

# A Summary of the Book of Revelation

## INTERPRETATIVE APPROACHES

Firstly, here's a reminder of the 4 broad interpretational approaches to the book (though there are of course many subtle variations and combinations of these.)

1. **Preterist** - the book only addresses first century issues and situations faced by John's readers.
2. **Historisict** - the book provides a time-line for events across the whole of history from the first century till the end.
3. **Futurist** - the book almost exclusively describes events which are still in the future
4. **Idealist** - the book doesn't really predict events at all and is not tied to any particular age. It describes universal spiritual realities which are true of the whole church age, albeit that there is still a linear movement towards final victory and judgement. History may repeat itself, but it is still linear and not cyclical.

The second of these has been largely (and rightly) discredited and thus we are left with three main approaches. The idealist view has most appeal to me, but it does of course allow for both first century and future applications at the same time. It interprets the text as referencing all periods of church history in general, allowing John's visions and symbols to apply to all times in general and none in particular. Whereas, the Preterist views ties our interpretation exclusively to past events and figures whilst a futurist interpretation ties it exclusively to future events and figures.

## GENRE

Revelation is an example of first century apocalyptic literature (of which there is a great deal) and must be understood and interpreted along those lines. It being God's Word does not altar that fact. Apocalyptic literature is full of symbolic images and numbers and is generally focussed on the conflict between good and evil. Our inspired author John the Apostle chooses this well recognised and understood medium of his day to communicate an explicitly Christ-centred vision of the cosmic battle, with the aim of reassuring the church that she is secure in God's hand.

## IMAGERY

The reality of God's triumph over evil is being described again and again throughout the book from different angles and perspectives through vivid images and symbols. But we should not read ANY of the symbols literally, not the locusts, the scorpions, the earthquakes, nor the moon turning to blood. The Old Testament prophets used similar imagery to prophesy the fall of historical empires like Assyria and Babylon (see Isa 34:4, Ezek 32:7-8, Amos 8:9) but we know that such things did not literally happen. It's just poetic and prophetic language.

## STRUCTUTURE

The contents page that I gave out at the beginning of this series is adapted from the contents page of a book called THE MESSAGE OF REVELATION by Michael Wilcox. This is the most helpful and I feel the most accurate commentary on Revelation that I have ever come across (and I have read plenty!)

Series of seven are fairly easy to spot in places (7 letters, 7 seals, 7 trumpets, 7 bowls), but an analysis of the phrases “I saw” and “I looked” suggest that there are further, though less obvious, groups of 7 images. In fact, Wilcox suggests there are in total 8 scenes, each made up of 7 separate visions. We will return to the significance of those numbers later, but the point to be made here is that these visions should not be viewed as a linear prediction of what is going to happen. Rather, each vision offers us an independent snapshot of some aspect of spiritual reality.

Each set of 7 visions moves towards its own climax and so Christ’s return is depicted in numerous places throughout the book - at the sixth seal (6:12-17), at the seventh trumpet (11:15-18), at the fifth vision of Scene 4 (14:14-20), at the seventh bowl (16:17-21), at the seventh vision of scene 6 (19:6-8) and throughout most of scene 7 (19:11-21:8).

An excellent modern example of this story telling technique is Christopher Nolan’s recent film Dunkirk. It tells the story of Dunkirk from 3 individual perspectives, each of which eventually overlap and combine into one climax. Some events we see twice from different angles at different points in the film. This doesn’t mean the same event happens twice, or that there are two similar but separate events. Nolan is simply showing us the SAME things from another camera angles and another perspective. John is doing exactly the same thing in Revelation.

