

Revelation

Without doubt, Revelation is the most controversial book in the Bible. During the history of the Church there have been numerous attempts to explain the book as if it were a detailed though symbolic account of events which, from the writer's point of view, would have been in the distant future, despite the fact that he explicitly denies this is the case (1:1-3). This conclusion becomes even more certain when we remember that it was a common feature of apocalyptic writing to set the vision in the distant past and to finish with an instruction to the recipient to seal it up until the time of the end (Daniel 12:4). In complete contrast, John describes a vision which he himself received and which referred both to things happening in the present and soon to come (1:3,19). All kinds of attempts have been made to identify the various visions with features of expected imminent events and so far every one of these has failed. It seems best to recognise that, like the author of Daniel, John was writing for his own day.

Revelation describes a church under persecution, which has led people to suppose that there must have been widespread persecution of the Church at the time it was written, about 95 A.D. Although the emperor Domitian, who came to the throne in 81 A.D. had demanded that his subjects worship him as "Lord and God" persecution was only sporadic. Most people and towns had their own gods and worship of the emperor would not have been required except for those whose loyalty was suspect. However, since Christians called Jesus "Lord" and would have had to refuse to offer the emperor any worship, the risk was always there.

In the letter to the Ephesians the writer reminds his readers that their battle is not against, "enemies of blood and flesh, but against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). In Revelation these spiritual powers are portrayed in the forms of the "dragon", the "monster from the deep" and the "great whore" (12:3; 13:1; 17:1). Christians are to discern both the heavenly and the earthly reality behind these figures and place their trust in Jesus' victory on the cross to overcome them. Perhaps more important is the fact that John sees "the persecution, the kingdom and the patient endurance" as being all part of the Christian life to which we are

called (1:9). To follow Jesus is to follow in the way of the cross, and those who wish to reign with him must also suffer with him (Romans 8:17).

John himself describes the book as both a "revelation" and a "prophecy" (1:1-3) and in 1:4 it is given the form of a letter. This would have told his readers what to expect. A "revelation" or "apocalypse" meant a vision or series of visions to be symbolically interpreted. A prophecy was a message from God for the building up of the churches. The letter, written to the seven churches, emphasises that the message is contemporary and relevant.

The message of the book is to be found in the interpretation of the visions. To understand these we need to know what the symbolism would have meant to the original readers who knew the context from which the images have been drawn. Although some of these images relate to popular beliefs of John's day most are drawn from the Old Testament; so in the course of these readings we will spend a good deal of time checking the Old Testament passages where the key to the visions is to be found. In this way we will hope to recover both the original meaning of Revelation and its meaning for today from beneath the symbolism.

Day 334. Psalm 89; Revelation 1

The Faithful Witness

Psalm 89

God the Creator is enthroned in heaven among the "holy ones," the angels who do his will (89:5-7). He has established his king on earth, whom he has named as his Son (89:26-27). He has made an everlasting covenant with him and will not take his love from him (89:28-29). He will rule on earth on God's behalf and all his enemies will serve him (89:20-23).

These promises are recalled by the covenant community in a time of suffering. Their prayer is to see them fulfilled in their own day.

Revelation 1

The opening chapter plunges us straight into the complex imagery of Revelation with a description of the Sender, Jesus himself (1:1). The description of who Jesus is is a microcosm of the message of the whole book.

- He is the faithful witness (1:5). The word for "witness" is the same as that for "martyr." Jesus is the one who has faced death for us at the hands of political rulers. He made the "good confession" in the presence of Pontius Pilate (1 Timothy 6:13) and Christians are called to risk death for that confession, that Jesus is Lord (Acts 4:23-31).
- He is triumphant over death (1:5,18). "Firstborn" has two senses. It implies that Jesus is the first of many to rise from death, that his resurrection has paved the way for the resurrection of many more (Hebrews 2:9-15). It also means the pre-eminent one, in the same sense as Psalm 89:27, the one who by rising from death ascended to the highest place in earth or heaven (Romans 1:4; Philippians 2:9-11). Not only has Jesus risen from death, but on leaving the place of the dead he took the keys with him. Now he is Lord of both the living and the dead (1:18; Romans 14:9).
- He is the ruler of kings on earth, fulfilling the hope of Psalm 89. The political powers at present persecuting the Church are not greater than Jesus. In fact they are under his control. References to Psalm 2,

in which God's anointed king rules the raging of the nations, abound throughout Revelation (12:5; 19:15).

