

8-3-2016

## The Book of Revelation [Lecture Notes]

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<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2016.sinclair.02>

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### Recommended Citation

Sinclair, Scott Gambrill, "The Book of Revelation [Lecture Notes]" (2016). *The Scott Sinclair Lecture Notes Collection*. 2.

<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2016.sinclair.02>

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## Course Syllabus for the "The Book of Revelation" (3 units)

Instructor: Dr. Scott Sinclair      scottgsinclair@hotmail.com

Course description: An examination of the context, message, and contemporary relevance of this extraordinary final book of the Christian New Testament.

Student Learning Outcomes for this course: Student will demonstrate a knowledge of 1) the literal contents of the Book of Revelation, 2) the cultural and/or historical situations to which they respond, and 3) the enduring theological perspectives that appear in these responses.

Texts: The Bible (including the Protestant Apocrypha). Students are expected to bring a Bible to class.

### Evaluation:

- 1) Students will receive 2 points for attending each class or for each excused absence.
- 2) There will be a weekly ten-point quiz which will cover the material given in the previous two class sessions.
- 3) There will also be a midterm and a final. The examinations are non-cumulative. The midterm will occur when we have gotten to page 30 of the lecture notes. The final examination will occur on the date scheduled by the registrar. The examinations have three sections. The first is multiple choice and is worth 100 points, the second is essay and is worth 100 points, and the third is extra credit worth up to 5 points. In the extra-credit section, students may briefly refute some position held by the instructor. Students will write the essays (and extra credit) at home and hand them in when they take the multiple choice section in class.
- 4) All students must do two brief classroom presentations: 1) a presentation of some futuristic treatment of Revelation in popular culture (e.g., a web site, a book, a movie; students should sign up in advance for a time slot) and 2) a presentation of some art work(s) inspired by Revelation. The presentation could be an art work (a painting, poem, song, dance, photographic essay [e.g., "Babylon in the Bay Area"]) composed by the student or a series of art works composed by others. The artistic presentations will take place after we have gotten to page 65 of the lecture notes and will be worth 25 points. The presentation on a futuristic treatment of Revelation in popular culture will not be graded but failure to do the presentation will result in a 25 point reduction in the student's total points for the course.
- 5) Upper division students must also write a 3-5 page paper on the topic, "What in This

Course Will Be of Continuing Importance in my Life?" and together lead a classroom discussion. The paper is due the last day of class, and the discussion will take place on the last day of class or during the period for the final examination (not all of the two hour slot will be needed for the multiple choice questions). The paper is worth 25 points.

## LECTURE NOTES AND ASSIGNMENTS

by

Scott Gambrill Sinclair

### Introduction

- I. Some books and courses on Revelation focus on providing technical information. They concentrate on such questions as, "Who wrote the book and when?" or "What is the book's literary structure?"
- II. And in this present class we will cover much of this technical information.
- III. Nevertheless, we will focus on how a Christian should interpret the book. We will do so for several reasons:
  - A. The instructor and presumably some of the students are Christians, and the question of how a Christian should interpret Revelation is of special interest to us.
  - B. The book was written by a Christian for Christians. Hence, its primary message was, at least originally, for believers in Jesus.
  - C. As part of the Bible, Revelation is authoritative for Christians, and, therefore, the issue of how we should interpret it is especially significant.
- IV. Of course, non-Christians who are interested in Revelation cannot simply borrow a Christian interpretation but must make their own. However, I believe that a knowledge of how a Christian might responsibly interpret Revelation will assist someone else who wishes to appropriate the book.
- V. The title of the book.
  - A. The original copy had no separate title.
  - B. Instead, the opening words of the text, "The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place . . ." served as an indication of the book's overall contents. The lack of a main verb helps indicate that the phrase serves as a summary or heading.
  - C. After the book was published many titles arose already in the ancient Greek manuscripts. Note that when each copy of a work is done separately by hand, numerous variations easily appear.
  - D. Sometimes the book is called simply the "Apocalypse" (Greek: "revelation"), which is the opening word in the text.
  - E. But this title also gets expanded in various ways, especially, "The Revelation of John" (early Greek manuscripts) or "The Revelation to John" (NRSV). Both these expansions are true to the content, since the book explicitly claims to be John's Revelation to us readers of what God revealed to him (1:1-2).
  - F. I will simply refer to the book by its abbreviated English title of "Revelation."
  - G. Please remember that the title should always be singular (not "Revelations").
- VI. The author

- A. The book repeatedly tells us that its author is "John" (Rev. 1:1, 1:4, 22:8).
- B. Since John had a detailed knowledge of what was happening in various congregations, he was probably an itinerant preacher ("prophet") (1:3). In the Bible "prophecy" is usually inspired preaching.
- C. Traditionally, the Church identified this John with John the son of Zebedee who was one of the twelve, an inner core of Jesus's original followers.
- D. The identification of Revelation's author with John the son of Zebedee is probably a mistake.
  - 1. Revelation never claims that its author is one of the twelve.
  - 2. When it did not know who wrote an authoritative book, the Church tended to attribute it to the twelve.
  - 3. The twelve would probably all have been dead by the time the "John" of Revelation wrote (see below). Revelation itself seems to treat the twelve as figures of the Church's past (21:14).
  - 4. Despite the tendency to attribute books to the twelve, important ancient Christians argued that John the son of Zebedee did not write Revelation (see below).
  - 5. John the son of Zebedee spoke Aramaic (the language of Jesus), whereas Revelation is in Greek (the dominant language of the Eastern Mediterranean during the New Testament era). It must be noted, however, that the Greek of Revelation does have a Hebrew/Aramaic feel, either because Greek is the author's second language or the author is deliberately trying to sound like the Hebrew Scriptures.
  - 6. John was a common name, and we have various "Johns" already in the New Testament (e.g., John the Baptist, John Mark).

### Some Problems with the Usual Christian Approaches to Revelation

A reading from Revelation.

- I. Except for Revelation, the books of the New Testament present a world that is basically familiar.
- II. Consequently, at the most fundamental level there has been general agreement over what these books mean. For example, no one debates whether St. Paul was a human being or an animal.
- III. By contrast, Revelation presents a world that is basically alien.
- IV. As a result, even at the most fundamental level, it is not obvious what Revelation means.
- V. The fact that the book claims to predict *future* events makes interpretation especially problematic, because we do not know what the future will be.
- VI. Revelation's obscurity makes it easy to read one's prejudices into the text.
- VII. Down through the ages the book has been popular with Christians who enjoyed speculation or were highly polarized. They used Revelation to
  - A. Prove that their enemies fit the number "666" and so were the Beast described in Revelation 13.
  - B. Prove that the end of the present world was imminent.

VIII. This speculative and polemical use of Revelation has a number of attractive features.

- A. It makes Revelation obviously relevant and, therefore, interesting.
- B. It inspires burning hope and zeal.
- C. Hence, it allows readers to experience some of the impact Revelation originally was intended to have.

IX. Perhaps because of these attractive features, such interpretation of Revelation has become big business, featuring a range of products, including not only guides to Revelation but also novels and movies. Many people seem to be getting rich off of Revelation. Web presentation from ArmageddonBooks.com

X. Nevertheless, the speculative and polemical use of the text has severe difficulties.

- A. So far, all specific predictions about the future based on Revelation (and other biblical books) have proven to be at least premature.
- B. The failure of these has inevitably led to hypocrisy or the loss of faith. Note the perennial tendency to recalculate when the world will end.
- C. The polemical use has fanned hatred and fear. (How would you feel if you thought your enemy was the Antichrist?)
- D. The speculative use of Revelation does not fit well with Jesus's opposition to seeking signs (e.g., Mat. 12:39).
- E. As Jesus's opposition suggests, religion ideally
  - 1. Helps us focus on making the most of the present
  - 2. Is about achieving inner transformation and doing social service, not about gaining esoteric information.
- F. However, the speculative and polemical use of the text
  - 1. Plunges us into a weird future.
  - 2. Focuses us on deciphering some sort of arcane code rather than having lives of love and service.

XI. Perhaps because speculative thinkers have abused Revelation, circumspect Christians have marginalized it.

- A. In "mainline" churches and parochial schools Revelation is seldom the topic of classes or sermons.
- B. "Mainline" scholarship mostly restricts its efforts to showing what the book meant originally or claiming that it contains things that are Christian or helpful today. Consequently, "mainline" commentaries tend to be dull for anyone who wishes more than esoteric information or platitudes.
- C. As a result, Revelation at best becomes something Christians are free to use selectively if they like.

XII. Often mainline scholars avoid a systematic discussion of whether Revelation is actually true, and, if so, whether that truth contributes something essential to Christianity which otherwise would be missing.

XIII. However, this question is crucial.

XIV. It is also the question with which we will struggle in this class.

XV. An outline of the course.

Discussion: What is your past experience (if any) of Revelation, and what is your present attitude toward the book?

ASSIGNMENT: Spend at least fifteen minutes on the web looking at material on

Revelation, including things that are for sale. Students should come to class prepared to comment briefly on what they found. Read Revelation and review the lecture notes.

## Revelation's Inclusion in the Bible as an Implicit Criticism of the Usual Christian Approaches

What did you find on Revelation that is for sale?

Discussion question: How do most people think that the Bible came into being? What were you told?

I. The primary reason that Revelation is important to Christians is that it is in the New Testament and, hence, is authoritative. For Christians the New Testament is a foundational document (i.e., a document that tells the community who it is) much like the Constitution is a foundational document for the United States.

A. Because Revelation is in the New Testament speculative Christians

1. Are confident that the book is absolutely true and utterly inspired and can tell us about the future.

2. Can claim that what they do is completely different from the occult.

B. Because Revelation is in the New Testament, circumspect Christians give the book lip service when they would like to dismiss it.

II. People sometimes talk as if the Bible fell from heaven one day.

III. In fact, none of the books presently in the New Testament started out as part of the Bible. Instead, after the individual writings came into existence, the Church gradually recognized their importance and canonized them.

IV. In the selection process three criteria were important:

A. Apostolicity.

1. A book was supposed to be by an apostle or, at least, by someone who relied on an apostle.

2. Apostle had two different definitions. An "apostle" was either

a. One of the twelve whom Jesus himself chose and who apparently symbolized the leaders of the New Israel which Jesus was calling into being.

b. Or a person who received a resurrection appearance and a commission from the risen Lord to preach.

3. In practice "apostolicity" meant that a document came from the first century, the era of the apostles, since the Church rarely remembered who had actually written sacred texts.

B. Inspiration. A book was supposed to be true and useful.

C. Catholicity ("universality"). A book had to be accepted by the Church as a whole and not just by some sect.

V. Revelation had more difficulty than any other New Testament book in gaining admission to the canon (the list of books in the Bible).

A. Important Christian theologians and communities questioned Revelation's canonicity or opposed it outright (e.g., the Alogoi, Eusebius, Amphilochius of Iconium, the School of Antioch).

B. As a result, it was the last book to gain universal acceptance into the New

Testament, and many ancient New Testament lists and manuscripts are identical to our own except for the absence of Revelation.

VI. One reason that many opposed Revelation was that they doubted its apostolicity. They (rightly) believed that the author of the Fourth Gospel or the Johannine Epistles could not have written Revelation. Dionysius of Alexandria (3rd cent.) was especially persuasive, since he systematically pointed out the differences in style, content, and authorship claims between Revelation and the other Johannine books.

VII. Nevertheless, the primary reason people opposed Revelation was they found the book to be obscure, and they objected to speculators who appealed to it to justify dubious theology (especially, a literal thousand year reign of resurrected saints on earth; see Rev. 20:4-6).

VIII. In the end, the Church canonized Revelation but only after leading theologians had insisted that it should not be used for uncontrolled speculation about imminent events.

A. In the West Augustine (354-430) taught that the millennium in Revelation referred to the history of the Church and that there was no way for humans to know in advance when the final events in history climaxing in the return of Christ would occur (e.g., City of God XVII.53). Thanks to Augustine's enormous influence, the use of Revelation for uncontrolled speculation about imminent events did not again become popular in the West until the twelfth century.

B. In the East mainline Christians from the second century on countered futuristic exegesis with allegory. The images of Revelation were symbols of timeless truth.

IX. The history of Revelation's entry into the New Testament implicitly challenges the speculative and mainline approaches usual today.

A. The inclusion of the book in the Bible challenges the mainline tendency to marginalize Revelation.

B. The insistence that Revelation not be used for speculation about imminent events challenges appealing to the book's canonical status to justify fanciful forecasts.

Discussion: Do you think Revelation should have been put into the Bible? Why? Note that even today one can find people who want to take Revelation out of the Bible.

X. Some visual illustrations of Revelation

ASSIGNMENT: Read Amos.

### Five Possible Ways to Interpret a Biblical Prophecy

I. John explicitly calls his book a "prophecy" (Rev. 1:3).

II. The English word "prophet" ultimately derives from Greek, and in Greek "pro" means "before" and "phemi" means to speak. Hence, by etymology the word "prophet" means to "pre" "dict." Note that Revelation is in ancient Greek.

III. Nevertheless, Revelation understands a contemporary prophet primarily as someone in the tradition of the prophets of the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures.

IV. The Old Testament prophets too sometimes predicted the future, and in John's time, Christians believed that centuries earlier the Old Testament prophets had



predicted the coming of Christ, including his death and resurrection. Today critical Christian scholars believe that the Old Testament prophets primarily spoke about their own era but also said things that prepared for the coming of Christ and the rise of Christianity.

- V. One way to predict the future is to rely on psychic powers (e.g., seeing things in a trance) or magical techniques (e.g., reading tarot cards). In this kind of prophecy
  - A. A philosophic implication is that the future is fixed, indeed, that in some sense it already exists.
  - B. A prophet can be a professional who has been trained in how to produce altered states of consciousness or how magically to interpret phenomena.
- VI. Another way of predicting the future is to extrapolate from tendencies in the present. I prefer the term “forecast” for this sort of prediction. In this kind of prophecy
  - A. A prophet ideally has an expert knowledge of the normal tendencies.
  - B. An implication is that there will be no outside interference.
- VII. By contrast, a “classical” biblical prophet
  - A. Does not normally rely on the “occult” or extrapolate from observable tendencies in the present.
  - B. Is not a trained professional.
- VIII. Instead, a classical biblical prophet
  - A. Receives an individual call from God to speak for him.
  - B. And God then tells the prophet to share how God feels about what people are doing and how God intends to respond. (E.g., the prophet learns that God is angry over Israel's sinfulness and declares that he will visit disaster on the nation.)
- IX. Some implications of this kind of prophecy are
  - A. God makes moral judgments about human behavior.
  - B. God will somehow reward the righteous and punish the wicked.
  - C. God summons special individuals to look into his heart and announce his will to others.

Discussion: Do you believe the future is fixed or that we can predict the future accurately from present tendencies? Does God make moral judgments and reward the righteous and punish the wicked? If so, how does God do this? If not, what do you believe instead?

- X. "Interpretation" is transferring meaning from one context (e.g., Spanish) into another (e.g., English) so that someone who understands only the second may be able to grasp what is being said in the first.
- XI. A valid interpretation must do at least two things:
  - A. Discover a meaning that actually existed in the original context
  - B. Accurately transfer that meaning into the secondary context.
- XII. In the case of Biblical prophecy (including apocalyptic prophecy) the transfer involves such culturally specific items as language and literary symbolism (e.g., beasts and horns).
- XIII. An even more important and troublesome transfer is the one involving chronological time. What was future for, say, the biblical prophet Amos in the eighth century B.C.E., may be past for us.
- XIV. Depending on how we make the transfer in time, we can interpret biblical

prophecy (and many other prophecies both ancient and modern) in at least five different ways.

A. If we assume that what was future for the prophet is future for us too, then we can interpret the prophecies futuristically. Amos or some other past prophet tells us about coming events in our world.

B. If we assume that what was future for the prophet is past for us, then we can interpret prophecies historically. Amos's predictions only tell us about what he thought would occur in ancient history. Hence, we can compare the prophecy with what subsequently took place and check its accuracy.

C. Or we can assume that the transfer in chronological time should not be made. The actual course of subsequent events does not explain what produced the prophecy. In that case, we can interpret it in an exhortative, idealistic, or preterite way.

1. According to an exhortative approach, a biblical prophecy was an attempt to improve moral behavior. Many prophecies were even contingent. The prophet foretold what would happen *unless* people repented. Therefore, the validity of biblical prophecy depends on whether it improved past behavior or will improve behavior now or in the future. Similarly, we can interpret many modern prophecies exhortatively. When scientists talk about the long term effects of global warming, scientists are not really telling us about what the future will be but warning us to change our behavior now.

2. According to an idealistic approach, a biblical prophecy is primarily a specific application of an underlying general principle (e.g., God destroys those who oppress the poor). The validity of the prophecy depends on whether the general principle is valid. So too today, the validity of a weather forecast may not be whether it turned out to be accurate but whether it was based on sound scientific principles.

3. According to a preterite approach, a prophecy should not be updated but simply be understood as a past event. Its "meaning" is what it meant originally. Subsequent events or our present needs, hopes, and fears do not help us understand the prophecy itself.

XV. Each of these approaches has its strengths and weaknesses.

A. The futuristic

1. The strength is that it usually allows us to take unfulfilled prophecies at face value and claim that they are wholly true. They will be fulfilled in our future.

2. However, there are several weaknesses.

- a. The futuristic approach cannot salvage a prophecy which has a time limit that has expired (e.g., Mat. 16:28) or whose fulfillment is no longer conceivable (e.g., Ezekiel 37:15-28).

- b. It raises the issue of why the prophecy was relevant to its first hearers or to those who subsequently passed on the tradition for thousands of years.

- c. It also raises the issue of whether the fulfillment is still far in the future and irrelevant to us too.

d. It makes it difficult to affirm meaningful human freedom. If God can foresee the distant future in detail, then it would appear that our actions are already determined or, if not, that our decisions do not shape events.