### MOTIVE

John is writing to comfort and encourage the believers of his day. He is NOT writing to give them coded messages about the long distant future that would have no meaning for them, be no help to them and offer them neither strength nor comfort. This book is first and foremost a pastorally motivated epistle. With such a concern at heart John uses apocalyptic imagery, familiar with his readers, to reassure them that God has not lost overarching control and that whatever happens they are safe in his hands. They may have to endure terrible trials even to the point of death, but they must remember two things. Those who suffer and die are safe with Jesus now and forever. Moreover, God will, after many patient warnings, eventually judge sin and defeat evil. There will be a final decisive victory when Christ returns and beyond that there is unimaginable bliss and beauty, the ultimate Jubilee celebration. The battle now is real and inescapable and calls for perseverance, but there is a day to come when every tear is wiped away and all pain is ended, when evil is exposed and when God is proved both powerful and good. We must never read any book of the Bible in a manner which would render it largely redundant for its original audience.

### SUMMARY

The two most important things to remember are the pastoral motive and the Apocalyptic genre. These must govern our interpretation. John is not writing for a casually curious audience to provide a time-line for future events. He is describing universal and ultimate REALITIES rather than specific future events. The only real future event which Revelation can be clearly said to teach is the Return of Christ to bring judgement to the current age and to usher in a new age. Everything else is largely symbolic descriptions of ongoing spiritual realities which all believers face in every age - the current battle, the nature of evil, the reality of judgement and the security of the saints. NEVER open the Book of Revelation with the “WHEN?” question in mind. It was not written to tell us when or in what order. It was written to reassure Christians of all ages, particularly those like John’s immediate recipients who face state

oppression of their faith, that God will be victorious and that behind all the chaos and pain he remains upon his throne.

Most of the visions John sees are simply symbolic representations of a TRUTH/REALITY that is already true. Generally speaking, they are neither literal nor even symbolic descriptions of future events. John is showing us God's reality NOW – making the book essentially a comfort for the present, not a road-map for the future. It is generally only in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> visions of each set of seven that we enter territory that is exclusively future, and even then, it is FUTURE REALITIES as distinct from FUTURE EVENTS that John is focussed on, and there is a subtle difference.

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### GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS AND IMAGES

We shall now work through some of the most debated and well-known images and visions in Revelation. I shall outline the interpretational options and indicate my preferences. I cannot reproduce here all the detailed arguments of each session but this is an attempt to offer a reminder and an outline.

#### **The Four Horsemen (Chap 6:1-8)**

[no direct parallels elsewhere in Scripture, though Zech 6:18 may be supplying John with his imagery]

These are symbolic representations of the forces of evil and destruction, which in John's day, in our day, and in the future are galloping across the Earth. The Four Horsemen are today's reality – the world is full of famine and war.

Jesus warns of wars and famine (Matt 24:6-8) and clearly says that these are NOT signs of the end but will be "birth-pangs" along the way. "*The end is still to come.*" NB:- It is also quite possible that the wars and famines that Jesus speaks of here are nothing to do with the Parousia at all, but merely birth-pangs of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. [see final note on the Olivet Discourse]

#### **The 144,000 (Chapter 7, Chap 14:1-5)**

[no parallel refs elsewhere in Scripture]

On a futurist/literal view these are 144,000 Jewish virgin men who will serve God in the last 7 years of time after the church has been raptured and is no longer on the Earth. This view has been popularised by Tim Lahay in the Left Behind series but (in my humble opinion) is complete nonsense.

If we work with John's use of symbolism (especially numbers) and understand his pastoral concern to reassure his first century readers then it seems fairly straightforward to assume that this a symbolic image of the entire church, past, present and future, who have been sealed by Jesus. This has generally been the consensus of mainstream Christian opinion over the centuries.

#### **The Beast and 666 (Rev 13, Rev 17:11, Rev 19:20)**

[Parallel passage 2 Thes 2:1-12]

This topic gives us a wonderful opportunity to case study the three primary interpretational views at work.