- He loves us. This assurance is tremendously important. Christians called to endure need to know that Jesus loves them. His love is the covenant faithfulness which he does not remove from those to whom his promise has been made (Psalm 89:30-34). In the next two chapters some of the churches will be rebuked for their failings, but this does not mean that Jesus no longer loves them.
- He has freed us from our sins by his blood. The blood of the Lamb by which he has ransomed or purchased those who belong to him is a major theme of the book. The white robes which God's faithful people wear, symbolising their purity from sin, have been washed in the Lamb's blood (7:14). It is his blood that overcomes the evil one (12:11). Jesus' death on the cross lies at the heart of the book as the action by which God reclaims his Bride and sets the world free from the domination of sin.
- We are a kingdom and priests, destined to rule with Jesus (2:26-27; 3:21). Those who endure with Jesus in his trials will rule with him in his kingdom (Luke 22:28-30). But as priests they are also mediators, whose vocation includes enduring persecution in a world opposed to God, as Jesus had to do (1 Timothy 3:12-13; Hebrews 12:3-11; 1 Peter 4:12-14).
- He is "coming" (1:7). Here Jesus is pictured as the Son of Man of Daniel 7:13 and as the pierced one for whom the world will mourn of Zechariah 12:10 (see Matthew 24:30). The coming of the Son of Man is the time when God's faithful people inherit the kingdom. Throughout the book, John gives a two-fold sense to this "coming". It is something for which we must patiently wait (6:9-11). But it is also something which happens now. Now, Jesus is reigning over the nations (5:12-13; 15:3-4).
- The vision of Jesus in 1:12-16 is based on the description of the high priest's robes in Exodus 28:4 and 29:29, the angel who appeared to Daniel (Daniel 10:5-6), the "one like a son of man" enthroned above the cherubim in Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 1:26-27) and the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-3). There is no one-to-one symbolism in the description. The whole thing evokes a background of divine splendour and worship.

Jesus has the splendour of God himself. Later, we see him reigning from the throne of God (5:13). The next few verses fill this out.

- His word is the word of God (1:16), the sword with which he will strike down the nations.
 - As God is the one who "was, and is, and is to come" (1:4), a reference to the divine name, "I am" (Exodus 3:14), Jesus is the First and the Last and the Living One (1:17-18). He, with God the Father, is Lord of both time and eternity.
 - He holds the seven stars in his hand (1:16,20) and walks among the seven lampstands (1:12-13). The lampstands symbolise the seven churches, based on the vision of Zechariah 4, where the seven-branched lampstand stands for God's people, Israel. The churches are now the true Israel. As well as an earthly reality, symbolised by the lampstands, each church also has a heavenly representative or angel, just as Israel and the nations have their own angels in Daniel 10 - 11. The seven angels are symbolised by the seven stars in Jesus' hand. However frail they may appear, Jesus is present among the churches and they are in his care.
 - John writes to them as a companion in the suffering, the kingdom and the endurance (1:9). For him, this sums up the Christian life. It is not just that earthly suffering precedes heavenly reign. The two go together and are one and the same thing. The vision of Revelation is that Jesus rules the universe from the cross.
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Day 335. Psalm 50; Revelation 2 - 3

The Letters to the Churches

Psalm 50

God comes to sit in judgement on his covenant people (50:5-6). Some of them have forgotten the terms of the covenant and the character of God. They misunderstand the purpose of sacrificial worship. God calls them to repentance.