## B. The historical

### 1. Strengths

a. The historical approach recognizes that biblical prophets (like virtually all prophets) were concerned about their own immediate future and made predictions about it.

b. The historical approach rightly notes that many of those predictions were remarkably perceptive and were fulfilled (e.g., Amos's prediction of the destruction of the Northern Kingdom; Amos 2:6-16), and it honestly admits that others did not come to pass.

### 2. Weaknesses

a. The historical approach does not explain why failed prophecies continued to inspire the faithful down through the ages.

b. Not all biblical "prophecies" (e.g., Daniel 7-12) were originally predictions.

c. Some prophecies (e.g., John 1:51) are too general or ambiguous for us to know whether they were fulfilled. Note the danger and lure of reading subsequent events back into vague predictions (cf. the astrology columns).

d. Basically, the historical approach makes biblical prophecy irrelevant today. What differences does it make now that a prophecy was or was not fulfilled long ago?

## C. The exhortative

### 1. Strengths

a. The exhortative approach takes the *goal* of biblical prophecy seriously.

b. It also allows us to salvage the truth of certain unfulfilled prophecies. If the prophecy inspired or now inspires improved behavior, then it is valid.

### 2. Weaknesses

a. Much biblical prophecy was not contingent. The prophet predicted what had to take place regardless of what people did.

b. We rarely know how biblical prophecies influenced past behavior.

c. Normally, a prophecy only improves behavior if people think that the prediction itself is an accurate forecast of what will take place (unless behavior changes). A prophecy is never merely an appeal for good conduct. One can appeal for good conduct without predicting the future.

## D. The idealistic

### 1. Strengths

a. It recognizes that biblical prophecies rest on general principles

(e.g., God loves the poor).

b. It makes biblical prophecies relevant, since the general principles usually remain significant.

2. Weaknesses

a. It dismisses the actual prediction.

b. In practice, people who use the idealistic approach only focus on principles that they like.

c. Identifying the principles is not enough; we must also explain why they are valid, and often people who use the idealistic approach fail to do so. E.g., does God in fact raise up the poor and bring down the rich, and, if so, how does God do this?

E. The preterite

1. The strength is the preterite does not impose our theological agenda on an ancient prophecy. Accordingly, it enables us to understand the prophecy on its own terms.

2. The weakness is that the prophecy becomes irrelevant to us, to the sacred community that preserved it through the centuries, and even to the prophet who was concerned about subsequent fulfillment.

XVI. An exercise in using the five approaches to interpret prophetic texts (Luke 6:20-21, Habakkuk 2:14). An exercise in using these approaches to interpret the secular prophecy that the present destruction of nature will lead to global catastrophe for human beings.

ASSIGNMENT: Read Revelation.

## The Necessity and Difficulty of the Five Ways in Interpreting Revelation

I. John wrote in the tradition of the classical biblical prophets. Note, for example, that at the beginning of Revelation he narrates his call to prophesy, as the older classical prophets also do (e.g., Isaiah 6:1-8).

II. (Review) In the last section we saw that there are five basic ways to interpret a biblical prophecy, and each has strengths and weaknesses.

III. In the case of Revelation, each approach has been used.

A. Many people have understood Revelation futuristically. Revelation tells us about coming events, and the task of exegesis is to deduce them. This approach is especially prominent in popular culture, as our student presentations show.

B. Other people have understood Revelation historically. Revelation gives an outline of history from John's day to some later time (e.g., the triumph of Christianity under Constantine) or to the end of the world. Consequently, all or much of the text was predictions about events that from our modern perspective are past. One task of exegesis is to correlate the scenes of Revelation with the events of history.

C. Occasionally, commentators have understood Revelation in an exhortative way. The book was a plea to change behavior, and the commentator must make that plea heard today. The exhortative approach works especially well with the seven letters in chapters 2-3.

- D. In pre-modern times scholars often interpreted Revelation idealistically, and a few modern scholars continue to do so. The book primarily presents timeless theological ideas (e.g., about good and evil), and the exegete must draw attention to them.
- E. Finally, in modern times the preterite approach has become standard in the academic community. Today most critical scholars assume that Revelation primarily addressed the specific problems of John's own day and that the task of exegesis is to determine Revelation's original message.
- IV. In my opinion each of these approaches is both necessary and problematic.
- A. The futuristic approach
1. Is necessary because the *climax* of Revelation--the millennium and New Jerusalem--has not yet come. If these predictions are in no sense still to be realized, the book as a whole fails.
  2. Is problematic because
    - a. So far all futuristic predictions have proven false and done pastoral damage.
    - b. Revelation stressed to its first readers that its predictions would be fulfilled "soon" (Rev. 1:1, 1:3, etc.), and from the perspective of this audience, "soon" cannot mean in 2,000 years.
- B. The historical approach
1. Is necessary in order to explain why the book's promise of deliverance "soon" was true. Note that this promise is central to Revelation.
  2. Is problematic because
    - a. Revelation understands "soon" to be "soon" to the consummation.
    - b. Revelation's predictions are mostly so bizarre and vague that we cannot convincingly correlate them with known historical events.
    - c. Hence, it is not even clear Revelation makes detailed predictions (see below).
- C. The exhortative approach
1. Is necessary because John's goal in writing Revelation was to change his readers' behavior, and the success of the book must be judged, at least in part, on whether the behavior improved.
  2. Is problematic because
    - a. We do not know how Revelation changed the behavior of its first readers.
    - b. Subsequently, Revelation often inspired foolishness and cruelty (see above).
- D. The idealistic approach
1. Is necessary because
    - a. Of the limitations of the other approaches
    - b. In using the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures John sometimes generalizes (e.g., "Babylon" summarizes all the evil cities of the past; Rev. 11:8). Hence, it appears that to some extent John himself interpreted scripture idealistically and considered general theological principles important.

c. Moreover, sometimes the principles underlying Revelation are clearly visible. Note, e.g., the *lex talionis* (the punishment fitting the crime) in Revelation 16:56 and elsewhere.

2. Is problematic because Revelation is a specific prophecy, not merely a set of principles.

#### E. The preterite

1. Is necessary because

a. It is the method with which we must begin. An interpretation must be based on something's original meaning. Note that the Christian doctrine of the incarnation implies that God must first be recognized in a particular context.

b. It clears up certain difficulties that other methods cannot satisfactorily resolve. For example, the preterite method demonstrates that the infamous Beast whose number is 666 is probably the Emperor Nero.

1). "Nero(n)" transliterated into Hebrew (where letters also are used for numbers) can yield "666" (Rev. 13:18). Without the "n" the number is 616, and some ancient copies of Revelation have this number.

2). Nero persecuted the church.

3). After Nero's suicide there were recurring rumors that he was not dead but had fled to the East and would soon return and conquer Rome. Several "Nero's" did in fact appear.

4). In Revelation the Beast is an eighth emperor, yet also one of the previous emperors and will return and destroy Rome (Rev. 17:8-18).

2. Is problematic because by itself it makes Revelation irrelevant today. Hence, even if the preterite method is the one with which we must begin, it cannot be the one with which we end.

Discussion: How might one interpret Revelation 13:1-8 in each of the five ways?

ASSIGNMENT: Read Daniel and 2 Esdras 11-14 (in the Apocrypha).

### Revelation's Old Testament and Intertestamental Background and Its Significance

I. Like most early Christian writers, John apparently assumed that his readers had a detailed knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament).

II. In contrast to other New Testament books, Revelation does not quote scripture verbatim.

III. Nevertheless, it is full of allusions to scripture (e.g., Rev. 4:6-8 versus Isaiah 6:1-3 & Ezekiel 1:5-10, 18).

IV. Revelation's dependence on Daniel is perhaps especially striking.

A. Many of Revelation's images come from there (compare, e.g., Rev. 1:13-15 & Dan. 7:9,13; 10:5-6; Rev. 13:1-2 & Dan. 7:2-7).

B. Much of Revelation's theology does too. Note that Daniel proclaims that in the end time an evil ruler will institute a catastrophic persecution and that soon

- thereafter God will destroy him and raise the dead and judge them.
- V. Revelation also has similarities to ancient visionary works such as 1 & 2 Enoch and 2 Esdras. Consequently, modern scholarship calls such works, along with Daniel, "apocalypses" [Greek: "unveiling" or "revelation"]. The Book of Revelation gave its name to a whole body of literature. The similarities among the apocalypses usually include
- A. Journeys to heaven or hell.
  - B. Two ages, an evil age to be followed by an endless age of justice.
  - C. Animals that stand for nations and rulers.
  - D. A heavenly being who interprets the visions.
  - E. And, by means of the above, the "revelation" of mysteries either about some transcendent realm (e.g., heaven) or about the future.
  - F. A narrative (story) structure.
- VI. Daniel and the other apocalypses originated at the end of the Old Testament period and afterward. Note that Daniel which was written around 165 B.C.E. is the latest book in the Hebrew Bible, and 2 Esdras comes from the late first century C.E., as does Revelation (see below).
- VII. In much of this era, the Jewish people had to struggle to preserve their identity in the face of relentless pressure and sometimes severe persecution. For example,
- A. Daniel was a response to the attempt by the Greek King, Antiochus Epiphanes, to destroy Judaism.
  - B. 2 Esdras was a response to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.
  - C. Greek culture which dominated the world when and where John lived was very aggressive, and many Jews abandoned their own culture to follow Greek ways.
- VIII. Books such as Daniel and 1 Enoch made permanent contributions to Christian theology, especially,
- A. The belief in meaningful life after death.
  - B. The belief that history has a transcendent goal.
- IX. These beliefs gave (and give) hope, particularly, to marginal peoples facing religious persecution.
- X. Unfortunately, the apocalypses also contain dubious innovations.
- A. Pseudonymity (Greek: "false name"). The apocalypses claim to be by ancient worthies even though the actual authors lived much later. Pseudonymity is especially disturbing when the purported author predicts events that were actually past from the real author's perspective.
  - B. Making known esoteric mysteries (e.g., about the cosmos).
- XI. These innovations helped make these books credible in their own day.
- A. No one questioned the authority of such ancient saints as Daniel and Ezra, and the books of Daniel and 2 Esdras claim to be written by them.
  - B. Since such books accurately predict future events which had occurred when the original readers lived (since these events were already past from the actual author's perspective!), it seemed reasonable to accept the accuracy of predictions which from the original reader's perspective were still to come.
  - C. The revelation of secrets seemed to show the great learning and wisdom of the author.

- XII. Revelation retains the advances of other "apocalypses" and yet drops the defects.
- A. Revelation emphasizes that there is meaningful life after death and that history has a transcendent goal.
  - B. Yet, John writes under his own name and does not reveal esoteric mysteries.
- XIII. In its own day, the dropping of pseudonymity and esoteric knowledge raised questions about Revelation's credibility.
- XIV. To make his message credible, John claims he is a prophet with a message from God. Note that John calls his book a "prophecy" (1:3), and the book shares important features with the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. These features include
- A. A call narrative in which God/Jesus summons the prophet to share a message 1:9-19, 10:1-11 cf. Ezekiel 1-3).
  - B. The recounting of visions.
  - C. The sharing of the actual words which God or Jesus dictates.
- XV. In subsequent lectures we will have to examine whether this claim is justified.
- Discussion: How do modern prophets attempt to make their messages credible? What makes you believe a modern prophecy?
- ASSIGNMENT: Reread Revelation.

### Revelation's Social Setting

- I. Revelation provides a fair amount of material from which we can reconstruct John's understanding of his social situation.
- A. The letters to the churches (chs. 2-3) give us concrete information about the specific congregations.
  - B. Chapters 13 and 17 present in traditional symbols John's understanding of the larger political situation.
    - 1. John borrows his basic symbols from prophetic and apocalyptic tradition. In this tradition
      - a. Beasts symbolize empires, and horns or heads symbolize individual rulers (e.g., Dan. 7-8).
      - b. Whores symbolize unrighteous cities, and "Babylon" is the supremely wicked city that oppresses God's people. In the period when John wrote, Babylon normally represented Rome (e.g., 1 Peter 5:13). Note that
        - 1. The historical Babylon had conquered what remained of Israel and in 586 B.C.E. had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and taken Jews into exile. When John wrote, the historical Babylon scarcely still existed.
        - 2. In 70 C.E. Rome finished putting down a Jewish revolt and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem.
      - c. A bride symbolizes a community which is faithful to God.
    - 2. Hence, the meaning of John's symbols is clear.
      - a. The Beast from the Sea is the Roman government, and the



Beast's individual heads are individual emperors. Note that from the geographical perspective of John's original readers Rome was across the sea.

b. The Beast from the Land is the local authorities (especially, the priesthood of the imperial cult) who perform and enforce emperor worship.

c. The Whore is the City of Rome.

d. The Lamb is Jesus. Note that lambs were offered as sacrifices to God, and Jesus in obedience to God sacrificed his life. Elsewhere in the New Testament Jesus is called the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36).

e. The Bride is the Christian Church and the New Jerusalem, the paradise that the faithful will inherit.

II. From the seven letters we can see that Revelation addresses Christian communities in western Asia Minor (western Turkey today).

A. The seven cities which the letters explicitly mention are all located in this area.



B. The number "7" in Revelation signifies completeness, and Revelation probably addresses all Christian communities in western Asia Minor. Note that taken together the various letters portray almost every possible pastoral situation and that in each letter we find an admonition to listen to the message that the Spirit is sending to the churches.

III. From the data which Revelation supplies we can see that John perceives three trends.

A. Jewish Christianity is under great pressure from non-Christian Jews and is failing. The letters to Smyrna (2:8-11) and Philadelphia (3:7-13) stress the weaknesses of these churches and the opposition of mainline Judaism ("the Synagogue of Satan"). The decline of Jewish Christianity was ongoing.

B. Gentile Christianity, while expanding, is making concessions to Paganism. John complains about congregations permitting the consumption of meat

sacrificed to idols (Rev. 2:14, 2:20) and "fornication" (2:20; probably acceptance of emperor worship). Note that the exclusive worship of the One God was and remains the foundation of Judaism and Christianity.

C. Soon the political authorities will insist that everyone worship the Roman emperor and will execute Christians who refuse to do so (especially, chapter 13).

IV. From the information in chapters 13 and 17 it might seem that we could determine who the emperor was when John wrote.

A. 17:9-10 suggests that the sixth emperor is reigning, and we know the succession of emperors, namely, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian.

B. Chapter 13 suggests that this emperor demands worship.

C. Therefore, it would seem that all we have to do is find a sixth emperor who demanded worship.

V. Unfortunately, however, there are problems.

A. Using the standard enumeration of emperors listed above, the sixth emperor would be Nero.

B. However, although Nero persecuted Christians, he did not demand worship.

C. Moreover, since the Beast whose number is "666" very probably represents Nero (see above), Revelation presupposes that he is already dead (cf. Rev. 17:8).

D. There are many indications that Revelation was written considerably after 68, the year of Nero's death (see VII.B below).

VI. Accordingly, there are various suggestions for how to fudge. Among them

A. Begin the list with Augustus because he was the first of the continuous line of emperors.

B. Omit Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, because they each reigned very briefly during an unsettled period.

C. Regard "6" as a purely symbolic number. In Revelation "6" seems to represent evil (cf. "666"), and Revelation tells us that the sixth emperor is now in power.

VII. A strong case can be made that Revelation was written either just after Nero's death or toward the end of Domitian's reign, and most scholars prefer the second date which also seems more likely to me.

A. Evidence in favor of the brief period after Nero's death

1. If we omit Julius Caesar, the sixth emperor would be Galba.

2. The prophecy that the "seventh" (Otho) would reign only briefly would be accurate (Rev. 17:10).

3. Revelation's pessimism about the immediate future would be reasonable.

a. Both the Jewish War and a struggle over who would be emperor were in progress.

b. The memory of Nero's persecution of Christians at Rome was fresh.

B. In favor of the concluding years of Domitian's reign (81-96).

1. The church situation which Revelation reflects fits this later period.

Note that Polycarp tells us that the church in Smyrna did not exist in

Paul's time, and the "Alogoi" claimed the church in Thyatira did not exist during the life of John the Apostle. Revelation describes the church in

Laodicea as "rich," and the city was devastated by an earthquake around the year 60.

2. Irenaeus (c. 130 - c. 200) explicitly states that Revelation was written near the end of Domitian's reign (Eusebius, Ecc. Hist. 3.18.1-3). And this testimony is probably reliable.

a. Irenaeus as a boy knew Polycarp who was the bishop of Smyrna, one of the seven cities which Revelation explicitly addresses.

b. Irenaeus is specific about Revelation's date.

VIII. The historical evidence about Domitian's policy toward Christians is ambiguous.

A. Roman historians (e.g., Suetonius) writing during the next dynasty portray Domitian as a murderous megalomaniac who insisted on being called "Lord and God."

B. In line with this portrait, Eusebius, the great church historian, claims that Domitian was a major persecutor of the church.

C. However, it appears that historians such as Suetonius exaggerate Domitian's faults to make the next dynasty look good by comparison. The documents that survive from Domitian's own time do not justify the negative portrayals (Leonard Thompson).

D. Eusebius does not give any details to substantiate his claim that Domitian launched a major persecution, and Eusebius would have imagined that an emperor who was generally regarded as evil would have persecuted the Church.

IX. Hence, there has been debate among scholars as to what Domitian's policies toward Christians were and what John himself thought would happen. Here are some possibilities:

A. Domitian did persecute the Church despite the lack of historical evidence, and Revelation is a response.

B. Domitian did not persecute the Church, and John was merely paranoid. Of course, since Nero had persecuted the Christians in Rome and Christianity was not a legal religion, it was easy to fear the worst!

C. Even John did not think there would be a persecution in the near future. The scenes of Christians being slaughtered in Revelation are not a prediction of imminent events but a dramatic way of

1. Stressing the ongoing hostility of the Roman system to Christian values

2. Affirming the traditional biblical teaching of the ultimate coming of a terrible, final persecution, an expectation that the Book of Daniel certainly encouraged.

X. I do not think that any of the possibilities listed above are probable.

A. If there was a major persecution, there would surely be more historical evidence for it.

B. While we cannot evaluate whether John was paranoid, even paranoia is usually only a great exaggeration of some reality.