1. The Preterist looks for an interpretation within John's own world, and there is plenty of strong evidence to suggest references to the Roman Emperors Domitian and/or Nero in the Beast and the 666 imagery.
2. The futurist view insists that the Beast will be a future figure (future to John, maybe contemporary to us) to whose identity the number 666 will provide a clue.
3. The pure idealist view says the Beast is not necessarily a person at all (neither past nor future) but an image representing the Anti-God State and its thirst for power. That evil "principle" will manifest and incarnate itself many times across history whenever the State tries to take power to itself that rivals God's. So, the Beast was both Nero and Hitler, and many others in between. 666 is not offered as a code to break in order to reveal the identity of any particular person, but a number symbolising human sin and imperfection. So it's NOT that John says "*Here is a code. QUESTION: Go and work out the answer by discovering to whom it refers*". But rather that John says; "*QUESTION: What number would you use to symbolise human imperfection and striving to be like God but falling short? ANSWER: 666 works well don't you think?*" In other words the number 666 symbolises the evil character and career of the Beast; it is NOT an identity clue.

Perhaps we can combine these views. If we take the idealist view as our lead, then the Beast represents the misuse of earthly State power to oppress the church. It does therefore refer to Rome in John's day, and it seems likely to me that in the very last days before Christ returns there may well be an ultimate expression of state evil which seeks to crush the church (Rev 11:7-10).

Rev 13:5 says that the Beast will be allowed to rule for 42 months and therefore our understanding of the Beast will also have to go hand in hand with our understanding of this 42 month period.

**42 months / 3.5 years / 1260 days / "a time, times and half a time" (Rev 11:2-3, 12:1-13, 13:5)**

[Parallel scriptures Dan 7:25, Dan 9:27, Dan 12:11]

Dispensational Premillennialism places the 70<sup>th</sup> week (final 7 years) of Daniel's prophecy at the end of time, and thus interprets the above references in Daniel and Revelation to be literally referring to the second half of this period when the Antichrist is doing his worst.

A more sober interpretation of Daniel can identify all these time periods as fitting with the events of 168 to 165 BC when Antiochus Epiphanes placed an idol to Zeus in the Jerusalem temple and was eventually overthrown by the Maccabean revolt. [The Maccabean revolt which lunged Israel into such tribulation lasted from June 168 BC to December 165, exactly 3.5 years.]

If the latter is the correct interpretation of Daniel, then the question becomes: what is John doing by borrowing the same numbers? If we assume, and we should, that he is using numbers symbolically then we will understand 42 months to be a symbolic motif for any period of struggle against ungodly powers which are crushing believers and setting themselves up to be God.

The idealist interpretation thus understands this symbol of 42 months to be apocalyptic shorthand for the entire church age. John is using the image of 42 months to depict the entire period of church history, across which the church will frequently struggle against different manifestations of oppressive state power. The recipients of John's letter would no doubt have recognised that their own struggle against Rome was of the same nature as that of Israel under Antiochus. Christians in Communist Russia and

China today will identify too. The 42 months must be NOW, the Church Age, stretching from the first to the second coming. A consideration of the two witnesses will strengthen that conclusion.

### **The Two Witnesses (Rev 11:1-14)**

[No direct parallels elsewhere in Scripture.]

These guys are so closely linked with the Beast and the 42 month period, that we will have no choice but to settle on the same interpretational handle for all three images. A literal futurist view assumes they are 2 particular individuals who will operate as God's special agents in the last 3.5 years [42 months] of time. They will testify for God until they are killed by the Beast. The language used to describe them brings to mind Moses and Elijah, so many assume that here we do indeed have Moses and Elijah back from dead to do another stint of service. (I'm sure the pair will be delighted to be recalled from their peaceful repose in paradise to face fresh incarnations of Pharaoh and Jezebel.) This is a special and beautiful example of the sort of drivel which results from failing to understand John's use of Old Testament imagery in a symbolic fashion.

The idealist interpretation offers a far better view in my opinion. On the idealist view, the Two Witnesses represent the church, testifying for God in the fashion and footsteps of Moses and Elijah, until she briefly (3.5 days) appears to have been destroyed by the Beast only to be raised and raptured. Scripture does seem to envisage a time (and this is the first clear indication of it in Revelation) when at the very end of history an unprecedented onslaught will be mounted against the church, and she will, to all appearances "go under".