Revelation 2 - 3

These two chapters give us a picture of the situations to which the book as a whole is addressed, in which the problems were persecution, doctrinal error and loss of spiritual life. The order in which the letters to the churches are presented traces a circular route around the Lycus valley, now in Turkey, with Laodicea, the church receiving the strongest censure, reserved until last. The letters are written prophecy: they are the words of Jesus, given through the Spirit, alerting the churches to the way Jesus views their situation.

The book of Revelation as a whole has a three storey cosmology, with heaven above, earth beneath and under the earth the abyss, the source of evil, ultimately subject to God but implacably opposed to him. The angels are representatives of the churches in heaven, but although the letters are addressed to the angels it is the congregations on earth who are the real recipients. Each letter has a common structure:

- A description of Jesus, drawing on some aspect of the vision of chapter 1. In some cases the attribute of Jesus chosen has obvious relevance to the message of the letter: the one who walks among the lampstands (2:1) emphasises his presence with the churches and his knowledge of them and serves as introduction to all the letters; the First and the Last who died and rose again (2:8) addresses a church whose members may soon face death for their faith (2:10); the one whose words are a sharp double-edged sword (2:12) threatens to use the sword on the rebellious members of the church (2:16); the one who holds the seven spirits of God (3:1) calls the church to

spiritual renewal (3:2); the one who holds the key of David (3:7) will open a door for the church which no one can shut (3:8).

- Each letter then continues with the words, "I know." Jesus knows the situation of the churches. Some are poor (2:9), others wealthy (3:17); some are faithful (2:3,19; 3:8), others less so (3:2,15). Some are unable to discern error in their midst (2:14-16,20-25). Two churches face persecution from the Jews (2:9; 3:9). Others are spiritually weak and need renewal (2:5; 3:2,18). Before the vision of judgement on the world and its political rulers, judgement first comes to the church (1 Peter 4:17-19). Where they are weak or in error they are called to repent and change their ways (3:19). If they do not, the church will be removed, not because of outside pressure but by the Lord himself (2:5).
 - At the end of each letter is the promise to the conquerors, those who faithfully endure suffering and persecution. Again, in several cases there is an obvious reference to what has gone before: those who face martyrdom will not be hurt by the second death (2:10-11); those who are true to Jesus' name will receive their own new name (2:13,17). All involve some aspect of sharing in the life of Jesus. The various promises are seen fulfilled in 20:4-6 and 21:4-5, when the saints join Jesus in his reign. Like Jesus (Mark 13:12-13), John is calling the churches to stand firm until the end.
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Day 336. Psalm 98; Revelation 4 - 5

The Lamb on the Throne

Psalm 98

Worship to the God of all creation and praise for his righteous justice.

Revelation 4 - 5

John has heard the letters directed to the churches on earth. Now he is given a glimpse of heaven. The open door is an invitation to enter and the beginning of the revelation. In response, John is caught up in worship ("in the Spirit", 4:2; 1:10) since it is in worship that we enter the heavenly realms.

John's vision of heaven draws on those of Moses and the elders in Exodus 24:9-11, Isaiah in Isaiah 6:1-5, Ezekiel in Ezekiel 1, and Daniel in Daniel 7:9-10. As in those Old Testament accounts, the first thing which strikes the eye is a throne (4:2). God is ruling in majesty. He is the sovereign Creator, by whose will all things exist (4:11).

The cherubim, or living creatures (Isaiah 6:2-3; Ezekiel 1:5-11) symbolise the orders of creation - wild animals, domestic animals, birds, and humankind (4:7). The twenty-four elders probably signify the angelic orders, the number drawn from the divisions of the Levitical priesthood (1 Chronicles 24:7-19). All worship the Creator, yielding their crowns, their own areas of authority, to his. The sovereignty of God and the worship of his creation is the principal reality of heaven.

As in Ezekiel 2:9-10, the scroll (5:1) is the will of God. But now follows a most important truth which explains all the rest. God's will can only be exercised on earth by men and women. On the day of creation, God gave authority over the world to human beings (Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8:5-6). Our task is to bring about God's kingdom on earth, but because the human race has fallen into sin and no longer obeys God, there is no one qualified to put his will into effect (5:3). The appropriate response for anyone who realises this is to weep (5:4).