C. Revelation emphasizes (including in its opening and closing verses!) that its predictions will be fulfilled "soon."

XI. My own view is that near the end of Domitian's reign local officials put increasing pressure on Christians to worship the emperor.

A. Toward the end of his reign, Domitian executed many people on the suspicion

- of disloyalty, and one of these was the proconsul (governor) of Asia Minor.
- B. Under such circumstances officials there must have been anxious to prove their loyalty.
- C. A convenient way to do so was to be especially zealous in promoting emperor worship. A great temple to Domitian and his deceased relatives was erected in Ephesus (the largest of the seven cities that Revelation explicitly addresses) at the time. Note that emperor worship was an ongoing part of civic life.
- D. Since Christians would not voluntarily worship the emperor, the local officials were putting pressure on them to conform.
- E. Probably the persecution of Christians was not yet serious.
- F. But the persecution was increasing.
1. It had already affected John.
    - a. He explicitly states that he was on the Island of Patmos "because of the word of God" (Rev. 1:9).
    - b. It seems most unlikely that John went to a small, desolate island voluntarily.
    - c. Sending someone into exile on an island was an accepted punishment at the time.
    - d. Hence, John as an outspoken opponent of government policy had himself already been arrested, tried, and exiled for his faith.
  2. The local authorities were probably ratcheting up the pressure on other Christians.
  3. Of course, any persecution seems serious to those who are facing the ax.
- XII. John appears to have been a conservative Jewish Christian. Note, for example, that unlike Paul (1 Cor. 10:23-33) he absolutely forbids eating meat sacrificed to idols (Rev. 2:14, 20).
- XIII. From the perspective of conservative Jewish Christianity the situation when John wrote was catastrophic.
- A. Jewish Christianity was dying.
  - B. Gentile Christianity was compromising with Paganism.
  - C. Soon everyone would have to worship the emperor or else, and the churches were not prepared for the confrontation.
- XIV. Revelation was John's personal response.
- A. John was in exile on Patmos and could not come himself (1:9).
  - B. Consequently, John sent the book. Note that the document has some of the features of an ancient Christian letter (esp., Rev. 1:4 and 22:21; an ancient letter normally began with the name of the sender, followed by the name of the recipient, and a greeting, and ancient Christian letters normally ended with the wish that the readers would have the "grace" of Jesus).
- XV. Pictures of the Island of Patmos where John wrote Revelation.
- XVI. Christian art illustrating John writing Revelation on the Island of Patmos. Note that the symbol of John is an eagle.

## Excursus: Was John's Expectation of a Great Persecution in the Near Future Reasonable?

- I. One can argue that John's expectation of an imminent, major persecution was totally unreasonable.
  - A. Almost certainly, no one in the government planned such a persecution.
  - B. Since John himself had been exiled for his faith, it would have been natural for him to exaggerate the threat.
  - C. John saw his present situation in the light of biblical prophecy rather than the objective political situation.
- II. Nevertheless, John's fears may have been reasonable.
  - A. We do not know what would have happened if the Emperor Domitian had not been assassinated.
  - B. It is a historical fact that imperial persecution of the Church repeatedly occurred in later Roman history.

## The Structure and Order of the Seven "Letters;" Emperor Worship

- I. Although these seven sections are traditionally called "letters," they do not conform to the structure of ancient letters (see above) and might better be called "the seven decrees."
- II. The structure of the seven "letters" is very tight.
  - A. "To the angel of the church in \_\_\_\_\_ write"
  - B. "Thus says"
  - C. An attribute of Christ taken from the descriptions in chapter 1. The attribute fits the specific message of the letter in question.
  - D. "I know"
  - E. Praise and/or blame, admonitions, and usually the assurance that Christ is coming
  - F. "Let those who have ears hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches":
  - G. "To the one who conquers" followed by a promise.  
{Note: in later letters "F" and "G" are reversed, probably to vary the style and avoid boredom.}
- III. The order of the letters is interesting.
  - A. It is a possible order in which one could visit the seven communities without having to backtrack. Perhaps John intended for Revelation to be sent from one congregation to the next in the order given.
  - B. The order of the letters produces alternating praise and blame and, therefore, makes John's evaluations stand out.
- IV. Visual presentation: The remains of the seven cities today.
- V. From a Pagan perspective emperor worship was a mandatory gesture of patriotism expected of everyone except Jews (cf. saying the Pledge of Allegiance in certain contexts in the modern United States). Jews were (reluctantly) exempted in practice, because they were an identifiable ethnic group with an ancient monotheistic heritage and were not very successful in making converts.

VI. We must assume that worshiping the emperor, like all worship, instilled uncritical awe and obedience.

VII. Because of their monotheism Christians refused to worship the emperor, and this refusal helped lead to persecution once the government realized that Christians were not necessarily Jews. Some of the bitterness of Revelation against the "Synagogue of Satan" was probably due to the official Jewish leaders informing the Roman authorities that Christians were not part of the Jewish community.

VIII. Historically, the refusal to worship the emperor ultimately contributed to the rise of democracy and a greater respect for human rights.

Discussion: There are three possible models for the relationship of church to state:

1) the church and the state are independent and tolerant of each other, 2) the church and the state support one another, 3) the church and the state are opposed. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each model?

ASSIGNMENT: Reread Revelation.

### The Basic Structure of Revelation and Its Significance

I. The structure of a literary work helps determine its meaning.

II. Revelation is tightly structured. The series of sevens (letters, seals, trumpets, bowls.) is an especially striking and pervasive part of the organization.

III. Nevertheless, the structure is also subtle and complex. Revelation sometimes interrupts sequences (e.g., the seven seals), sets up parallels between blocks of material that occur in different structural contexts, and has other subtleties (note that there are seven blessings in the book).

IV. Accordingly, no outline will ever be definitive, and several different ones may be helpful to bring out different literary patterns.

V. The following is (I hope!) at least one good structural analysis.

### An Outline of Revelation

I. Prologue (1:1-8).

A. Prophetic preface (1:1-3).

B. Letter preface (1:4-6).

C. Sayings (1:7-8).

II. The Seven Letters (1:9-3:22).

A. Introductory Scene (1:9-20): The exalted Christ commands John to write.

B. The "Letters."

1. To Ephesus (2:1-7).

2. To Smyrna (2:8-11).

3. To Pergamum (2:12-17).

4. To Thyatira (2:18-29).

5. To Sardis (3:1-6).

6. To Philadelphia (3:7-13).

7. To Laodicea (3:14-22).

### III. The Seven Seals (4:1-8:1).

A. Introductory Scene (4:1-5:14): God gives the scroll, and the Lamb is able to open it. (For an outline see below.)

B. The Opening of the Seals (6:1-8:1).

1. The First Seal (6:1-2): The white horse.
2. The Second Seal (6:3-4): The red horse.
3. The Third Seal (6:5-6): The black horse.
4. The Fourth Seal (6:7-8): The green horse.
5. The Fifth Seal (6:9-11): The martyrs ask, "How long?"
6. The Sixth Seal (6:12-17): The destruction of this age.
7. An Interlude that looks forward to chapters 20-21 (7:1-17).
  - a. The Sealing of the 144,000 (7:1-8).
  - b. The Worship of the Countless Multitude (7:9-17).
8. The Seventh Seal (8:1): Silence in heaven.

### IV. The Seven Trumpets (8:2-11:19).

A. Introductory Scene (8:2-8:6): The angel and the censer.

B. The Blowing of the Trumpets (8:7-11:19).

1. The First Trumpet (8:7): The destruction of a third of the earth.
2. The Second Trumpet (8:8-9): The destruction of a third of the sea.
3. The Third Trumpet (8:10-11): The destruction of a third of the rivers and springs.
4. The Fourth Trumpet (8:12): The destruction of a third of the sun, moon, and stars.
5. The Fifth Trumpet [first woe] (8:13-9:12).
  - a. Introduction to the Woes (8:13).
  - b. The Fifth Trumpet (9:1-12): The monstrous locusts.
6. The Sixth Trumpet [second woe] (9:13-21).
  - a. The hordes from the East kill a third of humankind (9:13-19).
  - b. The survivors refuse to repent (9:20-21).
7. An Interlude that looks forward to chapters 13-14 (10:1-11:13).
  - a. John receives and eats the open scroll (10:1-11).
  - b. The Two Witnesses (11:1-13).
8. The Seventh Trumpet [third woe?] (11:14-19): A heavenly celebration of victory.

### V. The First Set of Unnumbered Visions (12:1-14:20).

A. The Woman and the Dragon (12:1-18).

1. The Dragon tries to destroy the child to whom the Woman gives birth, but the child is caught up to heaven, and the Woman flees into the wilderness (12:1-6).
2. The Dragon is cast out of heaven, and there is a song of rejoicing (12:7-12).
3. The Dragon pursues the Woman who escapes into the wilderness (12:13-16).
4. The Dragon sets out against the Woman's other children (12:17-

- 18).
- B. The Beasts persecute God's people (13:1-18).
  - 1. The Beast from the Sea (13:1-10).
  - 2. The Beast from the Land (13:11-18).
- C. The 144,000 faithful on Mount Zion (14:1-5).
- D. Three Angels Pronounce Judgment (14:6-13).
  - 1. The first oracle (14:6-7): Worship God.
  - 2. The second oracle (14:8): Babylon is fallen.
  - 3. The third oracle (14:9-11): Doom for those who worship the Beast.
  - 4. Commentary on the oracles (14:12-13): Blessed are those who obey God.
- E. The Harvesting of the Earth (14:14-20).
  - 1. The harvesting of the grain (14:14-16).
  - 2. The harvesting of the grapes (14:17-20).
- VI. The Seven Bowls (15:1-16:21).
  - A. Introductory Scene (15:1-16:1): The angels prepare to pour out the bowls as the saved praise God.
  - B. The Pouring Out of the Bowls (16:2-21).
    - 1. The First Bowl (16:2): Sores come upon the Beast's followers.
    - 2. The Second Bowl (16:3): The sea becomes blood.
    - 3. The Third Bowl (16:4-7): The rivers and springs become blood.
    - 4. The Fourth Bowl (16:8-9): The sun becomes scorching.
    - 5. The Fifth Bowl (16:10-11): The kingdom of the Beast becomes dark.
    - 6. The Sixth Bowl (16:12-16): The Euphrates River is dried up for the kings of the East.
    - 7. The Seventh Bowl (16:17-21): The destruction of this age.
- VII. Babylon (17:1-19:10).
  - A. Introduction (17:1-3a): John is led away in the spirit.
  - B. The Whore (17:3b-18).
  - C. Lamentation over Babylon's Destruction (18:1-24).
  - D. Jubilation over Babylon's Destruction (19:1-8).
  - E. Conclusion of the Vision: John tries to worship the angel who revealed it (19:9-10).
- VIII. The Second Set of Unnumbered Visions (19:11-21:8).
  - A. The Divine Warrior and His Armies (19:11-16).
  - B. The Destruction of the Beast, the False Prophet, and their Followers (19:17-21).
  - C. The Binding of Satan, the Saints' 1,000-Year Reign, and Satan's Final Destruction (20:1-10).
  - D. The Judgment of the World (20:11-15).
- IX. The New Jerusalem (21:1-22:9).
  - A. Introduction (21:1-10): The New Jerusalem descends, and John is led away in the spirit.
  - B. The City (21:11-22:5).



- C. Conclusion of the Vision: John tries to worship the angel who revealed it (22:6-9).
- X. Epilogue (22:10-21).
  - A. Sayings (22:10-20).
  - B. Blessing (22:21).

VI. From this outline we see that most of Revelation consists of blocks of visions (e.g., the seven seals).

VII. Within each block the action moves steadily forward.

VIII. Structurally, the three cycles of seals, trumpets, and bowls are parallel and stand apart from the rest of the book. These are the only cycles in which each scene is explicitly numbered.

IX. In these three cycles we sometimes see essentially the same scene repeated in about the same place (e.g., Rev. 8:8-9, 16:3; Rev. 9:13-19, 16:12-16; Rev. 6:12-17, 16:17-21).

X. The recapitulation theory: In Revelation we have multiple accounts of the same events (already proposed to interpret the trumpets and bowls by Victorinus of Pettau, d. 304).

XI. Arguments for and against the recapitulation theory.

A. In addition to the extensive parallels between the numbered series, the following lends support to the theory:

1. The final member(s) of the seals, trumpets, and bowls is/are so destructive that history could not continue subsequently. Note: Much that is destroyed in the trumpets and bowls is already destroyed in the seals (e.g., 6:12-13 vs. 8:12).
2. The final member of each series takes place in heaven and seems to be associated with God's final triumph (e.g., 11:15-19).
3. The promise of imminent fulfillment in 10:5-7 works better.
4. Recapitulation is typical of the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions which John took for granted.

B. The following, however, undermines recapitulation:

1. Numerically, the destruction increases from one series to the next (1/4 for the seals [6:8], 1/3 for the trumpets, all for the bowls).
2. Revelation explicitly states that the bowls are the "last" plagues (15:1).
3. The prophetic and apocalyptic traditions commonly use similar images to portray different events (typology). Note that the plagues in the trumpets and bowls are modeled on the plagues against Egypt in Exodus.
4. The final member of each series may be the next series. The seventh seal may be the seven trumpets; the seventh trumpet, the seven bowls.

XII. The force of the arguments for and against recapitulation suggests that the numbered cycles make only a basic prediction. If John does not make it clear whether he is describing one or three series of events, he must be making only a vague, general forecast. The details which John provides are to add drama and incorporate material from the Old Testament and John's own visions, rather than give detailed predictions.

XIII. The two sets of unnumbered visions (12:1-14:20; 19:11-20:15) form a continuous narrative. The second set begins with the same basic scene that ends the first.

XIV. The narrative covers the events from the birth of Jesus to the consummation.

XV. However, the narrative also contains anomalies suggesting that here too we should not press the details (note 12:1-6 versus 12:7-14) but look for a simple prediction.

XVI. Revelation has long sections on "Babylon" and the New Jerusalem (Rev. 17:1-19:10, 21:1-22:9), and the second passage is the last sustained presentation in the book.

XVII. Literarily these sections have both striking parallels and contrasts. Note 17:1 versus 21:9 and 19:9-10 versus 22:6-9.

XVIII. The placement of the section on the New Jerusalem and its literary relationship to the section on Babylon suggest that the New Jerusalem is the climax of the entire book and that John wants us to compare the two cities and see the superiority of Jerusalem.

ASSIGNMENT: Reread Revelation and pay special attention to the numbers and colors.

### Making Sense of the Numbers and Colors in Revelation

I. Unlike previously, for the last couple of centuries Western culture has focused on empirical reality.

II. As a result, we mostly see numbers as a useful tool for dealing with the outer world and tend to take them literally.

III. Consequently, modern readers of Revelation sometimes take its numbers at face value.

IV. This literalism can lead to odd theological conclusions (e.g., only a limited number of people can be saved).

V. Since, however, the images of Revelation are poetic and symbolic, we should be open to the possibility that its use of numbers is the same.

VI. In fact, the ancient world in general endowed certain numbers with mystical significance.

VII. Occasionally, numbers in Revelation lack inner significance and seem to be due to other factors, such as John's reproduction of normal reality or use of Old Testament sources (e.g., "six wings" in Rev. 4:8; cf. Isaiah 6:2).

VIII. The bulk of the numbers, however, fall into predictable categories. Unfortunately, this consistency is not always clear in translation, since some translators convert measurements into modern equivalents (e.g., "144 cubits" may be rendered "216 feet").

IX. When we study the numerical patterns in Revelation, we see that John associated certain spiritual qualities with certain classes of numbers.

X. These associations often go back to Old Testament numerology.

XI. An interesting feature of John's numerology is that multiples of a number sometimes have the same associations as the number itself.

XII. For John the most important number is seven, and it signifies completion. Seven means "all." This usage goes back to the Old Testament, especially, the seven days of creation in Genesis 1. John uses seven in descriptions both of good and evil (e.g., Rev. 5:6; 13:1).

XIII. Two other numbers that John uses are closely related to seven but fall short of it and symbolize imperfection.

A. "3 1/2" is half of seven and is associated with tribulation (e.g., 11:11). Note that 42 months and 1,260 days are 3 1/2 (Jewish lunar) years. John apparently

- derived the association of 3 1/2 with tribulation from Daniel 7:25, 12:7.
- B. Six fails by one from being the perfect seven and in Revelation seems to symbolize evil. (Note "666" in Rev. 13:18).
- XIV. John also has a series of numbers that refer to various types of fullness.
- A. Four represents the fullness of created reality (e.g., Rev. 7:1), apparently because there are four directions.
- B. Ten represents the fullness of evil or tribulation (e.g., Rev. 2:10, 13:1).
- C. Twelve represents the fullness of good. The number and its multiples occur in descriptions of heaven, the New Jerusalem, and the number of the saved. The use of twelve to symbolize the fullness of good goes back to the twelve tribes of Israel and ultimately to the twelve months in the year.
- D. One thousand and its multiples represent the fullness of large numbers.
- XV. If we take Revelation's numbers symbolically, rather than literally, we can avoid various of problems.
- A. "144,000" (7:4-8, 14:1) does not limit the number of the elect, but, on the contrary, stresses that all "Israel" will be saved.
- B. The seven Spirits of God (e.g., Rev. 4:5) could be a poetic description of the Holy Spirit.
- C. "1260" days of tribulation (e.g., Rev. 12:6) and a thousand years of the saints reigning on earth (Rev. 20:4-6) probably indicate only that the tribulation will be brief and the reign long.
- XVI. Of course, if we take Revelation's numbers symbolically, we cannot use them to calculate such things as precisely when Christ will return.
- XVII. Just for fun: What is the significance of "1,600" in Rev. 14:20?
- XVIII. Like the numbers in Revelation, the colors sometimes are due to John's use of sources or his copying of nature. Thus, I think the first horse (Rev. 6:2) is white because of Zechariah 6:2 and John's need to produce an escalating series of colors (white, red, black, greenish-yellow).
- XIX. However, for the most part, John associates colors with spiritual qualities. These associations are consistent with normal biblical usage (cf., e.g., Isaiah 1:18).
- A. White symbolizes purity, honor, and victory. It is associated with God, Jesus, and the saints (e.g., 1:14, 3:4-5).
- B. Red ("fire color") and scarlet symbolize violence, lust, and luxury. They are associated with Satan (12:3), the Beast, and the Whore (e.g., 17:3-4).
- C. "Gold" in Revelation seems to refer to the metal more than the color and symbolizes glory whether real or presumed (e.g., 4:4, 9:7, 17:4).
- D. Black and dark symbolize doom and are associated with the destruction of the wicked (e.g., 6:12, 9:2).
- E. Clear symbolizes openness to light (God) and is associated with heaven and the New Jerusalem (e.g., 21:11).
- XX. If we remember that colors in Revelation are primarily symbolic, we can make sense of certain anomalies (e.g., making robes white by washing them in blood; Rev. 7:14).
- Discussion: Do numbers and colors symbolize things for you? If so, how does your system compare with that of Revelation?
- ASSIGNMENT: Read Mark 13, Luke 21, 2 Thessalonians.