If we take an idealist view of the two witnesses then we shall have to do the same for the 42 months, for that is the period of their prophetic ministry (11:3). It is also the period of the Beast's authority (13:5). We have to choose between taking the two witnesses, the Beast and the 42 months as literal future occurrences, or, interpreting all three images through an idealist lens as a picture of the whole of church history. The three ideas [Beast, 2 witnesses, 42 months] are tied inseparably together by 11:3 and 13:5.

There is one scripture that might help us make the call between the futurist and idealist view on this matter and it is Luke 21:20-24. The Lukan passage in which these verse fall is a parallel to Matthew 24, but makes it clearer than Matthew does that Jesus is talking about the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Jesus concludes that "*Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.*" That verse is remarkably similar to Rev 11:2, "*But exclude the outer court; because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the Holy City for 42 months.*" The two sayings almost certainly derive from one and the same saying of Jesus.

In the Lukan account, Jesus appears fairly clearly to be saying that the times of Gentile trampling are from AD 70 onwards. If that is the case, and if Rev 11:2 is indeed a true parallel, then we have a very strong indication that the idealist view is correct in its conclusion that John's 42 months is just apocalyptic shorthand for the "*times of the Gentiles*", in other words, a symbolic way of indicating the period during which "the nations" (ie the unbelievers) appear to dominate the world but the "people" (God's people) never-the-less maintain their witness within it – ie NOW.

### **False Prophet / Beast from the Earth (Rev 13:11-16, Rev 19:20)**

[No other parallels in Scripture]

A literal and futurist interpretation sees this as a future individual working alongside the Beast to promote Beast-worship. The false prophet is like the Beast's propaganda machine and along with the Beast and the Dragon himself, makes up an unholy trinity.

An idealist interpretation takes a more subtle approach and produces a variety of ideas among different scholars. The most common idealist interpretation is to identify the Beast from the Earth as false religion used in the service of the oppressive State power. So in John's day the Imperial Cult and its priesthood across the Roman Empire facilitated and promoted Emperor propaganda and Emperor worship throughout the Roman world. Everyone had to make an annual sacrifice and declare "*Caesar is Lord*". This is John's immediate incarnation of the second beast, but an idealist interpretation does not exclusively pin a symbol to any particular time in history. In Islam today, the religious element of it promotes obedience to the Islamic State, and crushes all other freedom of worship – a perfect example of Beast and False Prophet working together. The final days may well also see an oppressive world power using false religion to promote and enforce obedient worship to its principles. An idealist interpretation thus allows a symbol to apply to all times in general and none in particular.

### **The Rapture of the Church / harvest of the earth (Chapter 14:14-20 & Rev 11:12)**

[Parallel Scriptures: Mat 24:40-41, 1 Thes 4:14-17, 1 Cor 15:51-54]

The fifth of seven visions that form Scene 4. Each vision in this scene reveals some aspect of the great cosmic conflict between God and his church and the Dragon and his followers. Here is a picture of the church raptured/harvested to be with Jesus, assuring John's readers (then and now) that although it's hard now, the church will be rescued at the end. John also adds a harvest of grapes picturing the judgement of unbelievers (14:17-20). So here is an image of future reality but there is NOTHING in Revelation, nor anywhere in Scripture, to convince me that we should place this event 7 years before the Parousia (Return of Jesus proper).

The teaching which places the Rapture of the church 7 years before the Second Coming is a part of what is called "Dispensational Premillennialism" and the origin of this pre-tribulation rapture doctrine appears to be the movement which grew around J. N. Darby in the 1830s. Dispensationalism was then popularised by the Schofield Bible (1909) and is still taught and defended by numerous American teachers today, in particular John McArthur. However, the concept of a rapture of the church separate to the second coming itself, effectively rescuing the church from the final period of the Beast's rule, appears nowhere in the church fathers nor in any scholar or commentary prior to 1830. It only becomes necessary in dispensational theology because of the dispensationalist desire to separate God's future dealings with the church from God's future dealings with Israel.

