent and turn to him!

CHRIST REIGNS	REMEDIAL	DECISION	JUDGMENT	COMPLETE
Sea of Glass	Bowls 1-5	Bowl 6	Bowl 7	-----
15:2-4	15:5 - 16:11	16:12-16	16:17-21	

This short summary of three visions serves to show a rather consistent pattern in Revelation. An overlay of the major judgment scenes from Revelation is contained in an Appendix to this study. It shows rather clearly how John's emphasis gradually shifted from oppression to consummated judgment and the vindication and glorification of the saints.

The Genius of the Forward Look

Any reader of Revelation will see immediately that it begins with believers in trouble and ends with believers in glory. What is not so obvious is that each vision moves in the same direction. What is even less obvious is that the action and emphasis of the visions moves inexorably from the believers' present state (persecution and discouragement) through God's remedial judgments on the unrepentant, through the declaration of judgment, to rewards and punishment and the establishment of a new world.

If one can picture the first hearers of the Apocalypse with their eyes turned downward and inward, by the time the visions have all been told their eyes would clearly be turned outward and upward. John's genius is that he could accomplish a change of attitude through the use of repetition and story movement.

Summary

John used judgment themes from the Hebrew Scriptures and from other Christian sources. We have concluded that John's theology of judgment is consistent with other biblical theologies. We saw that John concentrated on two major judgment themes: remedial judgment and annihilation. We found no evidence of forensic judgment in the Apocalypse, noting instead that John implied that people determine their own fate by how they respond to God's love and remedial judgments.

When we classified Revelation as parabolic literature, we freed ourselves to look for spiritual messages rather than political or historical predictions. Throughout Revelation we have seen a consistent pattern where God first appeals to wicked people with remedial judgments, then determines that such remediation is concluded, and finally destroys the unresponsive ones and rewards the faithful with eternal life. Throughout it all, John pictures God as an active God with a plan to remove evil from the world.

CONCLUSION

It would be easy to give up completely on society, especially for the first intended hearers of John's apocalypse. It might have been difficult for them, as it is for us now, to always see why right-doing is worth the effort. Some, apparently, gave up the fight and forsook their faith for the approval of society and the government. Others wavered, holding some of their belief but stepping little by little away from the safety of the believing community.

What they needed (and we need, also) was a reminder that they, as a community of faith, were right--that they believed right, practiced right, and worshiped the right God. John, called by God to bolster their faith, used a literary style characterized by its colorful imagery and mystical language to capture their attention. Carefully he drew his hearers through a series of adventures to a dramatic conclusion.

John did not describe individual believers battling sin and Satan. Instead he pictured a band of the faithful watching in triumph as their king and Lord, Jesus Christ, fought the powers of evil. If they could listen to the story and not be sidetracked by the imagery, they would see that the fight was not their to win, but Christ's. They

would not endure by their own power, but would conquer with his strength.

The faithful ones in Revelation are harassed, and even killed for their faith, yet the reader never has a real sense of danger of them. Perhaps it is because, in the end, they are alive and well, and their enemies are destroyed.

Revelation is a gruesome book. It describes the judgments of God in gory detail. Did John's hearers get comfort from the winepress parable? We would hope not. But there is enough fear-invoking language there to turn some fence-sitters back to the way of the Lord. God has never been above frightening people when their good sense stopped working!

God's ultimate goal is clear--he wants all people to repent and turn to him. John was a realist though, and did not paint a picture of a repentant world. This time, Jonah's message falls on deaf ear, and Ninevah is destroyed! But for the individual, repentance brings an immediate change to favored status and escape from judgment.

Some have said that there are no individual Christians--that the faith only exists in community. In fact, in Revelation, the only time anyone truly stands alone is in the Great White Throne judgment on the wicked. Then "if any one's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15). Believers

are always in a group, whether in a multitude too big to number (Revelation 7:9) or one-hundred forty-four thousand (Revelation 14:1).

Whether one is able to conceive of a literal judgment or not, Revelation brings hope that God is still a God of promise and of action. The oppressors will not always oppress, and one day God will vindicate his people.

Tradition built another imaginary world atop John's. In that world God presided over a court which investigated each person's life and deeds. An apparently faithful believer might be snatched from the band of the redeemed and plunged into the lake of fire, there to burn without dying for ceaseless ages. It is hard to imagine how Christians could face that world and still believe that "God is love".

John's apocalypse was not meant to be an evangelistic tool to bring people to Christ. It was intended to comfort suffering Christians, and those who were in danger of losing their faith. And for those who read it rightly, it is still a source of comfort and hope.

Wherever people are oppressed or hurt for their faith, Revelation speaks to them of patience, of safety, of trust, and of promise. For those who believe without persecution, the Apocalypse reminds them that God is still waiting for the world to repent. Through a kaleidoscope of images and myths, John revealed a Christ who is victorious, people who are conquerors, and a Kingdom without end.

"I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown" (Revelation 3:11).

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⁵God is the righteous judge in Psalm 9:4-8, 50:6, 96:13, Isaiah 5:16, 58:2 and Jeremiah 11:20.

⁶The letters to the churches of Ephesus (Revelation 2:4), Pergamum (Revelation 2:14) and Thyatira (Revelation 2:20) include the warning "I have this against you", a statement of impending judgment. God is pictured, not as an advocate for the believers, but as a plaintiff. The language and imagery is remarkably reminiscent of the Old Testament "lawsuit of God" described by Limburg. James Limburg, "The Lawsuit of God in the Eighth-Century Prophets", Th.D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, 1969.

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