## The Basic Message of Revelation

A reading of 11:1-13

- I. (Review) Revelation consists of five basic types of material:
  - A. The introduction and conclusion (Rev. 1:1-8, 22:10-21).
  - B. The "letters [decrees]" to the churches (Rev. 1:9-3:22).
  - C. The three cycles of individually numbered visions (namely, the seals, trumpets, and bowls; Rev. 4:1-11:19 and 15:1-16:21).
  - D. The two cycles of unnumbered visions (Rev. 12:1-14:20; 19:11-20:15).
  - E. The sections on "Babylon [Rome]" and the New Jerusalem (Rev. 17:1-19:10; Rev. 21:1-22:9).
- II. (Review) The basic messages of these sections are probably simple.
- III. The introduction and conclusion stress that the reader must remain faithful because soon God will judge the world and reward the faithful.
- IV. The seven letters insist that the churches must repent of their sins and stand fast in their virtues because a decisive time of testing is at hand. Those who pass the test will obtain eternal blessings.
- V. The seals, trumpets, and bowls predict there will be an escalating set of cosmic and political woes that will culminate in catastrophe. These are to punish the godless and warn them to repent.
- VI. To discover the basic message of the unnumbered visions we must review their literal content.
  - A. A celestial woman (i.e., Israel and its continuation, the Church) gives birth to a child (Jesus) who is caught up to heaven.
  - B. Satan pursues the woman who escapes into the desert.
  - C. Satan rouses up a beast from the sea (i.e., the Roman Empire), and another beast rises from the land (local officials who support the Roman Empire).
  - D. All who refuse to worship the first beast are put to death.
  - E. "The Son of Humanity" (or the "Word of God"; i.e., Jesus) destroys the beasts and their supporters.
  - F. The martyrs rise and reign on earth for a thousand years.
  - G. Satan is destroyed, and the dead are raised and judged.
- VII. Consequently, here is the basic message:
  - A. For some time after the resurrection of Jesus, the Church suffered persecution but managed to escape the worst.
  - B. Soon the local authorities will force everyone to worship the emperor on pain of death.
  - C. As a result, the Church will be decimated.
  - D. Shortly thereafter, Christ will destroy the empire and raise the dead and reward the faithful.
- VIII. The sections on Babylon (i.e., the City of Rome) and the New Jerusalem stress that Rome is evil and will soon be destroyed, whereas the coming kingdom of God is

unimaginably glorious and will last forever.

IX. We may now summarize the message of Revelation as a whole.

A. We are in a period of growing disaster in which the cosmos is unraveling and the political system is becoming more anti-Christian.

B. So far the Church has mostly remained faithful.

C. Soon there will be a supreme crisis. The cosmos will lurch toward collapse, and the government will launch a huge persecution that will ravage the Church.

D. Then God will destroy the forces of evil, raise the dead, and vindicate the Christian faithful.

E. In the present time Christian readers must steel themselves for the coming ordeal and live in the hope of sharing in God's final salvation for those who endure to the end.

X. We can verify that we have correctly reconstructed Revelation's basic message by looking at the difficult passage 11:1-13. In the passage the two witnesses represent the Church as a "kingdom of priests" (cf. Zechariah 4:3, 11-14; Rev. 1:6, 5:10, 20:6). What happens to the witnesses corresponds with our reconstruction.

XI. The message of Revelation merely updates older Christian teaching (cf., e.g., Mark 13), and such updating occurs elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., Luke 21).

XII. Hence, Revelation's basic message does not greatly differ from the basic message of early Christianity as a whole.

ASSIGNMENT: Reread Revelation.

### How to Exegete a Section of Revelation

I. Like the book as a whole, the individual sections of Revelation are very rich and have many dimensions of meaning.

II. This richness comes from several different factors.

A. Like other texts, sections of Revelation make many points only implicitly or in passing.

B. Revelation uses allusions (especially to the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures) and symbols, and these have complex associations and suggest diverse things.

C. Each generation and person bring their own questions and perspectives to the text.

III. The challenge in interpreting a section of Revelation (as in interpreting other "poetic" works) is to honor the richness without allowing the text to mean whatever someone likes. Note that if a text can mean *anything*, then in reality it means nothing.

IV. In my opinion, the way to meet this challenge is to produce a hierarchy of meanings in which the upper members guide and limit our search for the lower ones. Here is one hierarchy:

A. Primary meanings, i.e., those points that the text emphatically makes.

B. Secondary meanings, i.e., those points that the text makes in passing or clearly assumes.

C. Permissible meanings, i.e., additional points that are compatible with the primary and secondary meanings and can be seen as possible extensions of them.

- D. Impermissible meanings, i.e., those points that are incompatible with the text's primary and secondary meanings.
- V. In studying a given text of Revelation we determine the upper members of this hierarchy by
- A. Doing a literary study of the text (including its structure and allusions).
  - B. Doing a social and historical study of the situation which the text addresses.
  - C. Looking at the text as an integral part of the book. In a literary work the meaning of the whole helps to determine the meaning of the parts.
- VI. Illustration 1: Resolving the exegetical problems in the Letter to the Church in Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7-13).
- A. There are several exegetical problems in this section.
    1. What is the "open door" and the bowing down of the "synagogue of Satan" in 3:8?
    2. How will Jesus keep the Church from the "hour of testing" (3:10)?
    3. How does the promise that God will make the faithful a pillar in his temple (3:12) cohere with the fact that the New Jerusalem has no temple (21:22)?
    4. What is the significance of Christ writing his new name on the faithful Christian (3:11)?
  - B. On the basis of structure and allusions we can determine the primary and secondary meaning of the "open door" and the bowing down of the synagogue.
    1. Structurally, the opening attributes of Jesus in each of the seven letters come from chapter 1. Hence, the "key of David" in 3:7 is the "keys of death and Hades" in 1:18. Accordingly, the primary meaning of the "open door" is that the Philadelphians will find eternal salvation despite their condemnation by the synagogue on earth. Note that in the next scene John enters heaven through an open door (4:1). The bowing down means that at the final judgment the synagogue will be condemned and acknowledge that the Church was in the right. This meaning coheres with Revelation's constant promises of final deliverance for faithful believers and with its pessimism concerning whether unbelievers will repent before it is too late (e.g., Rev. 16:9-10). It also coheres with the allusion to Isaiah 22:22 where the "key of David" seems to be the authority to enter into the king's presence.
    2. However, Isaiah 60:14, to which we have an allusion in Revelation 3:9, is about the conversion of the Gentiles, and elsewhere in the New Testament an "open door" means an opportunity to make converts (1 Corinthians 16:9, 2 Corinthians 2:12, Acts 14:27). Hence, a secondary meaning of the promise of an open door is that the Philadelphians may succeed in converting (some of?) their Jewish enemies who will bow down by acknowledging the truth of the Church's teaching.
  - C. On the basis of material elsewhere in Revelation and in the Old Testament, it would appear that the primary meaning of God keeping the Philadelphians from the "hour of testing" is that God will somehow spare them from the cosmic calamities which are coming (note, e.g., Rev. 9:4, Exodus 10:23) [R.H. Charles]. A secondary meaning is that God will support them during the great persecution

and help them remain faithful.

D. The tension between the Philadelphians becoming a pillar in God's temple and the absence of a temple in the New Jerusalem indicates that both images merely promise that the saved will be infinitely close to God. On a strictly literal level Revelation is full of contradictions and anomalies.

E. Discussion: What is the significance of Christ writing his new name on the faithful (3:12)? Note 2:17 and 19:11-16.

VII. Illustration 2: Resolving exegetical problems in the letter to the church in Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22).

A. We will consider two important issues:

1. What is the significance of "lukewarm" in 3:16?

2. What does the image, "I stand at the door and knock" (3:20), indicate?

B. It appears that the primary meaning of "lukewarm" is "nauseating" and that a secondary meaning is "not fully committed."

1. Since Jesus says that he is about to vomit, lukewarm must be an indication of nausea.

2. At banquets wine might be heated or chilled to be more satisfying (Craig Koester). By extension lukewarm wine would be distasteful. This interpretation explains why being either cold or hot is better than lukewarm.

3. Nevertheless, elsewhere in the New Testament "hot" symbolizes enthusiasm (Acts 18:25, Romans 12:11), and, from what John tells us, the church in Laodicea is self-satisfied (Rev. 3:17). Hence, here "lukewarm" also suggests "not fully committed."

C. It appears that the primary meaning of Jesus knocking at the door is that he is about to come again soon; and that a secondary meaning is that he is asking the Laodiceans to be "open" to him.

1. A central theme in Revelation is that Jesus is about to return soon to punish the wicked and reward the faithful, and the next verse (vs. 21) presupposes that theme. Note that Jesus's promise to dine with the Laodiceans probably refers to the final banquet in the kingdom.

2. Nevertheless, the letter also stresses Jesus's love for the Laodiceans and his desire to be united with them (3:19-20), and so it is not wrong to claim that he is "knocking at the door of their heart."

VIII. Exercise: Resolving exegetical problems in the letter to the Church in Pergamum (Rev. 2:2-17).

IX. Pictures of the Altar of Zeus at Pergamum.

ASSIGNMENT: Reread Daniel and 2 Esdras 11-14.

### Introduction to the Next Five Sections

I. So far in the course we have critiqued some common approaches to Revelation, and we have determined its basic message.

II. Now we must discover what the spiritual basis of that message is.

## John's Invitation to Judge his Visions from the Inside

- I. In important respects Revelation's style differs even from that of such similar works as Daniel, 1 Enoch, and 2 Esdras.
    - A. John's allegories are less transparent.
      1. He does not give us long, explicit interpretations. Contrast Revelation 17:7-18 (the longest explanatory passage in Revelation) with 2 Esdras 12:10-35.
      2. He sometimes makes symbols more mysterious by generalizing. The same symbol can mean more than one thing (e.g., the Beast can be the Roman Empire in general or Nero in particular).
    - B. Revelation is tightly organized.
    - C. Revelation deliberately creates suspense by building up to anticipated climaxes and then postponing them (e.g., 6:1-8:1).
    - D. Revelation piles powerful images together to produce gripping scenes (e.g., 9:1-11).
    - E. Revelation has kaleidoscopic changes of location and speaker (e.g., Rev. 22:6-21).
    - F. Revelation constantly alludes to Old Testament texts and yet unexpectedly twists them (e.g., Rev. 6:1-8, Zechariah 6:1-6; Daniel 12:4, 9, Rev. 22:10).
    - G. Revelation admonishes the reader directly (e.g., 13:9-10). In other apocalypses pseudonymity made direct address impossible.
  - II. Because of these stylistic peculiarities, Revelation's overall effect on us is fundamentally different.
    - A. When we read other "apocalypses," there is a distance between ourselves and the text, and the visions remain someone else's.
    - B. When we read Revelation, we get drawn into the text, and the visions become our own as well as John's.
  - III. Consequently, Revelation has a different way of attempting to make its message credible.
    - A. (review) To achieve credibility, the other apocalypses resort to such things as pseudonymity and retrospective prophecy.
    - B. Revelation does not.
    - C. Instead, Revelation invites us to feel its visions from the inside and directly experience their power and truth.
- Discussion: If we wish to know whether an experience is reliable, what difference does it make if we have the experience ourselves?

## The Nature of God and the Deeds of the Lamb

- I. Most of Revelation consists of four great visionary cycles. Each of these has a special introduction which says that John entered into the spirit and gives us the location where the visions occurred.



- A. Christ walking among the lamp stands and dictating the seven letters (1:9-3:22).
  - B. The worship of God and the Lamb; and the opening of the seals (4:1-8:1). This visionary cycle may go on to include even more material, since the blowing of the trumpets follows without a break.
  - C. Babylon and her destruction (17:1-19:10).
  - D. The New Jerusalem (21:1-22:9).
- II. In recounting his visions John claims that he has had privileged access to heavenly mysteries. These disclose ultimate reality and will determine what will subsequently take place on earth.
- III. (review) There are two possible ways to back up this claim, and John chose the second.
- A. One can appeal to the author's authority.
  - B. Or one can appeal to the persuasiveness of the vision itself.
- IV. The vision in chapters 4-5 deals almost explicitly with how John can know the future.
- A. The vision concerns who (if anyone) can open the scroll that foretells the future.
  - B. Significantly, this vision prepares for the first major predictive cycle in Revelation.
    - 1. The previous cycle, the letters to the churches, primarily concerns the present and only secondarily the future. Jesus commends or condemns the congregations on their present faithfulness or laxness.
    - 2. By contrast, the seals concern the future.
    - 3. Note that Revelation emphasizes the transition to futuristic prediction.
      - a. In the introduction to the letters, Christ tells John to write "what you saw and what is and what will be after these things" (Rev. 1:19).
      - b. This introduction invites the reader to distinguish three different sections (David Aune).
        - 1). "What you saw" must be the material before 1:19.
        - 2). "What is" should be the material immediately after 1:19 (which is the letters to the seven churches).
        - 3). There should then be a third section concerned with "what will be after these things."
      - c. In the introduction to the second visionary cycle Jesus says, "I will show you what must take place *after these things*" (4:1), and confirms that we are now dealing with a third section which is about the future rather than the present.
- V. Accordingly, chapters 4-5 should give us theological clues concerning both how John can know the future and how readers can know that he is right.
- VI. If we can verify these clues from other passages, we can be fairly sure we have found the ultimate basis for John's predictions.
- VII. Chapters 4-5 overwhelm us with the power of their kaleidoscopic images.
- VIII. Nevertheless, the structure is tight.

## An Outline of Revelation 4-5

- I. Introduction marking a new section of the book: The circumstances of the vision (4:1-2a).
  - II. The glory and worship of the one seated on the throne [God] (4:2b-11).
    - A. God's glory (4:2b-8a).
    - B. The worship of God (4:8b-4:11).
      - 1. The first hymn (4:8b).
      - 2. A middle section (4:9-10).
      - 3. The second hymn (4:11).
  - III. The challenge to open the scroll (5:1-4).
  - IV. The glory and worship of the Lamb (5:5-13).
    - A. The Lamb's glory: He alone can open the scroll, and he takes it (5:5-7).
    - B. The worship of the Lamb (5:8-12).
      - 1. Opening (5:8-9a).
      - 2. The first hymn (5:9b-10).
      - 3. A middle section (5:11-12a).
      - 4. The second hymn (5:12b).
  - V. The combined worship of God and the Lamb with a final hymn (5:13-14).
- IX. This structure makes it clear that the glory of God and the Lamb allow John to know the future (note, especially, the hymns of adoration).
- A. Chapter 4 emphasizes the unspeakable glory of God (vss. 2-11).
  - B. 5:5-14 emphasizes the glory of the Lamb.
  - C. The question of who can open the book occurs between the passages.
  - D. Hence, it is because of God's glory that he has the scroll that reveals the future, and it is because of the Lamb's glory that he can open it for John to see.
- X. Chapter 4 emphasizes that God's glory is greater than that of any created thing. The chapter refuses to describe God himself. All John sees is a gem-like radiance, not God himself. We see God's majesty reflected in the things that surround him (e.g., the Four Living Creatures). God surpasses anything that can be described. By not picturing God, John in his own way is respecting the commandment not to make any image of God (Exodus 20:4).
- XI. Specifically, God's glory includes three attributes.
- A. God is eternal.
  - B. God is omnipotent and the creator and sustainer of all.
  - C. God is morally perfect ("holy," "worthy").
- XII. Significantly, other passages in Revelation also emphasize that God has these attributes (e.g., 10:6).
- XIII. These attributes guarantee that God will triumph over all his enemies.
- A. If God is eternal, he will win in the end. Note that "who was and is and is to come" seems to be an adaption in Greek of the I AM in Hebrew, which is what God calls himself in Exodus 3:13-15. Verb tenses in Hebrew are different from tenses in Greek (and English).
  - B. If he is the almighty creator and sustainer, all things will finally bow to his

will.

C. If he is supremely good, his virtue will become evident and expose and destroy all wickedness.

XIV. Chapter 5 emphasizes that the Lamb's glory is superior to that of any created thing, because he alone can open the scroll, and he along with God receives worship from every creature. Since Revelation stresses that only God is to be worshiped (e.g., 19:10), the book clearly assumes the divinity of Christ. Note that throughout the book Christ reveals God fully and, therefore, shares in God's being.

XV. The Lamb is worthy thanks to his death.

XVI. Consequently, his death led to

A. His resurrection and his authority over all things

B. His universal acclaim

C. His priestly kingdom on earth (Rev. 5:9-10).

XVII. The themes listed under "XVI" all occur in the opening verses of Revelation (especially, vss. 5-6) and, hence, receive extraordinary literary emphasis.

XVIII. In both the introduction and chapter 5 the celebration of the Lamb's greatness leads immediately to a prediction of his triumph over evil (1:7, ch. 6ff.).

XIX. This progression is logical.

A. The Lamb's death has definitively manifested the love of God, and so his stature will endure and his triumph is right.