But now, Jesus, the perfect representative of the human race, is qualified to open the scroll and put God's will into effect because he has "conquered" (5:5), by which John means that he has overcome the evil powers opposed

to God's will through his death and resurrection. At first, Jesus is introduced in terms which suggest a militaristic and nationalistic Messiah (5:5; see Genesis 49:9-10; Isaiah 11:1-5), but when John actually sees this conquering Messiah, he turns out to be a sacrificial lamb (5:6). Jesus fulfils God's will not by winning earthly battles, but by giving his life, and not only for the people of Israel but for people of every tribe, language, people and nation (5:9). The promises made to Israel as God's treasured possession (Exodus 19:5-6) are now extended to people of all nations (5:10; see also Hebrews 2:5-9 for the recovery of the sovereignty of humanity through Jesus).

Like the ancient kings of Israel, the throne of the Lamb is God's own throne (5:6; see Psalm 45:6-7). The Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God (5:6). The number seven stands for completion, so the seven horns and eyes signify omnipotence and omniscience, which were earlier attributed to God the Creator (4:6,11). Like God, the Lamb also holds the seven spirits (see 3:1). Now it is the Lamb who receives the worship not only of Heaven but earth as well (5:8,11,13). It is not only God the Creator who is worshipped, but the Lamb the Redeemer. In the midst of tribulation, Christians are invited to see the Lamb on the Throne as the supreme heavenly and earthly reality and build their lives around it.

Day 337. Psalm 148; Revelation 6 - 7

The Seven Seals

Psalm 148

The whole of Creation praises God.

Revelation 6

By breaking the seals, the Lamb puts into action the will of God contained in the scroll which John had seen (5:1). God's purpose turns out to be judgement on the present world system, culminating in the Day of the Lord.

The famous "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (6:1-8) are based on the visions of Zechariah 1 and 6, but the content of the judgements echoes the words of Jesus in Mark 13. There, he warned of deceivers, wars, earthquakes, persecution, days of distress, false prophets, the darkening of the sun and moon, the falling of the stars and finally the coming of the Son of Man (Mark 13:1-27). He also taught his disciples that the days of distress would be shortened for the sake of the elect (Mark 13:20).

The judgements brought in by the breaking of the seals are reminiscent of Jesus' prophecy. The first horseman suggests war in which powerful world rulers subject others to their sway. The second is warfare again, this time strife and hatred, perhaps civil war or religious hatred. The third rider brings famine, the fourth death through war, famine, illness and wild beasts. While all this is going on the Church is subjected to persecution and the fifth seal allows us a glimpse of the martyrs who are to be killed as the judgement unfolds.

Finally the sixth seal ushers in a vision of cosmic catastrophe, but the emphasis is not so much on physical but political breakdown. The description of the great earthquake is based on a series of Old Testament passages which tell us what the images mean. In Isaiah 2:10-19 the earthquake, during which people hide themselves in caves and among the rocks, is the result of the judgement of God on all the pride and arrogance of mankind in the Day of the Lord. In Hosea 10:8, in a passage also quoted by Jesus, the people of Samaria call on the mountains to hide them as their city is destroyed (Luke 23:30). In Isaiah 34:2-4 the stars which fall are the

heavenly guardians of the rebellious earthly nations and in Joel 2:28-end the darkening of the sun and the turning of the moon to blood take place on the Day of the Lord when God's people are rescued and the Spirit is poured out. Thus the sixth seal describes the Day of the Lord in which the nations are judged and God's people vindicated.

Revelation 7

Having reached the brink of the Day of the Lord, John stops short to show us the fate of the Church, the servants of God (7:3). The reference to the four winds (7:1) recalls the vision of Zechariah 6 and suggests that what is said about the Church in chapter 7 is meant to belong to the same course of events as those in chapter 6. God is holding back or shortening the time of trouble for the sake of the elect. They are sealed like the servants of God in Ezekiel 9 to protect them from the judgement coming on all the rest.