Crucially, the dispensational pre-tribulation rapture teachers are completely inconsistent in their own treatment of Matthew 24. If one interprets the "*great distress*" of Mat 24:21 as being an end times distress (rather than an AD 70 distress), how can one then fail to notice that the rapture described in Mat 24:40-41 is a part of what follows "*after those days of distress*" (Mat 24:29), not before. Paul's description of the rapture in Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians contains absolutely no hint that it comes 7 years earlier than the Second Coming and Paul describes it simply as if it is simultaneous with the last trumpet at Christ's return.

## Armageddon

This is a difficult word to work out the meaning of, in more ways than one. The root of it looks to be “*Har Megiddo*” which literally means the Mount of Megiddo. But there isn’t really any mountain at Megiddo, so you can see that even the etymology of the word is difficult.

Armageddon comes with the 6<sup>th</sup> of 7 bowls of wrath. The 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> visions in each series are generally cataclysmic and therefore associated with the very end of time. So, it certainly does seem safe to conclude that John is describing something primarily future, (although Hendrikson suggests there are still echoes of current battles - see quote below). The question is WHAT is exactly is John telling us?

Let’s assume Armageddon does refer to the place called Megiddo. This small town is situated on the Plain of Esdraelon close to a strategic pass through the Carmel mountains through which any traveller or army would have to pass on the journey from Egypt via the coastal plain of Israel and then inland towards the East and North. Great historic battles have thus been fought here. It is where Josiah lost his life in 603 BC trying to stop the Egyptians on their way to fight the Assyrians. Alexander the Great also came this way in his conquest of the Holy land. So, the name Megiddo is synonymous with strategic and decisive battles.

If we take John literally, as Hal Lindsey and others have done, then we will conclude that there will be some final large-scale literal battle (between the AntiChrist and other world armies) near to Megiddo. This battle will rage for some weeks or months until is suddenly interrupted by the return of Jesus.

But we should know by now that interpreting Revelation literally is usually the worst thing you can do. Perhaps John is saying that towards the very end Satan will switch his tactic from corruption, perversion and deception to all out destruction. Christ comes suddenly into this time and the world powers finally find themselves confronted by their rejected Lord. They will be finally facing their “Megiddo”, in the same way that Abba use the phrase “*finally facing my Waterloo*”. Nothing necessarily needs to literally happen at Megiddo, but the place name supplies the symbolism for battle, destruction and final judgement.

*For this cause, Har Magedon is the symbol of every battle in which, when the need is greatest and believers are oppressed, the Lord suddenly reveals His power in the interest of His distressed people and defeats the enemy. When Sennacherib's 185,000 are slain by the Angel of Jehovah, that is a shadow of the final Har-Magedon. When God grants a little handful of Maccabees a glorious victory over an enemy which far outnumbers it, that is a type of Har-Magedon. But the real, the great, the final Har Magedon coincides with the time of Satan's little season. Then the world, under the leadership of Satan, anti-Christian government, and anti-Christian religion – the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet – is gathered against the Church for the final battle, and the need is greatest; when God's children, oppressed on every side, cry for help; then suddenly, Christ will appear on the clouds of glory to deliver his people; that is Har-Magedon.*

William Hendrikson

## **Great Tribulation (Rev7:14)**

[Parallel scriptures; Mat 24:21 (Lk 21:23, Mk 13:19), Dan 12:1]

This is a tricky topic on which it is hard to find much Biblical clarity. Dispensational Premillennialism (the literal and futurist interpretation of Revelation which underpins the Left Behind series and a great deal of popular American theology) identifies the “Great Tribulation” as the final three and a half years of time before the Parousia. The church, having been raptured 7 years before the Parousia, will escape this terrible time (on this dispensational view).