B. Despite the opposition of this age, he already enjoys the acclaim of heaven where he now rules.

C. The Lamb also has the allegiance of holy people on earth, and, therefore, his reign has already begun and must continue.

D. He is lord over death and the universe, and all things must in the end surrender to him.

XX. Consequently, the question of whether Revelation has a solid basis becomes the question of whether the larger claims of ethical monotheism and, particularly, Christian ethical monotheism are true.

A. Revelation presupposes the truth of the position that there is a unified, hidden force in the universe that is eternal and almighty and righteous.

B. Revelation also presupposes the further Christian claim that God made himself especially visible in the life and crucifixion of Jesus and that God raised Jesus from the dead and made him Lord of the universe.

XXI. Nevertheless, Revelation not only presupposes these things, it also invites us to experience them as we read the magnificent descriptions of the One on the throne and of the Lamb.

Discussion: Does Revelation 4-5 awake in us an experience of God's glory? Do we assent to the conclusions which John draws from that experience? Why? Do you believe in God? If so, what is your vision of God, and what does it lead you to conclude about the future? If you do not believe in God, what do you think is the meaning of life, and what kind of final future do you envision for yourself and others?

(excursus) Loyalty to the One God and the Problem of Idols

- I. In the Greco-Roman world which John knew, almost everyone who was not Jewish worshiped many deities.
- II. The Pagan gods (and goddesses) were personifications of the superhuman forces of nature, psychology, and politics.
- III. Since these underlying forces were themselves amoral, the gods often were arbitrary.
- IV. The primary purpose of religion was to placate the gods (e.g., by offering them sacrifices) so that they would be beneficent. Pagan religion
  - A. Had little connection with ethics (which was the realm of philosophy).
  - B. Had little connection with religious experience.
  - C. Did not necessarily include loving the divine.
  - D. Was largely concerned with getting the gods to support the *status quo*, particularly, conventional political and social hierarchies.
- V. A major part of the religious cult was honoring images of the gods.
- VI. Judaism has always remembered that its ancestors were slaves who escaped from Egypt, and these slaves believed that their God had saved them and was more powerful than the gods of the Egyptians.
- VII. Consequently, Judaism has always held that
  - A. God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed and demands justice.
  - B. Only one God can be worshiped. To worship other gods would be to encourage injustice and nullify the "covenant" that the one true god has made with his chosen people.
- VIII. Along with these perspectives, there was the conviction that God has no limits and yet is personal. Note, for example, the crucial scene of God's initial encounter with Moses in Exodus 3.
  - A. God in his essence cannot be limited. He simply is. John in Revelation builds on this limitlessness. God was and is and is coming.
  - B. Yet this same God is the God of Moses's ancestors and the God who loves his people.
- IX. Because of the divine limitlessness, it was inappropriate to make any image (idol) of God. Already the Ten Commandments stemming from the Mosaic era outlaw divine images, and John continues to condemn them. Judaism and John insist that idolatry leads to other sins (Rev. 9:20-21).
- X. As time went on, the Jews concluded that there were no other gods, and we have monotheism as a theological doctrine. John takes this development for granted.
- XI. The Jews also insisted that the primary obligation of the community and each individual in it was to love God totally and obey his commandments.
- XII. John's greatest concern in Revelation is to keep his readers from worshiping the Emperor and the other Roman deities.
- XIII. This concern for the exclusive worship of the Judeo-Christian God is problematic to many modern readers of Revelation because
  - A. They are not religious themselves and often are atheists or agnostics
  - B. Or they believe that there is truth in all religion.
- XIV. Hence, many modern scholars, especially liberal ones, stress that Revelation is concerned about social justice.
- XV. Of course, Revelation does condemn Roman oppression, but it condemns that

oppression primarily on theological grounds, not humanistic ones. Note that in the terrifying judgment scenes God pours out his wrath on all who worship the Beast, including the poor and the slaves (e.g., 19:18).

XVI. As a Christian I would basically agree with John.

- A. There is only one God.
- B. God is personal and limitless.
- C. Our primary relationship should be with God, and we are called to love him.
- D. The danger of all religion is that we will limit God and, especially, that we will make God a supporter of the selfish interests of those in power.
- E. When we do limit God in this way, we betray our relationship with the only God that there truly is.

ASSIGNMENT: Read Isaiah 44.

### The Nature of Evil

Discussion question: Why do people who live under evil systems often not realize this fact? What could they (we?) do to become more aware?

I. A striking and pervasive feature in Revelation is the literary parallelism between the descriptions of God and Jesus and those of Satan and the Beast (note the two trinities [God, the Lamb, and the Spirit versus Satan, the Beast from the Sea, and the False Prophet], and note, e.g., 5:6 versus 13:1-3).

II. It was probably to promote such parallelism that John chose to make the "Beast" Nero and slightly altered popular tradition about him. (Review) Nero persecuted the church at Rome, and the Beast whose number is 666 probably represents him.

- A. Around 95 C.E. when John probably wrote, Nero who died in 68 was a figure of the past.
- B. However, there were rumors that Nero was still alive in the East and would return and conquer Rome. Some pretenders claiming to be Nero actually appeared.
- C. John basically took over this tradition but instead of having the Beast remain alive had him return from the dead (17:8).
- D. Accordingly, John made the Beast a parody of Jesus.
- E. We may mention in passing that in having Nero destroy Rome, John suggests that evil preys on itself.
  - 1. The forces of good tend by their very nature to cooperate, because they seek the common welfare.
  - 2. By contrast, the forces of evil tend by their very nature to oppose one another, because they seek their individual selfish interests.

III. Revelation also draws many parallels between "Babylon" (Rome) and the New Jerusalem.

- A. The introductions and conclusions of the sections on the two cities have striking literary similarities (Rev. 17:1-3 versus Rev. 21:9-10; Rev. 19:9-10 versus 22:6-9).
- B. The descriptions of the two cities also have many common features (e.g., the gold and the jewels).

IV. The parallelism that John draws between the forces of good and evil is a daring innovation in the biblical tradition which normally emphasizes their absolute difference (e.g., Isaiah 44). Emphasizing the absolute differences between the forces of good and evil is theologically "safe."

V. The parallelism suggests that evil attempts to appear good and becomes most evil when the attempt comes closest to success. Evil is rebellion against God and is an attempt to replace him.

VI. Revelation's parallelism between the forces of good and evil reflects the fact that in John's social situation the emperor did appear to be the Almighty, and Rome did appear to be the Heavenly City. Note that political power does produce a sense of the numinous.

A. The Roman Empire ruled the entire Mediterranean basin, including Asia Minor where John was and Israel where Christianity originated.

B. Rome was the largest and wealthiest city in John's World.

C. The Roman government produced extensive "propaganda," extolling its own achievements.

VII. John had to convince his readers that the Empire and its Capital were not as great as they claimed.

VIII. In response to the seeming greatness of the emperor and the City of Rome, John points out

A. The Beast and the Whore are transitory and can collapse in a moment, whereas God and Christ and the salvation they bestow are eternal (note, Rev. 1:4 versus Rev. 17:8).

B. The Beast appears worthy only because of social manipulation. In the Roman system power was delegated downward in exchange for worship which was promoted upward. A key support for the system was the local authorities (including church members) who appeared to be good but supported emperor worship. In Revelation

1. Satan gives his authority to the Beast from the Sea (i.e., the emperors; Rev. 13:4), and the Beast from the Sea gives his authority to the Beast from the Land (the local authorities in Asia Minor; 13:12).

2. In return, the Beast from the Land makes everyone worship the Beast from the Sea (Rev. 13:12), and, when people worship the Beast from the Sea, they also worship Satan (Rev. 13:4).

3. The Beast from the Land as the bottommost member in the hierarchy deceives people, because it appears to be innocent and trustworthy. It has two horns like a lamb even though it speaks like a dragon (Rev. 13:11).

4. The Beast from the Land includes not just local officials but also Christian leaders who promote compromise. The Beast from the Land is also called the "false prophet" (Rev. 16:13, 19:20, 20:10), and the only other false prophet in Revelation is "Jezebel" who is a Christian leader who apparently favors accommodation with the government (Rev. 2:20). Note: Her real name was not "Jezebel," since Jezebel was an evil queen in the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures who promoted foreign worship and persecuted loyal Israelites. In the first century (unlike soon thereafter) women could still be church leaders.

5. A striking feature of the Beast from the Land is that the Beast works miracles, and we must carefully consider the truth of this claim.
  - a. Revelation pictures the Beast of the Land making fire come down from heaven and enabling the image of the Beast from the Sea (the Roman emperors) to speak.
  - b. Ancient Jews and Christians claimed that fake miracles were part of ancient Pagan religion (e.g., Bel and the Dragon).
  - c. Whether or not that claim was actually true, Revelation clearly assumes that the miracles of the Beast from the Land are genuine.
  - d. In part, John is following a tradition that in the last days before the coming of final salvation evil people will work “signs and wonders” (e.g., Mark 13:22).
  - e. Whatever we may think of that tradition today, we should admit the tremendous psychological impact that political ceremonies reinforced by religious sanction can have, an impact that may produce the appearance, or perhaps even the reality, of miracles.

C. Ultimately, the only reason that the local authorities and others worship the Beast is because it exercises tyrannical power (Rev. 13:4, 15).

D. The Whore only appears attractive because of her enormous wealth.

E. However, this wealth is corrupting and based on oppression.

1. The Whore thirsts for frivolous luxuries ("fat and glitter;" 18:14) and has spawned a huge economic network to obtain them. Hence, she has corrupted the whole world.
2. She pays for her wealth by enslaving human beings and treating them like things (Rev. 18:13).

IX. John's analysis of the structures of oppression was very perceptive in first century Asia Minor but seems even more appropriate to the modern era with its totalitarianism and economic exploitation of the Developing Nations.

X. A final way which Revelation unmask the Roman system is by comparing it with the glory of God and the New Jerusalem. The parallelism between the Beast and Christ or between Babylon and the New Jerusalem is *ascending* parallelism. The comparison exposes.

XI. Discussion question: Does John's model concerning the structures of oppression have any relevance to the world in which we live?

ASSIGNMENT: Read Genesis 2, Ezekiel 47:1-12, Revelation 21-22, and Andrew J. Dell'Olio, "Do Near-Death Experiences Provide a Rational Basis for Belief in Life After Death?" (available on line).

## Our Hope of Immediate Life after Death and of the Coming of the New Jerusalem

Discussion question: Based on such things as the advertisements, what is the American vision of paradise? How do you feel about that vision?

I. At least in the biblical books, the only detailed description of a post-mortem paradise is in Revelation.

II. It is striking that this description does not contain a more extreme version of the

pleasures of earthly self-indulgence. For example, there is no feasting and no sex.  
III. Instead, the description is the consummation of our relationship with God, with one another, and with the natural world.

IV. The description is richly concrete and even sensual while being transparently theological. Here I will try to honor the imagery while decoding its theological substratum.

V. Earlier Christian writings, such as the Letters of Paul, have a two step eschatology (N.T. Wright).

A. At the death of an individual the "spirit" goes to preliminary fulfillment or punishment depending on the individual's life.

B. Later the risen Christ returns in glory and

1. Raises the physical remains of the dead and reunites them with their spirits.

2. Transforms the bodies of both the dead and those still alive.

3. There is a final judgment.

4. The righteous then inhabit a gloriously transformed earth.

5. The wicked suffer in hell, often pictured as being underground.

VI. As we would expect given this tradition, Revelation assumes that there is an immediate resurrection of the spirit at the moment of death, and those who died for the faith receive preliminary fulfillment. We see this fulfillment in the fifth seal (6:9-11) and the vision of the 144,000 in chapter 14.

VII. Taken literally, the martyred dead

A. Are clothed in white garments. (Review) White in Revelation symbolizes purity, honor, and victory.

B. Praise God

C. Rest

D. Live in the reassurance that God will vindicate their comrades.

VIII. Taken theologically these visions make it clear that the preliminary fulfillment at individual death includes

A. A full awareness—confirmed by God himself—of the good which an individual has done and its effect on others and of the appreciation of God.

B. A deeper relationship with God which includes the acknowledgment of all that God has done and will do.

C. The end to the individual's earthly sufferings.

D. But a continued concern for the sufferings on earth, especially, the sufferings of one's Christian comrades.

E. A hope that later all the sufferings of the righteous will end and there will be justice.

IX. Consequently, Revelation fulfills the widespread human hope of immediate salvation after death.

X. However, it is striking how little emphasis Revelation places on this hope, because Revelation looks forward to the final consummation of all things through a two-step intervention by God and Christ to transform the earth. Literally, Revelation predicts that

A. God and Christ will intervene to end the Great Persecution (which John thought would be imminent) and then there will be 1,000 years of peace and



- missionary work. Note that there will be a preliminary resurrection for the martyrs while the other dead will remain in their graves.
- B. Finally, there will be a universal resurrection, a final judgment, and the triumphant coming of the New Jerusalem where the redeemed (including all those who have become Christians in the meantime) will rejoice. Note that the New Jerusalem will be on a transformed earth, and the “kings of the earth” will bring their glory into the City (21:24).
- XI. It is difficult to interpret the 1,000 year reign of the resurrected martyrs.
- A. This is the only place where the idea occurs in the Bible.
- B. Many early Christian theologians (e.g., Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria) objected to it.
- XII. Because of the special issues involved in the millennium, we will defer discussion of it until later.
- XIII. The literary climax of Revelation is the magnificent description of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1-22:5).
- A. Earlier passages point forward to it (e.g., 3:12).
- B. This is the last sustained passage in Revelation and surpasses all others in power.
- C. In this section God himself finally speaks (21:5ff.).
- XIV. In writing 21:1-22:5 John took elements from earlier biblical descriptions of past and future paradises, including Genesis 2 and Ezekiel 47.
- XV. But, as always when he borrows material, John welds these elements into something profoundly new.
- XVI. Theologically, the section (and the material in Revelation which anticipates it) stresses that if we are faithful, our reward will be true life.
- A. If we are faithless, we will inherit the "second death" which is destruction in the Lake of Fire (Rev. 21:8).
- B. By contrast, the New Jerusalem is where the faithful will drink from the water of life and eat from the Tree of Life (Rev. 22:1-2).
- XVII. This true life has many dimensions including
- A. The fulfillment of all the previously disappointed hopes of God's people. Note the restoration of the Tree of Life and of the Lost Tribes.
- B. The abolition of everything that is painful and degrading. God will wipe away every tear, and nothing will be accursed.
- C. The recognition and honoring of all the spiritual accomplishments of God's people. The Bride (Church) is clothed with fine linen which “is the righteous deeds of the saints” (19:8).
- D. The redemption and transformation of the natural world and the reconciliation of the natural and the urban environments. The Tree of Life and the River of Life are in the City.
- E. The transfiguration of all things and people by the Divine. Everything in the city is either shiny or transparent, and, therefore, God, symbolized as light, is visible in all things. God’s name is on everyone’s foreheads. However, all things and every person retain their own identity.
- F. Perfect fellowship between people from all cultures. The redeemed come from “every nation, from all tribes and peoples, and languages” (7:9).

- G. Final ecstatic fellowship with God in which we will find our fulfillment by being centered in him and in giving him praise, and we will receive his commendation.
- H. This blessed state will last forever.
- XVIII. John uses all of the resources of allusive language and symbol to make this vision have the greatest possible impact.
- XIX. His goal is for us to experience this life so vividly that we will affirm that this is our ultimate hope.
- XX. If we do so, then we will be able to reject Babylon and suffer for the New Jerusalem.
- XXI. A philosophical assumption which John seems to make is that our deepest hope is an indication of ultimate reality (cf. Paul's doctrine of hope).
- XXII. When we correctly identify what we really want, we also discover that we have been using other things as poor substitutes for it, and we are able to surrender them.
- Note that
- A. The vision of the New Jerusalem is in ascending parallelism to the vision of the Whore (Rome). There are many parallels between Babylon (Rome) and the New Jerusalem, but the New Jerusalem always is better.
  - B. The vision of the New Jerusalem unmasks the shallowness of worldly fulfillment, especially worldly fulfillment achieved through (corporate) sin.
  - C. But it affirms the hope that the world claims to fulfill. That hope is universal and comes from our nature as beings created by God.
- XXIII. However, to identify what we really want, we must have someone give us a taste of it, and that is what John does.
- XXIV. (time permitting) A reading of Rev. 21:1-22:5
- XXV. (time permitting) We can appreciate the beauty and profundity of John's vision of paradise by comparing it to other descriptions of paradise, such as the brief one in the Apocalypse of Peter.
- XXVI. Discussion: What are your ultimate hope and vision of paradise, and why do you have them?

### Revelation and the Problem of Hell

- I. One of the climaxes of Revelation is the destruction of Satan, the Beasts, and those who have worshiped them in the Lake of Fire.
- II. Revelation pictures damnation as eternal torment and a "second death" (20:14-15).
- III. It should be noted that this picture of hell fit well with the pre-modern social context and was not controversial at the time.
  - A. Before modern times, torture and death were the normal legal punishment for serious crimes. "Justice" required torture and/or execution.
  - B. People believed that God directly caused sickness and death to punish sinful individuals and directly caused natural disasters to punish sinful societies.
  - C. Consequently, it seemed appropriate that God would torture sinners.
  - D. In the gospels Jesus sometimes pictures hell as a place of tormenting fire (9:43-48).