First John hears the elect described (7:4). They are God's chosen, the new Israel, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes, suggesting the full number. Then he sees them (7:9). The 144,000 and the tribes of 7:4-8 are the same as the multitude. Just as in 5:5-6, what John hears suggests the vindication of Israel by military conquest, whereas what he sees portrays the salvation of the whole world by Jesus' death on the cross. The saved are those from every tribe, nation, people and language whom Jesus has purchased for God (5:9; 7:9) They carry palms to welcome their victorious king and wear white robes to symbolise both victory and purity, both of which are achieved by Jesus' death on the cross (7:13-14).

The promises to the saved are drawn from a variety of Old Testament passages, including Psalm 84, where the psalmist longs to stay day and night in the Temple, Psalms 23 and 121, Isaiah 49:10 and Ezekiel 34:23. The message to the Church is that despite the break-up of earthly systems of government and despite persecution and martyrdom, God's chosen are safe with him and their destiny is assured.

Day 338. Psalm 76; Revelation 8 - 9

The Seven Trumpets

Psalm 76

God brings judgement on the armies of the world.

Revelation 8 - 9

The breaking of the first six seals has led to the Day of the Lord so at the seventh seal we expect the end to come. Instead there is a pregnant pause followed by another series of seven judgements. It cannot be that the seven trumpets are meant to come *after* the seven seals, since the number seven signifies completion. In any case, the fourth trumpet could not come after the sixth seal (6:12-14; 8:12). In fact, each of the series of seven, the seals, the trumpets and the bowls lead to the same point, the Day of the Lord and the coming of the Son of Man. Each series intensifies and fills out the picture of the one before.

At the opening of the seventh seal, the worship of heaven, which goes on day and night (4:8), ceases to make way for the prayers of God's people. Jesus taught us to pray for the coming of his kingdom (Matthew 6:10) and to these prayers, which always go up before God (5:8), is added incense from the altar before God. Thrown on the earth, this produces the traditional symbols of the descent of God as seen at Mount Sinai: thunder, lightning and earthquake (8:5; Exodus 19:16-19).

The appearance of God at Mount Sinai was also heralded by a trumpet, a traditional symbol for the approach of divine judgement (Joel 2:1-2; Zephaniah 1:15-16), so the sound of trumpets follows naturally from the breaking of the seventh seal. Trumpets also sounded before the destruction of Jericho, which blocked the way to the promised land (Joshua 6:20), and there is a hint of this story in the appearance of the ark at 11:19. Trumpets also called people to repentance, especially on the first day of the seventh month leading to the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:24; also Isaiah 58:1; Jeremiah 4:5; 6:17; Ezekiel 33:1-4) and the trumpet judgements are meant to lead people to repentance (9:20-21). Finally, Christians knew that Jesus was to come at the sound of the last trumpet (Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16).

The first four trumpets bring destruction on the earth, the sea, the rivers and the sky in ways reminiscent of the Egyptian plagues (8:7-12). These affect the physical world; the last three trumpets announce the three woes which affect the people of the earth (8:13). The first woe is reminiscent of the locust plagues of Egypt and Joel 1 and 2, but the locusts come up from the Abyss, the dwelling of evil below the earth. They are released by an evil angel, a star fallen from heaven (9:1; Isaiah 14:12-15), who is probably the same as the ruler of the locusts, Abaddon or Apollyon (9:11). The face of evil is human (9:7) even if the power behind it is demonic, but its power is limited (9:4-6).

The first woe brought torment, the second brings death, this time to a third of mankind, an intensification of the four riders, who killed a quarter (6:8; 9:15). This time the judgement takes the form of an invasion from beyond the Euphrates, the home of the dreaded Parthian empire with its vast army of horsemen, which had already defeated Rome in two decisive battles (9:14,16). Again, their power to kill, symbolised by fire, smoke, sulphur and snakes, originates in the Abyss (9:2,17-19; 12:9). Yet although the judgement is the work of evil, God is totally in command of its timing and its extent (9:15).