Although the word “*immediately*” in Mat 24:29 appears to connect the tribulation period with the Second Coming, many commentators, ancient and modern, plus many Church Fathers, are inclined to regard Jesus’s predictions as being entirely fulfilled during the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70. In support of this view, we could argue that Jesus’ use of the phrase “*nor ever again*” only really makes sense if we assume that this is NOT the end of time as we know it. [To say that something happens at the very end of time and that nothing worse will ever follow it is hardly to say anything meaningful!] AD 70 was indeed unparalleled .... The Romans were crucifying 500 Jews every day at one point until they ran out of trees.

And to take a third view; St Augustine preferred to interpret the tribulation as a characteristic of history as a whole. That view fits with John’s use of the phrase in Revelation 7:14, assuming the 144,000 represent the church in its entirety.

Which is correct? It is probably preferable to allow some fluidity of terminology between Jesus, John and Daniel. The Bible is not a coordinated textbook and there is no reason why one author should use an image or phrase to mean exactly the same thing as another, especially not authors of apocalyptic as John and Daniel are.

I therefore tend towards a combination of all three; namely that the Tribulation was prophesied by Jesus primarily in connection with the events of AD 70, but that there is a potential double reference and telescopic foreshortening in Jesus words, implying a similar intensification of tribulation at the very end of time. John hints at this short intensification in Rev 11:7-10 (and in Rev 20:7 if we assume the Millennium is now and not future), as does Paul in 1 Tim 3:1 and 2 Thes 2:7-9. However, John is fluid with his images and may also legitimately be using the phrase “Great Tribulation” in Rev7:14 to refer to the entire church age. Rev 7:14 means that our understand of “Great Tribulation” (in that verse) and our understanding of the 144,000 have to interact with each other, because the two are linked in that verse.

## **Abomination of Desolation**

[Parallel scriptures, Dan 9:27, 11:31 & 12:11, Mat 24:15 (Mk 13:14) ]

NO specific reference in Revelation, though 13:6 comes close)

Most commentators believe that the reference in Daniel is to the desecration of the Jewish Temple by the Greek King Antiochus Epiphanes in 168-165 BC. Depending what date is put on Daniel the refence is either prophetic or contemporary, but that is a secondary issue. The period of 3.5 years given in Daniel fits very well with what know of the Antiochus incident. He was finally overthrown by the Maccabean revolt in 165 BC, remembered today in the festival of Hannukah.

Jesus, however, speaks of it as future event “*when you see*” in language suggesting the disciples themselves will see this event. And indeed, in AD 70 the Romans did trample the Holy land and destroy the temple. In this case Jesus has reapplied an Old Testament phrase to something very similar which he is prophesying will happen again. And it did!

Luke actually rewords the saying a little to suggest that the arrival of Roman troops in the city is quite sufficient to fulfil what Jesus meant (Luke 21:20). Heathen feet standing in the Holy land is “*abomination*” enough for any God-fearing Jew. In conclusion it appears that Jesus intends to foretell a desecration of the temple and city in a manner not unlike that brought about by Antiochus Epiphanes.

However, dispensational premillennialists want to separate Daniels 70<sup>th</sup> week from his previous 69 and so they move it at the end of time. Thus, the abomination gets shunted with it to the end of time as well, requiring an operational Jewish Temple for the AntiChrist/Beast to desecrate. No doubt the Beast will utter blasphemies but there is no need to shunt Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> week into the far future and therefore no need to think about an future literal abomination in a future literal Jewish Temple. All nonsense in my view.

### **Millennium (Rev 20:1-10)**

No other directly parallel scriptures, although some would identify certain OT prophecies with this period. [eg Zech 14:16-19]

If we take a linear and literal view, then this is a 1000 year period which immediately follows the return of Christ. Jesus establishes a physical and literal Kingdom upon the Earth and reigns over it from Jerusalem. Ordinary human beings continue to live upon the Earth, governed in some way by resurrected believers. At the end of the 1000 years there is another battle before Satan is finally thrown into the Lake of Fire.