- IV. Today when social conditions are different, a picture of hell as physical torture seems incompatible with the love of God.
- V. It should be noted, however, that some near-death out-of-body experiences have been "hellish."
- VI. A more theologically interesting view of hell is (perhaps voluntary) separation from God after moral exposure.
- A. Jesus told parables in which people are exposed and cast out (see, e.g., Matthew 25:1-30).
  - B. John's Gospel stresses that the wicked flee from the light to avoid having their deeds exposed (John 3:19-20).
- VII. In Revelation, at least part of the punishment of the wicked is exclusion from the New Jerusalem where God dwells with his people.
- VIII. It is striking (and much to John's credit) that he does not sadistically dwell on the sufferings of the damned.
- A. John spends most of two chapters describing the New Jerusalem.
  - B. But he only has a couple of verses on the Lake of Fire (19:10; 20:10, 14-15).
  - C. Unfortunately, this restraint was not shared by many subsequent Christian writers (as well as many writers in other religious traditions).
- IX. Instead, John spends chapters (the seals, the trumpets, etc.) describing the preliminary earthly sufferings of the wicked which are warnings to them to repent.
- X. Apparently, John views final damnation as the culmination of ignoring that previous suffering was due to sin.
- XI. He also seems to believe that the way to make final damnation credible is to remind people of the sufferings that lead up to it.
- XII. To me this approach to making hell credible is interesting, since I believe that sin does bring at least psychological suffering (shame, guilt) to the perpetrator and often bring other types of suffering (poor health, the breakdown of relationships, social disgrace).

(excursus) Is Revelation's Vision of the Consummation Credible Today.

- I. Revelation justifies its vision of the consummation by appealing to several things.
  - A. The justice of God.
  - B. The resurrection of Jesus (already 1:5)
  - C. John's own visions.
  - D. The hope that these visions inspire. John seems to assume that an ultimate hope must be realizable.
- II. Of course, all of these bases remain debatable today.
- III. However, after two thousand years many things have changed.
  - A. Near-death out-of-body experiences which have become frequent with the rise of modern medicine give strong additional evidence that
    1. The spirit does leave the body at death and goes to some sort of judgment.
    2. There are realms of unimaginable beauty which the righteous dead inhabit which resemble John's vision of the New Jerusalem.

B. On the other hand, other things make it more difficult to believe that God will transform the earth into paradise.

1. Two thousand years have passed, and God has not yet transformed the earth.
2. We have a very different cosmology than John did.
  - a. John assumed that the earth was the center of the universe and that it was not very ancient and that God created human beings directly
  - b. Today we know that the earth is 13.8 billion years old and is only one of trillions of planets, many of which may contain intelligent life, and human beings are the end result of billions of years of evolution.
3. Are we then to believe that God is going to end billions of years of evolution by transforming one planet?

Discussion: Do you feel that the bases of John's vision of the consummation (see "I" above) are sound, and what should we believe today about a final consummation? We will return to these questions as the course continues.

### The Origin of John's Visions and How John Composed Revelation

Discussion question: Where do you think visions (or dreams) come from, and what can we learn from them?

- I. Revelation explicitly claims that it describes what John saw (Rev. 1:2, 22:8).
- II. We must assume that this claim contains at least some truth.
  - A. John writes under his own name to congregations who know him personally.
  - B. He attacks the credentials of an influential seer at Thyatira (Rev. 2:20).
  - C. Therefore, he would not have made the claim if it was wholly false.
- III. There are at least three possible explanations of how visions originate and what they tell us:
  - A. A vision comes directly from God and gives us exact images of heavenly things. Hence, visions allow us to glimpse divine realities directly and perfectly. An implication is that heavenly realities are sufficiently like earthly ones that we can at least experience them directly.
  - B. A vision comes completely from ourselves and tells us nothing about heavenly realities but only about our own hopes, fears, and pathologies. An implication is that visions cannot mediate genuine experiences of external spiritual realities.
  - C. A vision is a culturally conditioned translation of a divine impulse.
    1. God is outside of space and time, and we cannot perceive him directly.
    2. When the divine touches the human, our minds translate this impulse into symbols which we can see or hear, or, at least, experience and comprehend.
    3. This translation is culturally conditioned, because our cultural context helps determine what symbols are meaningful to us.
- IV. In my opinion, the first two models are inadequate for the most valuable and profound ("authentic") visions.

- A. The first model has two defects:
  1. It fails to explain why visions of a single spiritual reality (e.g., Jesus) vary depending on cultural context.
  2. It cheapens divine realities.
- B. The second model fails to explain the enormous and positive devotional and theological impact of certain visions. If visions only tell us about ourselves, why do they often lead people to love *God* and believe in *him* more?
- V. Accordingly, I think the third model is correct, at least, for "authentic" visions.
- VI. If a vision is a culturally conditioned translation of a divine impulse, then a written account of a vision is a translation of a translation.
  - A. We cannot transcribe most things exactly and exhaustively.
  - B. Instead, we must describe them selectively and use the imperfect resources of language.
  - C. Descriptions of visions are especially inexact, because visions can differ so much from everyday reality (cf. how inexact descriptions of dreams are). Note that language depends on everyday reality. Shared experience gives rise to words with accepted "definitions."
- VII. A great strength of Revelation is that John seems to realize that he is giving us a double translation.
  - A. As we noted above, John seems to realize that his visions have a deeper spiritual basis (e.g., the nature of God).
  - B. He also records that his visions did not come directly from God but were mediated by an angel (Rev. 1:1).
  - C. He repeatedly uses the words "like" and "as" to remind us that his descriptions only partially capture what he experienced.
- VIII. We can now attempt to trace the spiritual process which led to the composition of Revelation.
  - A. When the church was facing present difficulties and the possibility of imminent catastrophe, John had a series of encounters with God.
  - B. In these he experienced such things as God's majesty and Jesus's worthiness and the certainty that those who remain faithful to God and Jesus would be vindicated.
  - C. Thanks to John's religious heritage, his mind translated this fundamental experience into visions of God and Jesus ending the world, destroying the wicked, and saving the saints.
  - D. Because John was steeped in the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures and regarded them as inspired, most of the individual images in his visions came from there.
  - E. John then translated these visions into writing.
  - F. In this written form he passed on both his fundamental experience of God and the visions it had inspired.
  - G. In recording his visions John organized and augmented them so they would have the maximum impact on the reader.
    1. He arranged the visions in logical and exciting patterns.
    2. He filled in the gaps and perhaps composed entire scenes in order to produce a compelling whole.

3. He added theological and sociological perspectives.

IX. We can verify that our analysis is correct by looking at Revelation 15-16. Note, especially,

A. The section begins with an ecstatic celebration of God's greatness (15:2-3). This celebration accords with what Christianity teaches about God's fundamental nature, and we must suppose that John actually had this sort of experience of God.

B. A vision predicting God's triumph over his enemies follows. We must assume John actually had this sort of vision, and it arose from John's experience of God.

C. The destruction of God's enemies and the world falls into the familiar literary pattern of seven pictures. This pattern was probably not in the actual visions, but instead John added it when he reduced the visions to writing. These specific scenes may be wholly imaginary.

ASSIGNMENT: Read Jonah.

### Introduction to the Next Four Sections

We now turn to the question of whether or not Revelation is actually true.

### How Do We Determine Whether a Document Is True?

Discussion question: What is a work of art? Can a work of art be true or false?

I. Introduction (just for fun): A false fairy tale. Discussion: Why are most fairy tales true, but the one that I just told false?

II. The most important question one can ask about a biblical book (any book?) is whether it is true. Note that if the answer is "no," the other questions we would normally ask (e.g., "What is Paul saying to us in this passage?") become less interesting.

III. Unfortunately, many Christians, including Christian scholars, do not deal with this question helpfully.

A. Conservatives often ask the question prematurely and deal with it defensively.

1. Without serious investigation, they assume that biblical authors meant for their writings to describe historical happenings and to be taken literally.

2. Then they labor to defend the literal accuracy of seemingly unhistorical accounts.

3. We can see the weaknesses of the conservative approach by looking at the book of Jonah.

a. If we assume that the author meant for the book to be taken literally, we end up trying to explain formidable difficulties.

b. However, there is nothing in the text to justify this assumption.

B. Liberals sometimes ask the question of truth belatedly, unsystematically, or not at all.

1. The bulk of scholarly effort goes into answering purely historical or literary questions (e.g., "When did this book of the Bible originate?").

2. If the question of truth comes up at all, the liberal is often content to point out something in the text that is helpful. There is no discussion of whether the document taken as a whole is true, and one often cannot escape the impression that it is not.
- IV. In this course we will deal systematically with the question of whether Revelation is true.
    - A. So far, we have primarily dealt with issues that conservatives sometimes neglect. Note that we discovered that John did not intend for many of the details in Revelation to be taken literally.
    - B. Now we must deal with the issues that liberals sometimes neglect: Can we claim that Revelation as a whole is true?
  - V. In my opinion, to determine whether a document is true, we must do three things:
    - A. Determine what sort of thing the document is (a newspaper article? a children's fairy tale?).
    - B. Determine what the criteria of truth are for the thing in question. These criteria will in large part depend on the thing's purpose. A newspaper's purpose is to give us dependable facts; hence, a criterion for truth is accuracy. One purpose of children's fairy tales is to instill moral values in children, and a criterion for truth is edification. Thus, a fairy tale in which a supernatural figure intervenes to cause the evil sister (rather than the good sister) to get the handsome young prince is false.
    - C. Determine whether the document meets the criteria of truth for the thing in question.
  - VI. Revelation is at least three things:
    - A. A visionary prophecy
    - B. A Christian work. The author claims to be passing on a "Revelation of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:1).
    - C. A work of art, i.e., something that communicates its message primarily through its form.
  - VII. We must now go over what the criteria of truth for these things are and see whether Revelation meets them.

### The Truth of Revelation as a Visionary Prophecy

- I. (review) There are five principal ways of interpreting a visionary prophecy, and they have different criteria for truth.
  - A. A preterite interpretation assumes that the meaning of a prophecy is what it meant originally, and there is no objective basis for determining whether a prophecy is "true."
  - B. A historical interpretation assumes that a biblical prophecy was a prediction about the short-term future, and the truth of a biblical prophecy is whether what it predicted actually took place subsequently.
  - C. An idealistic perspective assumes that a biblical prophecy was a specific application of a general theological principle. Hence, the criterion of truth is whether the general principle is valid.

- D. A futuristic perspective assumes that a biblical prophecy was a prediction about the long-term future (i.e., the future from our modern perspective), and the criterion of truth is whether the prediction will be fulfilled.
- E. The exhortative perspective assumes that the goal of a biblical prophecy was to improve people's behavior. The criterion for truth is whether the prophecy actually has improved behavior and continues to do so.
- II. (review) To test Revelation's truth, we must begin by using the preterite approach and determine what Revelation's original message was. A valid interpretation must be based on something's original message.
- III. (review) The original message of Revelation:
- A. During a period when the synagogues and the Roman system were putting pressure on the Church, Revelation predicted a period of growing cosmic disorder and religious persecution.
  - B. Soon there would be a supreme crisis in which the cosmos would start to collapse, and the Roman empire would demand that everyone worship the emperor and would massacre Christians who refused.
  - C. Then God would suddenly intervene, raise the dead, transform the world, and reward everyone in accordance with their works.
  - D. Hence, Christians should be steadfast and live in hope.
- IV. From a historical perspective, some of Revelation's message is false. In the years immediately after John wrote, there was no cosmic collapse or devastating persecution, and the present order of reality did not end.
- V. Still, three striking things did occur.
- A. In the years immediately after John wrote, the emperor Domitian was assassinated and discredited, and, as a result, the short-term threat of persecution dramatically subsided.
  - B. In the next two centuries the imperial persecutions which John feared actually occurred, and then they suddenly ceased, and Christianity became the official religion of the empire.
  - C. Ultimately, Christianity became the largest and most influential religion in the world.
- VI. In part these historical events fulfilled John's prophecy. Note that John had predicted
- A. Soon God would destroy the Church's enemies and then John and his faithful comrades would be saved.
  - B. There would be a devastating persecution, and then the Church would reign on earth.
- VII. A biblical prophecy can be considered as historically fulfilled if those who heeded the message were vindicated. A biblical prophecy is not clairvoyance but an attempt to get people to obey God by promising that those who do will somehow be better off. Hence, fulfillment in minute detail is relatively unimportant.
- VIII. By this standard Revelation's predictions were fulfilled. People who refused to worship the emperor were vindicated. They survived the test, kept their spiritual integrity, and became a link in the continuing chain of God's faithful people in history.
- IX. Revelation invites us to prophesy in our own time and reminds us that our predictions need not (and probably will not) be fulfilled in detail.



- X. If we turn to the question of whether Revelation is true from an idealistic perspective, we may note that Revelation is based on the principle that the forces of good will inevitably triumph over tyrants who pretend to be God.
- XI. As we saw earlier, Revelation grounds this principle systematically by pointing out such things as God's eternity.
- XII. In evaluating this principle, we must ask two questions:
- A. Does the belief that God will overthrow tyrants and vindicate those who resist them inspire resistance and hope?
  - B. Does the principle in fact generate correct predictions?
- XIII. In my opinion, the answer to both questions is, "yes."
- XIV. The basic futuristic message of Revelation is that the world will experience a particular consummation. All that is radically evil will be destroyed. All that is good will be affirmed and transfigured. We will experience God directly and totally. For further details, see above.
- XV. Strictly speaking, we cannot know now whether this prophecy is true. By definition we can never know that a prophecy is true from a futuristic perspective.
- XVI. Nevertheless, in dealing with a prophecy about our ultimate destiny we can at least ask two questions:
- A. Does the prophecy cohere with what we know of God? Of course, Christians know God primarily as he has revealed himself in Jesus.
  - B. Does it satisfy our deepest hope and offer a plausible explanation of how such a hope could be realized?
  - C. We should ask these questions because *ultimately* God will achieve his purposes and *ultimately* humanity's deepest hope must be realizable (otherwise the hope itself is inexplicable). Of course, in trying to determine how this realization will take place, we should give preference to the most plausible solution.
- XVII. (review) Revelation's futuristic prediction does cohere with God's nature and our deepest hope, and so I accept it as true.
- A. The God of Jesus is unalterably opposed to evil; he longs to unite himself with us.
  - B. We do long for such a consummation.
  - C. We cannot achieve such a consummation by our own power; only God can do it.
- XVIII. In addition, near-death out-of-body experiences confirm what the church traditionally taught: Individually, we come to this consummation at the moment of death. John himself believed this. Note the fifth seal (Rev. 6:9-11).
- XIX. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that John also holds up an ultimate hope for history and even the ecology. He looks forward to a new earth. Christian hope is never only for life in "heaven," and our goal is never just to escape our present universe (see below).
- XX. From an exhortative perspective, the heart of Revelation is the seven letters (chs. 2-3), because it is in them that John directly challenges his readers to act in a Christian way.
- XXI. Of the letters, the one to the church in Laodicea is the most important.
- A. As the last letter, it culminates John's appeal. Note that each of the letters is

an exhortation to all of John's readers. ("Hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.")

B. It is the most negative letter.

C. Yet, it offers perhaps the most moving promises.

XXII. Apparently, the letter motivated its first readers, and subsequently, its positive impact on behavior has been tremendous.

A. The fact that Revelation was preserved suggests that at least something in it must have been helpful initially. In an era before the invention of the printing press, it took a great deal of effort to keep documents from being quickly lost.

B. In subsequent times

1. The condemnation of lukewarm Christianity in the Letter to Laodicea (Rev. 3:15-16) has become famous.

2. The image of Christ knocking at the door (3:20) has inspired popular devotional art and become a commonplace in evangelistic preaching.

3. Therefore, we must assume that these passages have changed behavior.

XXIII. Consequently, we can affirm that from an exhortative perspective Revelation is indeed true.

### The Truth of Revelation as a Christian Document

Discussion: Do you think Revelation is a "Christian" book?

I. Revelation claims to be a Christian work.

II. For this claim to be true, the message of Revelation must be compatible with that of Jesus.

III. Yet, superficially Revelation's message seems very different.

A. Stylistically, Jesus used images from everyday first-century life, whereas John used the esoteric language of his visions and of Jewish apocalyptic.

B. Revelation is vindictive toward the church's enemies (e.g., Rev. 6:9-10), whereas Jesus taught that we should love them (Matthew 5:44). Indeed, here the contrast seems so great that some scholars (e.g., G.B. Caird) try to claim that Revelation is not vindictive. However, in view of passages like 14:8-11 and 19:20-21, this claim seems most unlikely. Surely, John would have been concerned about how his original readers would have understood the book. And John's largely illiterate audience who were suffering under the Roman system would have interpreted such texts vindictively.

C. Revelation seems preoccupied with the future, whereas Jesus invited us to live in the present. According to Jesus, we should not worry about tomorrow (Matthew 6:34).

IV. Hence, we need to test Revelation's fidelity to Jesus by reviewing briefly what Jesus taught and seeing whether Revelation's teaching coheres with it.

V. The basic teaching of Jesus

A. Like the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures Jesus simply assumed that there was only one God and that this God was just.

B. A theme of the preaching of Jesus was that God was everyone's father, and, therefore, people were brothers and sisters. God summons everyone to love God

with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves.

C. Like the Old Testament Jesus believed that in the past God had a special relationship with Israel.

D. Jesus believed that God was now beginning a renewed Israel through the movement that Jesus was himself starting. Through Jesus's own words and deeds God's reign was entering the world and overcoming evil and estrangement. Note, especially, that Jesus appointed a council of twelve who corresponded to the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28).

E. Ultimately God's reign would encompass the entire world.

F. At present, this new "kingdom" was hidden, and to benefit from it, people had to perceive it and make sacrifices, but, if they did, they would ultimately have a great reward.

G. In the future God's kingdom would become manifest. However, then it would come in judgment.

H. The barrier to perceiving the kingdom now and obtaining salvation was hypocrisy.

1. People's blindness was not primarily due to lack of information or intelligence.

2. Instead, it was due to a fundamental rottenness deep within.

3. This rottenness was hidden, and often behavior and people that outwardly appeared to be good were in fact evil.

I. Therefore, Jesus labored to expose hidden evil and warned about the danger of self-deception and the need for inner transformation.

J. Once people accepted Jesus's message and dealt with their own hypocrisy, they would be able to discern the signs of the times and determine what God's love required in particular situations.

K. In order to help people uncover hypocrisy and discern the kingdom, Jesus spoke obliquely. Note, especially, the overly radical sayings (e.g., Mark 9:47) and the odd parables (e.g., Mat. 20:1-16).