Although these terrors are meant to lead people to repent, in fact, like Pharaoh, they only harden their hearts. Whereas in heaven, the worship of God and the Lamb goes on ceaselessly, on earth the worship is of demons and idols (9:20-21).

Day 339. Psalm 17; Revelation 10 - 11

The Two Witnesses

Psalm 17

God's servant prays for protection and for judgement on his enemies.

Revelation 10 - 11

After the sixth seal, John broke off to describe the Church, safe in God's care (chapter 7). After the sixth trumpet he again breaks into the series to describe the Church, this time as the prophetic witness.

The description of the mighty angel descending from heaven (10:1) takes us back to the throne visions of the Old Testament, especially that of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:27-28) and, like Ezekiel, John is soon to be offered an open scroll to eat (10:2; Ezekiel 2:9-10). This is the word of the Lord given to the prophets, which is announced with the roar of a lion (10:3; Amos 3:8). It is a word many people will not listen to because their hearts are hard (Ezekiel 3:4-9). However, John warns us against thinking that what we are about to hear is the whole counsel of God by introducing another series of revelations whose content he is not allowed to write down; some things in the will of God remain a mystery (10:3-4).

Daniel's angel had sworn with upraised hand that the days of tribulation would be three and a half years during which the power of the holy people would be broken (Daniel 12:7). John's angel swears that there will be no more delay. What he is to show is the conclusion of the period of tribulation. So John takes the scroll, which in Ezekiel was written all over with words of mourning and woe (Ezekiel 2:10) and eats it, and like Ezekiel's scroll it is sweet in his mouth (Psalm 19:10) but bitter in his stomach (10:10; Ezekiel 3:3,14).

Having eaten the scroll, he begins to describe the prophetic Church, first as the worshippers in Ezekiel's Temple (11:1; Ezekiel 40:3). Although the outer court is trodden down by the Gentiles for the 3½ years of the tribulation, the inner court is safe (11:2). The next vision describes the Church as the two witnesses, the number required in a court of law to establish the truth of any testimony. It is taken from Zechariah 4, where the two witnesses were Joshua and Zerubbabel (Zechariah 4:11-14). Here, the two witnesses

are Moses and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets (11:6; Exodus 7:1-5,17; 1 Kings 17:1), speaking the word of the Lord, which is like fire (Jeremiah 23:29).

The prophetic word enrages the rulers of this age and the prophets are killed by the beast which comes from the Abyss, of which we will hear more in chapter 13 (11:7). The place of their death is the "great city", which stands for every place which refuses the word of God: Sodom, Egypt and finally Jerusalem, where Jesus himself was put to death for the faithful witness he bore (11:8). Then it will seem as if the powers of evil have finally overcome and the power of God's holy people has finally been broken (11:9-10; Daniel 12:7). But just like Jesus, death and apparent defeat soon give way to resurrection. At the end of 3½ years of persecution, the victory of the beast lasts only 3½ days. God's people are brought back to life, like Ezekiel's dry bones - a vast army (Ezekiel 37:10) - and carried up to heaven, while the city is rocked in judgement like Jericho at the sound of the trumpet (11:13; Joshua 6:20). John is calling the Church of his time to remember what the apostles knew, that faithful witness takes place in the face of the anger of the nations and we who are called to bear witness to our faith depend on the protecting power of God (Acts 4:24-31).

The salvation of God's people at the end of the time of tribulation concludes the sixth trumpet and leads on to the seventh (11:14-15). When the seventh trumpet sounds, the kingdom of God, for which his people have been faithfully praying, finally comes (5:8; 8:3; 11:15). The angry nations are subdued (11:17-18; Psalm 2:1-6), the dead are judged (Daniel 12:1-2) and God's prophetic people rewarded (Matthew 5:11-12).

Finally, the Temple is opened and the ark, which was never seen in Israel's worship, is revealed (11:19). God is present with his people while the signs of his coming bring us to the same point as the sixth seal (6:12-14).

Day 340. Psalm 124; Revelation 12 - 14

God's People Rescued from the Power of Satan

Psalm 124

The Lord protects his people.