A “premillennialist” accepts this literal futurist view of the 1000 year reign and believes that Christ will return before it starts (hence the “pre”).

A “postmillennialist” believes that Jesus will return at the end (post) of 1000 years of church rule and victory over the world, which the church will bring about as she fulfils the Great Commission. This is an optimistic view of church influence and church growth, but is not now held very widely at all. It was more widespread in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, but two world wars since then have inevitably dampened optimism for what the church might achieve.

An “amillennialist” takes the idealist approach to interpretation and refuses to interpret John literally or linearly. The millennium on this view is NOT a future “event” or period but just another piece of apocalyptic shorthand for the current age of the church. The millennium is code for now. Satan is bound by the work of Christ in his death and resurrection and the gospel thus has power to save. Satan’s brief let-out at the end thus corresponds with the idea a final period of intense distress for the church (Rev 11:7-10) just before Christ’s return. So, the gathering of the nations at Armageddon (Rev 16:16) is on view again here in Rev 20:8. John is just showing us the same truths from a different camera angle.

The arguments, both theological and grammatical, go back and forward and I won’t repeat them all here. There are certainly some difficulties with the amillennial view but personally I am convinced it is the right way to read revelation.

## SO WHAT SHOULD WE ACTUALLY EXPECT TO HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE?

I was taught to separate out the Rapture from the second coming (7 years earlier) and the final judgment from the second coming (1000 years later). Dispensationalism spreads these events out along a timeline. I now take the view that there is ONE single end-of-time event. One Parousia which encompasses rapture and judgement and a new heavens all in one decisive act of God at the end of time as we know it. I no longer see any reason in Scripture to separate these as distinct events. I like Peter's condensation "*The day of the lord will come like a thief, the heavens will be destroyed by fire and the elements will melt in the heat.*" Bang, all done and dusted in one single intervention from God.

Earthquakes, wars and famine are **not** specific signs. They have happened throughout history, and Jesus was probably referring to the destruction of Jerusalem when he spoke of these things anyway. Looking for a world leader with 666 tattooed on their forehead will not help us either, not should we necessarily expect Israel to re-establish sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple. Cosmic signs such as the moon turning to blood are all just apocalyptic images and as far Armageddon is concerned, we may not necessarily be looking at a literal military battle on Israeli soil in order for John's words to be fulfilled.

So much for the traditional "signs" - which can become an obsession of many. However, Paul tells us that this day should NOT surprise us like a thief (1 Thes 5:4). What might we expect then in those final days? I think there is certainly more than a hint in Scripture of an intensification of opposition to the church, and perhaps this would grow to become a world-wide phenomenon. The Chinese already experience this of course, so we must be careful not to take an exclusively Western view. I actually believe that today's western liberal agenda with its equality and diversity mantra is well worthy of the label 666. It is a totalitarian movement with a moral and religious agenda which mimics God and persecutes believers. I fear we are at the beginning of something that will get much worse. Food for thought!

## LAST WORD

If Wilcox is correct to divide the book into 8 scenes and if each of the first seven scenes has 7 visions or sections to it, then does that structure itself carry some sort of message. Perhaps it does, and I have been saving this for last.

Why is there an Eighth scene at all? If we are using a pattern of 7s, we might expect 7 scenes split into 7 subsections. Would we not have expected Revelation to reach a fitting end with the 7<sup>th</sup> vision of the 7<sup>th</sup> scene? But we do have a Scene 8, beginning at 21:9 "*Come I will show you the Bride*". Do we now have to find to find some significant meaning to the number 8? The truth is that there is an outstanding EIGHTH in Scripture which fails to spring to mind because we do not normally think of it as an eighth! Call to mind the most obvious 7 of all in the Old Testament; the week of 6 working days crowned by a 7<sup>th</sup> day of sabbath rest. Creation was completed on day 6, as was redemption; "*it is finished*" were words uttered on a Friday. Sunday, the day of resurrection, was the first day of the week and the first day of the New Age, but it was also an eighth day in effect (see Num 29:25). "Small wonder", says Wilcox, "that the pattern laid down in creation and amplified in redemption should reappear in the last chapters of the Bible."