L. Jesus's own life was to be a pattern for that of his disciples.

VI. The basic teaching of Revelation is the same.

A. In response to demands for emperor worship, John insists that there is only one God and he will certainly judge the world justly.

B. John also assumes that in the past God had a special relationship with Israel and that now God has a special relationship with the Church of Christ which is the New Israel. Note that like the old Israel, the Church is a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6, Rev. 1:6, 5:10, 20:6).

C. John also assumes that the Church (which already is multi-national) will ultimately encompass the world. Note, e.g., 21:24.

D. John tries to discern the signs of the times and specify what God's love demands in his particular situation. John looks at the laxness of certain churches and at the menacing political situation and issues specific exhortations and warnings.

E. John's exhortations presuppose Christ's love for us (Rev. 1:5) and demand that we love (e.g., Rev. 2:4).

F. He assumes that in the present God's power is hidden and that to benefit from

it we must perceive it and make sacrifices. However, if we do, we will ultimately have a great reward.

G. In the future God will manifest his power, but then it will come in terrible judgment on those who do evil.

H. John, like Jesus, sees hypocrisy as the great barrier to salvation. The False Prophet looks like a lamb (Rev. 13:11), and the Whore pretends to be beautiful.

I. Hence, John labors to expose the hidden structures of oppression.

J. In order to help us see our world with new eyes, John speaks obliquely, using fantastic imagery.

K. Jesus's life is to be a pattern for our own. He was the faithful witness (Rev. 1:5) who died and is now alive forever (Rev. 1:18). We must be faithful and die so we can live forever (e.g., Rev. 2:10).

VII. Although it is true that John invites us to think about the future, whereas Jesus asks us to concentrate on the present (see III.C. above), the contrast should not be pressed.

A. Jesus told us we could concentrate on the present because God controls the future and will take care of us (e.g., Mat. 6:25-33).

B. Moreover, Jesus also foretold the future (e.g., Mark 13), and his predictions became a model for John's own (see above).

C. John invites us to think about the future so that we will live more responsibly today. He tells us about what is to come not in order to satisfy our curiosity but to make us more faithful.

VIII. Although Jesus told us to love our enemies, whereas Revelation rejoices in their destruction, here too the contrast should not be pressed.

A. In Revelation

1. John leaves vengeance up to God. Indeed, Revelation warns its readers not to resort to violence no matter how great the provocation (13:9-10).

2. God only destroys the unrepentant, and his enemies are so evil that even fearsome plagues do not bring a change in heart (Rev. 9:20-21, 16:9-11). Hence, their destruction is just.

3. Moreover, God *must* destroy them in order to overcome evil and vindicate his saints.

4. Accordingly, Christians may rightly rejoice over the end of the wicked.

5. We should also remember that the goal of Revelation and the circumstances under which John wrote make the book's vengefulness pardonable.

a. John wrote Revelation as a warning to Christians not to compromise. The gruesome fate of the wicked was intended to serve as a caution.

b. Moreover, Christians were a persecuted minority and so their resentment is understandable. Today we who happen to live in happier circumstances should hesitate before judging Revelation's vindictiveness too harshly.

B. Jesus, despite his love for his enemies, foretold their doom if they did not repent.

IX. Accordingly, Revelation is true as a Christian document.

## Excursus: Is Revelation Compatible with Christian Orthodoxy?

- I. "Classical Orthodoxy" arose after Revelation was written.
  - A. The councils which defined the core doctrines of traditional Christianity took place in the fourth and fifth centuries.
  - B. The creeds which briefly summarized mainstream Christian doctrine also were composed after Revelation. Thus, the Nicene Creed which is the most important statement of Christian faith and is still recited in Christian worship was composed in the fourth century.
- II. Therefore, it is anachronistic to ask whether Revelation is orthodox, since orthodoxy, at least in its classical form, did not exist when John wrote.
- III. Nevertheless, one can ask whether Revelation's theology is at least pre-orthodox, i.e., a legitimate precursor of later orthodoxy and compatible with it.
- IV. This question is especially significant since various Christians have claimed that the work is not part of mainstream Christianity.
  - A. The Alogoi even held that a heretic named Cerinthus wrote Revelation.
  - B. Some modern thinkers (e.g., Rudolf Bultmann) have contended that Revelation is basically a Jewish work with only a Christian veneer.
- V. Since the Nicene Creed is the classical statement of orthodoxy we can compare what it says with Revelation to determine Revelation's "orthodoxy."
- VI. The Nicene Creed emphasizes these basic points.
  - A. There is only one God, and this God made all things.
  - B. Jesus is one substance with this God, and, "is god of god."
  - C. Jesus became human through being born of Mary and was crucified for our salvation.
  - D. He rose from the dead and now reigns with God the Father in heaven.
  - E. He will return to judge the world, "and his kingdom will have no end."
  - F. The Holy Spirit comes from God and spoke through the prophets.
  - G. There is only one legitimate Church; it is universal and based on the apostles.
  - H. Christians look forward to the resurrection of the dead.
- VII. It is noteworthy that Revelation affirms all of these doctrines. Of course, since Revelation is a visionary work, these affirmations often occur in imagery.
  - A. Revelation repeatedly emphasizes that we can only worship the One God (19:10, 22:9), and this God created everything (4:11, 10:6, 14:7).
  - B. Revelation insists that Jesus sits on God's throne (3:21) and rightly receives worship from all of the universe (5:13). Note that Revelation insists that only God is to be worshiped. Revelation even seems to teach that Jesus preexisted his human birth. He was the "first" (1:17), "the beginning of God's creation" (3:14).
  - C. Revelation teaches that Jesus was born from a celestial woman who represents both the people of God generally and, more specifically, Mary (ch. 12).
  - D. Jesus by his blood has freed Christians from their sins (1:5; 5:9).
  - E. After his death, Jesus returned to life (1:18) and now reigns (ch. 5).
  - F. Jesus will return to rule the earth, and his kingdom (the New Jerusalem) will last forever.

- G. John repeatedly mentions the Holy Spirit. Under the symbol of seven (the number of fullness) spirits, the Holy Spirit is before God's throne. The Spirit speaks to each of the seven churches. John also says that "the testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy" (19:10), and John calls his own work a "prophecy" (e.g., 1:3).
- H. John celebrates the Church under the symbol of the Bride (19:7-8; 22:17), and the names of the twelve apostles are written on the foundations of the New Jerusalem (which is the Church triumphant; 21:14) .
- I. Of course, John specifically narrates a final resurrection (20:11-13).
- VIII. Consequently, it is hard to imagine how Revelation could be more "orthodox." And historically during the controversy over whether Jesus was fully divine, orthodox theologians appealed to texts from Revelation to argue that he was (Craig Koester).
- IX. I also feel that it is unreasonable to say that Revelation is basically a Jewish work.
- A. Of course, John is a Jewish Christian and, therefore, is especially supportive of Jewish Christians.
- B. But it is noteworthy that John
1. Never suggests that Christians need to follow the ethnic provisions of the Mosaic Law. Despite his harsh criticism of some of the seven churches, he does not mention laxness in observing such Jewish markers as food laws or resting on the Sabbath.
  2. Constantly emphasizes that the gospel is for all nations, not just for ethnic Jews (e.g., 7:9-10).
  3. Condemns Jews who reject Christianity ("the synagogue of Satan" [2:9, 3:9]).

### The Truth of Revelation as a Work of Art

- I. (review) Art primarily communicates through its form.
- II. Consequently, the artist must strive for formal excellence.
- III. To achieve formal excellence, an artist must depart from reality, because both the natural world and human society are poor in form.
- IV. Hence, art is seldom accurate in the strict sense, and the test of whether a piece of art is true is not literal fidelity to "reality."
- V. Because art is not accurate, it invites us to compare the representation with the reality.
- VI. Therefore, after we experience a piece of art, we perceive the "real" world differently.
- VII. The test of whether a work of art is true is whether the work leads us to see the world more accurately and, consequently, live more wisely. Note that by this definition some art (e.g., TV programs that sanitize violence) is false.
- VIII. Art helps us re-evaluate reality by inviting us into an imaginary world from which we return and see the actual one with new eyes.
- IX. Revelation invites us to enter a world that is both fantastic and ultimate.
- X. John's goal is to get us to see present reality in the context of ultimate reality. His

hope is that once we do, we will choose to suffer in this deceptive and transitory life in order to obtain that which is truly real and lasting. The bulk of the book consists of

A. Gripping scenes depicting the destruction of this world and its champions. Artistically, these undermine our attachment to this life.

B. Magnificent descriptions of final blessedness. Artistically, these contrast with the destruction scenes and invite us to choose God.

XI. Since Revelation's first readers preserved the book, we must assume that it accomplished John's goal in their case.

XII. The question which we must ask is whether Revelation as a work of art is true today.

XIII. In my opinion, if we read Revelation in the popular futuristic manner, the answer must be, "no." If we use Revelation to predict upcoming events, we see the world less accurately and live more foolishly. One reason that I have required students to present futuristic predictions based on Revelation is to demonstrate that this approach to Revelation leads to craziness.

XIV. However, I believe that if we see Revelation as a disclosure of the fragility of this life and of the majesty of eternal blessedness, then we do see life more accurately and live more wisely.

XV. Discussion: For you personally, is Revelation true as a work of art?

ASSIGNMENT: Read Genesis 1-3, the Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Revelation 20-22.

### Introduction to the Remaining Sections

The question to which we now turn is whether Revelation remains helpful today, and if so, how.

### The Positive Contribution of Revelation to the Canon

Discussion: Is the Bible a single book or only a collection of books? Why is the Bible important?

I. The Bible is a collection of early documents that became authoritative in the Church because they encapsulate the foundations of Christian faith. Hence, the Bible became the standard for determining

A. What Christianity essentially was

B. Whether new movements or ideas were compatible with Christianity.

II. Because it encapsulates the foundations of our faith, the Bible needs to have two contrasting qualities:

A. It must be a unity and so give unity to Christianity.

B. It must also honor the diversity of the early faith and so be a resource to the diverse people and situations of today.

III. Revelation makes a vital contribution to the unity of the Bible.

A. Taken individually, the biblical books are almost hopelessly diverse. For example, what do the Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes have in common?

B. A crucial unifying element in the Bible taken as a whole is salvation history.

The Bible narrates how God saved his people from creation onwards. Note that the Bible attributes both the Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes to King Solomon, an important person in biblical history.

C. Revelation unifies the biblical narrative by bringing salvation history to its awesome conclusion and providing a fitting close to scripture. Note, especially, that

1. The final chapters of Revelation echo the opening chapters of Genesis (compare, for example, Gen. 1:1 and Rev. 21:1; Gen. 2:9 and Rev. 22:2; Gen. 3:17-19 and Rev. 22:3).
2. Revelation emphasizes that what was lost at the beginning of the Bible is restored at the end, and the circle of scripture is closed.
3. At the same time, however, Revelation completes scripture's linear progression, because the New Jerusalem far surpasses Eden in splendor and in population.
4. Once a story is complete it is easier to see it as a unified whole, and Revelation allows us to view the entire Bible as a coherent account of God's plan of salvation.

IV. Revelation makes a vital contribution to the diversity of the New Testament.

A. Revelation gives literary diversity.

1. The remainder of the New Testament consists of pastoral letters and stories about Jesus and the early church.
2. Revelation alone allows us to experience the evocative power of visionary images.

B. Revelation adds diversity to New Testament theology.

1. Revelation emphasizes loving God, whereas the rest of the New Testament emphasizes loving one's neighbor. I believe this emphasis on God is especially needed in liberal Christianity today.
2. Revelation stresses that political powers can be evil and may need to be resisted, whereas the rest of the New Testament assumes the goodness of governors and the need to obey them (e.g., Romans 13). I believe that today we particularly need to recover Revelation's perspective that *monotheism* calls us to resist political idolatry.

Discussion: Is loving God important?

### The Contribution of Revelation to Christian Art and Worship

I. Revelation has been an enormous blessing to the arts.

A. It has inspired artists down through the centuries.

1. Many of the monuments of world art (e.g., Albert Durer's woodcuts) illustrate scenes from Revelation.
2. Many of the motifs of Christian and even secular art come from there (the four living creatures as symbols for the four evangelists, the image of Mary having a crown of twelve stars and standing on the moon, the grim reaper, heaven as a place with pearly gates and people playing harps).
3. Many classical and popular musical texts borrow from the apocalypse.



4. Much of the greatest Christian literature (e.g., Dante, Milton) has drawn on Revelation.
- B. In the history of art Revelation's unearthly scenes have spurred imagination and creativity.
- II. Theologically, Revelation demonstrates that art can mediate God's presence, and so the arts should play an important role in religious life.
  - A. Unfortunately, ever since the Mosaic prohibition of images (Exodus 20:4-5, Deuteronomy 5:8-9) there has been a bias against visual art in many circles.
  - B. Revelation stands as a rebuke against such prejudice, since the book makes God's being and attributes manifest through pictorial descriptions.
- III. Nevertheless, by declining to describe God himself, John also reminds us that God exceeds anything we can imagine, and the artist should respect the Mosaic injunction not to portray God himself. God becomes visible through the reflected glory of the things that surround him and through the rest of creation.
- IV. Visual presentation: Comparing Christian art which pictures God with Christian art which does not picture God but makes him visible through the reflected glory of the things that surround him or through the rest of creation. Which approach gives us a greater experience of the presence of God?
- V. Revelation reminds Christians that in this age God is primarily visible in Jesus, and the Christian artist should present Jesus in such a way that we can see God in him.
  - A. After he had forbidden making images of himself, God became incarnate.
  - B. Hence, for Christians the face of Christ is the face of God (cf. 2 Cor. 4:6).
  - C. Accordingly, the Christian artist should present Jesus so we can see God in and through him.
  - D. Significantly, Revelation does this. Jesus is the first thing we encounter in John's visions, and in him we clearly see the majesty of God himself (Rev. 1:12-18).
- VI. Visual presentation: Pictures of Christ which make God visible through him.
- VII. Revelation has also enriched Christian worship by providing texts for various liturgies through the ages. The hymns to God and/or the Lamb have been particularly popular in services.
- VIII. Perhaps even more important, Revelation vindicates liturgy itself.
  - A. Especially in extreme Protestantism there has been a bias against ceremony in the worship of God, and, recently, there have been attempts to turn liturgy into entertainment.
  - B. Revelation portrays heavenly worship as rich and sensual with prostrations and hymns and incense (e.g., 4:4-11, 8:3-4).
  - C. And it is in the context of worship that John (and his readers) encounter ultimate reality (Daniel Harrington).
  - D. Moreover, Revelation originally even made its readers part of heavenly worship.
    1. In Revelation all things, not only in heaven, but even on earth, worship God and the Lamb (Rev. 5:13).
    2. John probably intended for Revelation to be read when a congregation gathered for the Eucharist.
    3. Some of what is in Revelation echoes parts of the Eucharist as it was

celebrated in the first century. Note, for example, that the Eucharist like Revelation ended with a prayer for Jesus to come (Didache X.6; Rev. 22:20).

4. Hence, John's descriptions of heavenly worship became an integral part of actual liturgy on earth.

5. And Revelation is a continuing warning that the primary test of liturgy is not whether it is entertaining but whether it helps people enter into the presence of God.

IX. Visual presentation: Some art works inspired by Revelation.

ASSIGNMENT: Read Sinclair, ch. 18.

### The Message of Revelation for Contemporary Spirituality

I. In recent years spirituality has become more popular.

II. I choose to believe this new enthusiasm for such things as prayer and meditation is a hopeful sign.

III. Nevertheless, it seems to me that some contemporary spirituality suffers from two dangers:

A. Narcissism.

1. The goal of spirituality may not in practice be dying to self and growing in the love and service of God and others.

2. Instead, the goal can become

a. Either having have esoteric experiences which one enjoys and about which one can boast

b. Or becoming richer and more popular or becoming more relaxed and more able to concentrate. Note: These goals are not necessarily bad things, but they are not a legitimate substitute for loving God and serving one's neighbor.

B. Fragmentation. Now that we have become aware of the complexities of spiritual experience, we are in danger of losing our focus on God. Often it seems like people are primarily concerned with decoding visionary symbols or classifying states of consciousness or dealing with spiritual intermediaries (e.g., angels).

IV. Theologically, spiritual narcissism is due to a misunderstanding of the relationship between the Divine and created things.

A. The spiritual narcissist assumes that the individual is the center of reality and that experiences are primarily something which we have. Hence, we should seek to have the right ones and use them for self-aggrandizement.

B. By contrast, once we realize that God is the center of reality, we seek to be receptive to the experiences that God sends, and we hope such experiences will allow us to have him as the center of our lives. Ideally, such spirituality should lead to "ecstasy" (standing outside of oneself).

V. Theologically, spiritual fragmentation is due to a loss of practical monotheism.

When we become preoccupied with visionary symbols or states of consciousness or the like, we in effect detach them from God and make them separate divine realities.

- VI. Revelation is the biblical book that focuses most on spirituality and should provide us with a biblical perspective on it.
- VII. When John wrote, spiritual narcissism and fragmentation *may* have been appearing in his churches.
- A. Colossians attacks the "worship of angels" (Col. 2:18), and the city of Colossae was close to Laodicea, one of the seven cities which Revelation explicitly addresses.
  - B. In the letter to Thyatira Revelation complains that some study "the deep things of Satan" (Rev. 2:24).
  - C. But unfortunately, this data is too limited and ambiguous to draw secure conclusions about the spirituality of these churches.
- VIII. In any case, Revelation emphatically rejects the worship of angels (Rev. 19:10, 22:9).
- IX. Nevertheless, John affirms the importance of visions and intermediary spiritual beings. Most of Revelation consists of accounts of visions, and many angels play important roles in them.
- X. However, he suggests that the fundamental spiritual experience for Christians is the joyful loss of self before the majesty of God.
- A. In Revelation God is awesome and fascinating.
  - B. Those who worship God focus entirely on him and lose all preoccupation with self.
  - C. The literary power of John's descriptions invite readers to experience the majesty of God and forget about ourselves.
- XI. John's descriptions of heavenly intermediaries never compromise monotheism.
- A. Heavenly beings merely reflect or parody God's glory; they have none of their own. Indeed, when we read Revelation we see the glory of God in the heavenly beings. God himself is never described.
  - B. Only evil "angels" seek to be worshiped (ch. 13; cf. 19:10, 22:9).
  - C. At the consummation we will see God face to face (22:4).
- XII. Revelation suggests that the key to overcoming spiritual narcissism and fragmentation is praising God and Christ. Psychologically, praise takes the focus of our attention away from ourselves and centers us on the one we are praising. Note that praise predominates in the heavenly "liturgies" (e.g., chs. 4-5).
- XIII. Some implications for us today as we rediscover spiritual experience.
- A. We should be open to visions and should take their contents seriously.
  - B. Nevertheless, we should not seek self-gratification from them or become preoccupied with their details.
  - C. Instead, we should be centered in God and be open to the ecstatic loss of self.
  - D. The path to spiritual maturity is praise.
- ASSIGNMENT: Reread Revelation.