But perhaps there is more, and when I first stumbled over this idea it gave me goose pimples. If, prior to 21:9, there are indeed 7 scenes each with 7 visions then that is 49 visions. No Jew would miss for a

moment the significance of the number 49 and what should follow it (Lev 25:8-10). With the 50<sup>th</sup> year, the Jubilee year, came the release of slaves, the reunion of families, the restitution of all wrongs. The eighth which follows the seventh and the 50<sup>th</sup> which follows the 49<sup>th</sup>, are alike symbols of a glorious new beginning.

With small variations here and there the scenes of Revelation have brought us the world's end at each sixth section and at each seventh section have shown us the triumph of Jesus. The eighth scene finally puts us in heaven. From nearly every room one window has looked out into the garden, but on leaving the seventh room we find ourselves actually outside in the open air, in the garden of God, in paradise itself. As Lewis puts it:

*"The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at least they were beginning chapter one of the great story which no one on earth has read; which goes on for ever; in which every chapter is better than the one before."* C.S. Lewis The Last Battle

#### APPENDIX - HOW TO READ THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

The Olivet discourse is the teaching of Jesus on the second coming which is found in Mat 24, Luke 21 and Mark 13, and it provides a vital reference point for dealing with tricky issues in Revelation. These three parallel texts offer us 3 records of 1 discourse and so whatever Jesus means in Luke MUST be the same as what he means in Matthew. The starting point for serious interpretation should be a synoptic study of the three records to discover their overlaps and divergences. I would encourage any serious student of Scripture to make three columns on a piece of paper and write out each writer's version in each column verse by verse, lining up verses that are clearly parallel.

The real issue is to settle is WHAT QUESTION IS JESUS ANSWERING? The disciples' question is worded differently in Matthew as compared with Mark and Luke. In Matthew, after Jesus prophesies the destruction of the temple, the disciples then ask:

*"When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"*

In Mark and Luke, the question makes no reference to the second coming at all, and is merely an enquiry about Jesus prediction of the destruction of the temple.

*"When will these things happen. And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?"*

We must therefore assume that MOST of the collected sayings in this passage are about the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Indeed, Jesus's words in Luke 21:32/Mat 24:34/Mk 13:30, *"this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened"*, indicate categorically that Jesus must be talking primarily about AD 70 and not about his Parousia at the end of time.

However, the gospel writers appear to have conflated together some sayings about AD 70 with other sayings about Jesus's own coming, and the text jumps without warning from one topic to the other. We might not notice the transition, but Jesus's two completely different comments about time frame, both

recorded in this discourse, will help us to see that the two events, though discussed in the same passage, are different and distinct in time. In other words: the fall of Jerusalem is certain and near, and Jesus **DOES** know when it will happen; *“this generation will not pass away”*. But of his second coming Jesus readily admits; *“No-one knows about that day or hour, not the angels, not even the Son.”* So, the Olivet Discourse must be carefully de-stranded into its two topics, or we will create all sorts of confusion for ourselves.

Moreover, if, as is likely, Mark is writing BEFORE the fall of Jerusalem around AD65, and Matthew is writing a few years AFTER it, then this would explain Matthew’s rewording of the question asked by the disciples so that it refers to both events distinctly and explicitly. Matthew now knows, as Mark could not have done, that there is a separation in time between one event and the other. Mark does preserve both the sayings about timing, but writing before AD 70 he has not felt any need to otherwise distinguish the two quite separate events.

### **Recommended Reading**

I will offer you my two best picks:

Michael Wilcox – The Message of Revelation (Bible Speaks Today series, IVP)

T. L. Frazier – A Second Look at the Second Coming (Conciliar Press)