### Some Reflections on Satan and the Antichrist, especially as seen in Revelation

- I. Satan plays a major role in Revelation.
- A. He is often mentioned in the seven letters (2:9, 13, 24; 3:9).

- B. Christ's resurrection leads to his expulsion from heaven (ch. 12).
- C. Satan is behind the great persecution, since he rouses up the Beasts (ch. 13).
- D. His imprisonment brings in the millennium, and his final destruction removes the last obstacle to the coming of the New Jerusalem (ch. 20).
- II. Of course, Satan (or his demonic subordinates) also plays a significant role in contemporary culture (e.g., in motion pictures).
- III. Accordingly, I would like to reflect on Satan both in Revelation and today.
- IV. The history of the concept of Satan up to the writing of Revelation.
  - A. A major problem in human life and thought is how to account for the existence of superhuman evil. By "superhuman evil" I mean massive evil that apparently does not come solely from human misdeeds.
  - B. In amoral polytheistic systems such evil may come from the gods themselves.
    - 1. Individual gods have character defects.
    - 2. The gods are sometimes in conflict with one another.
    - 3. Hence, human beings sometimes suffer through no fault of their own.
  - C. Ancient Israel adopted ethical monotheism and could not explain evil in this way.
    - 1. Because there was only one God, all lesser beings (including angels) were subject to him.
    - 2. Since he was morally perfect, he would not commit evil himself.
  - D. As much as possible, the Israelites explained evil as God's just punishment for human misdeeds.
  - E. Over the course of time, however, people increasingly realized that this explanation was not entirely adequate. The book of Job was an especially important protest against blaming misfortune on the sinfulness of victims. And it is striking that in this book Satan (who is not yet the devil but an overly aggressive heavenly prosecuting attorney) is actually the one who afflicts Job, and God criticizes Satan for doing so (Job 2:3).
  - F. From 539 B.C.E. until 331 B.C.E. the Jews were under Persian rule, and the Persians believed that there was a god of evil as well as a god of good. How much influence Persian thought had on Judaism is unclear.
  - G. In the last centuries before the common era, some Jews increasingly emphasized that certain angels were evil.
    - 1. Like sinful human beings, these superhuman forces had chosen to disobey God.
    - 2. Of course, in the end God would destroy them.
    - 3. In the meantime, however, they were the cause of superhuman evil and, especially, of destructive worship.
    - 4. They also tempted human beings to disobey God.
    - 5. We see this theology throughout the New Testament. Note, e.g., Ephesians 6:10-12.
  - H. The idea of Satan evolved in accordance with the overall scheme noted above.
    - 1. We have no mention of Satan in the earlier biblical books.
    - 2. In the late books of Job and Zechariah "Satan" (Hebrew: "adversary") is the title of a heavenly accuser who incites God to send calamity on people. Perhaps in 1 Chronicles 21:1 Satan is running a sting operation.

3. By New Testament times Satan is the leader of the angels in rebellion against God.
4. The New Testament assumes that the coming of Jesus, and, especially, his death and resurrection have in principle defeated Satan (e.g., Luke 10:18).
5. However, his final defeat will only occur when Christ returns to judge the world.

V. The portrait of Satan in Revelation is consistent with the history sketched above. According to Revelation

- A. Satan originally was an evil angel in heaven who brought accusations against God's people (12:10).
- B. He then incited a third of the angels to rebel against God (12:3-4).
- C. With Christ's death and resurrection, Satan is cast out of heaven along with his angels (12:7-10).
- D. He incites the Roman authorities to persecute the Church.
- E. In the end Christ will destroy him.

VI. Some reflections on the usefulness of the concept of Satan today. I believe that the idea of Satan is of continuing theological importance, because it emphasizes

- A. There is superhuman evil, and we must not uncritically blame individuals for everything that goes wrong in life or naively assume that "progress" will solve all problems.
- B. Sometimes superhuman evil (e.g., mob psychology) has a personality and leads to persecution or genocide.
- C. Nevertheless, superhuman evil is not divine, and we need not worship it.
- D. We can legitimately look forward to its final elimination in the next life. Note that the problem with some Hollywood treatments of Satan is that Satan, not God, becomes the focus of attention.

VII. One controversial issue is whether "Satan" is merely a mythological and literary figure or is an actual being. For what it is worth, I hold the second viewpoint.

VIII. Like Satan, the "Antichrist" plays a major role in Revelation.

- A. The word "Antichrist" does not actually occur in Revelation but does occur for the first time in the Epistles of John (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). Literally, it means someone who "replaces Christ."
- B. Even though the word does not occur in Revelation, the "Beast from the Sea" plays a similar role and dominates chapter 13 and appears elsewhere also (e.g., 11:7).
- C. The concept of a last, supremely evil, ruler who would dominate the earth, act as if he was God, and be destroyed just before the arrival of final salvation goes back at least as far as the book of Daniel (c. 165 B.C.E.) and was common in the early church.
  1. Daniel was written as a response to a persecution of Judaism which threatened to destroy the entire religion. The persecution included
    - a. The ritual defilement of the temple at Jerusalem.
    - b. The imposition of idolatrous worship on the population.
    - c. The outlawing of circumcision and of the possession of biblical writings.

- d. The torture and execution of Jews who did not submit.
- 2. The instigator of this persecution was Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) who ruled over an empire which included Israel and (like other rulers in the East) was worshiped as a god by non-Jews.
- 3. To steel the faithful to face martyrdom, the book of Daniel portrays Antiochus IV as the final monster in history who would immediately precede the coming of God's glorious reign (which would include the resurrection and judgment of the dead).
- 4. Daniel then set the expectation that just before the end of this world and the triumph of God a supremely evil person would appear who would persecute the faithful, act as if he were God, and attain almost superhuman power (Dan. 11:21-45).
- 5. This expectation was taken over by the early church and appears in a number of places in the New Testament. The picture of the Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 is especially close to that in Revelation.
- D. As we saw above, Revelation pictures the Antichrist as
  - 1. Like the Emperor Nero (see, for example, the discussion of 666 above).
  - 2. A parody of Jesus.
  - 3. A nearly superhuman figure.
- E. John tells us that Nero will rise from the dead, lead a nightmarish army from the East, and destroy Rome, and then Jesus will destroy him.
- F. But it is hard to know how much of this John believed to be literally true. For example, did John suppose that Nero would literally rise from the dead or only that a new ruler who was similar to Nero would appear?
- G. Of course, regardless of what John believed, we have not seen the Antichrist yet, although such recent figures as Hitler, Stalin, and Mao certainly resembled the Antichrist in important ways.
- H. The figure of the Antichrist has fascinated Christians down through the ages and continues to do so today.
- I. Identifying the Antichrist with specific individuals (including Ronald Reagan and William Clinton!) has encouraged needless polarization.
- J. Nevertheless, the concept of the Antichrist remains useful as a warning.
  - 1. Without help from others, individual human beings can only commit a very limited amount of evil.
  - 2. Human communities can commit vast evil.
  - 3. Such evil is especially liable to occur when communities invest a ruler with supreme power and no moral accountability.
  - 4. Often this happens when the ruler in question promises the equivalent of final salvation, or to use traditional language, when the ruler claims to be able to replace God.

Discussion: What do you think of the concept of Satan? Why does the public have such interest in him? What do you think of the concept of the Antichrist?

ASSIGNMENT: Reread Revelation.

## The Positive Contribution of Revelation to Living in a World that Is in Danger of Destroying Itself

Discussion: How does the threat that the world as we know it could end in the near future affect our lives and our society?

- I. In the twentieth century human beings gained the ability to destroy the world, especially, through
  - A. Military “advances” (e.g., nuclear weapons)
  - B. Degrading the ecology.
- II. We also have had the worst tyrannies in history so far.
- III. Consequently, modern times have similarities to the tribulation which Revelation depicts.
- IV. Such similarities, however, are not due to John foreseeing contemporary events.
- V. Instead, John tried to describe absolute human tyranny and cosmic devastation, and, as our technological capacities have increased, we have become ever closer to producing them.
- VI. As we have approached these horrors, Revelation has comforted Christians by providing us with biblical names for them (esp., "Apocalypse," "The Beast," and "Armageddon"). Note that knowing something's name robs it of much of its terror. "Apocalypse" and "Armageddon" have become so useful that they are now part of secular English.
- VII. Revelation has further comforted us with the assurance that what it names cannot disrupt God's plan of salvation.
- VIII. This assurance has been helpful even to Revelation's most ignorant readers. Even futurists who misinterpret the book's details realize that Revelation proclaims that God is ultimately in control and will be victorious.
- IX. Revelation provides a helpful reminder that "progress" is not necessary for history to be meaningful if we believe that God will give history a transcendent consummation.
- X. Ironically, the security of knowing that "progress" in this world is not essential makes progress easier to achieve. Note: I believe (see next section) that progress is part of God's “plan.”

Discussion: How do you live with the knowledge that the world may destroy itself?

ASSIGNMENT: Reread Revelation.

## The Millennium in Revelation and the Implications for Today--A Personal Christian Reflection from the Instructor

- I. Despite its enormous impact on subsequent Christian thought and life, the biblical idea of the millennium only occurs in one place in scripture, Revelation 20:1-6. Let's read it.
- II. Perhaps one reason for its influence is that the passage is at the conclusion of the Bible, and conclusions attract a great deal of attention.
- III. (review) The millennium occurs as part of Revelation's larger schema for the end of the present world. There are basically three events in this whole:
  - A. The great persecution of the Church.

1. The demonic Roman government slaughters Christians for refusing to worship the emperor. Note that during this period the Beast from the Land works miracles which deceive the world into thinking that the emperor is divine (Rev. 13:13-15).
  2. Then Christ returns to end the persecution by destroying the emperors and their supporters.
- B. The millennium in which only the martyrs rise from the dead and reign on earth, perhaps at Jerusalem.
1. During this period the rest of history will apparently continue pretty much as it always has.
  2. And apparently the Church will proclaim the gospel to the nations of the world (e.g., 14:6-7). Here Revelation envisions the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy (e.g., Isaiah 49:6) and the later Christian expectation (e.g., Mark 13:10) that the gospel would reach to the ends of the earth.
  3. At the conclusions of the period Satan will again be able to marshal people for one last assault on the Church.
- C. The coming of a new order of reality.
1. The final destruction of Satan
  2. The last judgment
  3. The damnation of the wicked and the abolition of death.
  4. The coming of a new heaven and a new earth.
  5. The descent of the New Jerusalem where the saints will dwell in glory with God and Christ forever.
- IV. As background, it should be noted that in the previous centuries (at least since the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. and the subsequent Exile) the Jews had sometimes looked forward to a radically better life. Their belief in ethical monotheism and their daily experience of suffering despite being at least relatively righteous produced the recurring conviction that soon God would intervene to save them.
- V. It is hard to know how literally to take the details of various predictions concerning a radically better future.
- A. In a previous era scholars sometimes saw them as expressions of consistent theological positions.
  - B. Today I think lots of people (including me) would see them as mostly poetic expressions of a fundamental hope for deliverance.
- VI. Nevertheless, these texts seem to predict two alternative understandings of the future.
- A. God would redeem Israel within the context of present reality. Perhaps there would be a great new king who would defeat the enemies of Israel, establish peace, justice, and prosperity, and institute proper worship.
  - B. God would save Israel by altering fundamental reality. The wolf and the lamb would live together in peace (Isaiah 11:6).
- VII. In any case, in the late first century of the common era, some Jewish apocalypses (e.g., 2 [4] Esdras) and Revelation--combined these hopes. First there would be a redemption within history and then a redemption beyond history. Note 2 Esdras 7:26-44.
- VIII. Accordingly, it seems to me that Revelation is affirming that Christians should



believe that there will be two types of salvation.

A. God will bring history to a positive conclusion. There will be a great period of justice and peace.

B. God will also give us a salvation which is greater than would be possible within the limits of earthly reality.

IX. Revelation is being poetic, and the details of its predictions should not be pressed. Consequently, I think it is basically consistent with Revelation to look forward to both

A. A coming period of justice and peace on earth.

B. Going to "heaven" when we die.

X. In Western history there have been two great Christian heresies that have tried to opt for just one of these two. (review) Within biblical tradition the concept of meaningful personal survival after death first appears in "apocalyptic" writings.

A. Gnosticism held that the material world was evil and the most which humans could hope for was deliverance from fleshly and historical reality. We could escape the filthy body at death and go to a non-material realm.

B. Secular messianism (e.g., communism) held that the material world was all that would ever exist and the most which we could hope for was a fundamentally better world (e.g., a classless society).

XI. Today it is easy in retrospect to see the disturbing consequences of either approach.

A. Gnosticism and its descendants (Manichean, even Christian Science) have led both to psychological disorder (e.g., a disgust for sex) and a failure to benefit from progress in history (e.g., the techniques of modern medicine).

B. Secular messianism--perhaps partly because it had no hope for life beyond the grave--had an obsessive need to perfect history quickly and, therefore, violently. The policies of Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot were one result.

XII. Mainline Christianity itself has on occasion veered in one of these two directions.

A. Sometimes (e.g., in the European "Dark Ages") the emphasis was almost exclusively on getting to heaven, and there was little concern for improving the world.

B. Sometimes (e.g., in the 1960's) the emphasis was almost exclusively on improving the world. There was little emphasis on prayer or loving God or eternal life.

XIII. The millennium then is the Christian affirmation that God has a purpose that will be accomplished within history, as well as a purpose beyond it.

XIV. Of course, Revelation believes that only God can accomplish this purpose--not human beings working without him--and that to the extent that God will accomplish his purposes by working through people, he will work through those who are faithful in suffering love. It is the martyrs--those who have died for their love of God and refused to worship human tyranny--who will reign in the millennium.

XV. The modern idea of progress partly derived from faith in the millennium. Some Christians (e.g., the Puritans) concluded that the millennium was arriving and that, therefore, over the next thousand years life would continually improve. Such hope fostered technological and social advancement.

XVI. By the nineteenth century, Western culture, and, to some extent, even world culture adopted the idea of secular progress.

XVII. The dominant idea was that human beings could build a better world without

having to rely on God. From at least the time of Darwin, science considered God to be an unnecessary hypothesis, at least for scientific work. In social planning too religion was not taken into consideration. Of course, some of the most determined attempts to produce the perfect world (whether in the Soviet Union in the 1930's or in China during the Cultural Revolution or in Cambodia under Pol Pot) were self-consciously anti-Christian and atheistic.

XVIII. (review) We need not dwell on the tragic results such attempts sometimes produced, but we may note in passing that they have an eerie similarity to the vision of demonic government which occurs in Revelation, and, indeed, occurs shortly before the millennium. For example, the Stalinist government also (through technological progress) worked wonders that made the regime and its leader appear superhuman. Of course, as in Revelation, the totalitarian governments of the twentieth century have been destroyed. (Naturally, I am not claiming that John "foresaw" such events, but only that they are consistent with his theology.)

XIX. The social failure of atheistic progress encourages us to ask if God and faith are necessary both for science and/or social planning.

A. Should science continue to try to explain the origin and evolution of the universe without God? In the modern world science has proceeded on the basis of methodological atheism. Would a more neutral working assumption be preferable? And in recent years the discovery that the universe is fine tuned for life has caused some cosmologists to conclude that there must be a God.

B. Could faith be necessary for human welfare? Note that some medical studies show that faith and prayer have a positive impact on physical health.

XX. Theologically, it is also increasingly clear that progress within history is part of the "divine plan." Despite the claims of Fundamentalists, evolution is a proved hypothesis, and, I personally believe that there is more and more evidence that some divine hand has helped guide the "progress" in the universe from the Big Bang until the present.

XXI. Consequently, now perhaps more than ever we should adopt Revelation's concept that with the help of God there can be a radically better world within history, but only if we realize that

A. It cannot be achieved by a government or society that deifies itself.

B. It must be achieved by self-sacrificing love.

C. It must be combined with a vision of a greater salvation beyond history, especially, seeing God after physical death.

Discussion: Is Revelation helpful to me?

Assignment: Study for the final examination. Complete upper division reflection papers.

(time permitting) An Oral reading of Revelation

I. Today most people experience Revelation primarily through individual silent reading rather than listening.

II. John, however, intended that most people would *hear* his book (Rev. 1:3).

A. A few people probably read what John wrote. But even those people read the book out loud. Silent reading was virtually unknown in John's time.

B. Most people were illiterate.

C. Probably there was originally only one copy of Revelation--the one John sent. Note that copying was slow, because it had to be done by hand and only printing (not handwriting) existed.

III. Listening to a document is a different experience than reading it oneself silently.

When we hear a document,

A. We hear it through someone else's interpretation. It is impossible to read something out loud without supplying an implicit interpretation.

B. We are unable to pause to study and reflect or go back to review.

C. Under such circumstances we do not retain many of the details.

D. Instead, we get the basic thrust of the document.

E. But for that very reason the experience may be more intense.

IV. An oral reading of Revelation.

Discussion: What reaction did you have in hearing Revelation read?

Student artistic presentations.

Presentations of upper division papers on the topic, "What in This Course Will Be of Continuing Importance in my Life?" Discussion.

Final Examination