Revelation 12 - 14

The third of the interludes focusing on the fate of the Church sums up the central message of the book: faithful witness, even if it leads to martyrdom, is ultimate victory.

In the figure of the woman (12:1), John parodies the myth of Mother Roma who claimed to be queen of the gods and mother of the world's saviour. Both the woman and the dragon (12:3) are signs in heaven, that is angelic beings or pagan gods, though what begins as a heavenly battle is soon transferred to earth (12:12). In John's vision the woman is mother Jerusalem (Isaiah 66:7-9; Galatians 4:26). Her male child is Jesus, the Messiah (12:5), who ascends to the throne of God. His victory is the dragon's defeat, the downfall of Satan. Michael the angelic representative of God's people, leads the battle as a result of which Satan is thrown out of heaven. No longer can he stand in the heavenly council to accuse God's people (12:10; Job 1:9-11; 2:4-5; Zechariah 3:1). For those in Christ there is no longer any condemnation (Romans 8:1).

The woman is taken to hide in the desert during the time of the persecution (12:6). Here the desert represents a place outside the control of evil, as the people of Israel escaped from Egypt into the desert. There, the woman is carried on eagle's wings (12:14; Exodus 19:4). The dragon attacks her with a river which comes from his mouth. This can only be lies and accusations from the devil, the father of lies. But the earth swallows the river, as it swallowed those who opposed Moses in the desert (Numbers 16:31-32; see Psalm 124).

Having failed to destroy the Church as a whole, the devil turns to individual Christians (12:17), calling on the beast from the sea, the home of chaos and rebellion against God. The beast has similar characteristics to the dragon (13:1; 12:3), except that the crowns are on its horns and on its heads a blasphemous name instead of crowns. This is the whole anti-God

political, social and economic system of which Rome was the current representative. The head which has been wounded and recovered is a travesty of the crucifixion and resurrection and a reference to the myth that the emperor Nero would come back to life. All Greek letters had a numerical value, so every word in the Greek language could be expressed by a number. As well as falling short of the perfect 777, the number 666 (13:18) is the sum of the letters in the title "Nero Caesar".

The political system is bolstered by the work of a second beast, another parody of Christ (13:11). This is the state religion, demanding loyalty from all inhabitants of the empire (13:15) and impressing them by false signs and wonders (13:12-14). No one who refuses such worship can be a full citizen of the empire (13:16-17). Although the numbers of Christians killed for their faith was actually quite small, all lived in constant danger of being denounced and forced to prove their loyalty, a test which meant a choice between abandoning Christ and possible death. In the face of this danger, John writes to strengthen his readers to stand firm with patient endurance (13:10; 14:12).

He reminds them that the triumph of the Lamb and the victory of the saints is assured. The martyrs, who avoid lies and spiritual adultery and follow the Lamb wherever he goes (that is, to death) are the first-fruits of a greater harvest of all God's faithful people (14:4-5). The angels call the world to worship God (14:6-7), announce judgement on Babylon the Great, the city which represents the evil and oppressive system (14:8) and warn those who submit to her that they are storing up wrath for themselves on the day when Babylon is judged (14:9-11).

Then follows the vision of the full harvest at the coming of the Son of Man (14:14), the time when he sends out his angels to gather God's elect (Matthew 24:30-31). The harvest is announced by angels who come out of the Temple (14:15,17-18) since the faithful offer to God the sacrifice of their lives (12:11). What John sees here is not the final judgement but the martyrdom of God's people. They suffer outside the city (14:20; see Hebrews 13:11-14) and their blood goes into the cup of God's wrath, which the persecuting earthly powers will eventually drink (16:6; 17:4-6). John wants his readers to recognise in their persecution and even in their death the coming of eventual judgement on the world. Like Jesus' death on the cross, apparent defeat is really victory.

Day 341. Psalm 35; Revelation 15 - 16

The Seven Bowls

Psalm 35

A prayer to God for justice.

Revelation 15 - 16

In chapter 12, the woman, the mother of God's people, escaped from the dragon into the wilderness. Here, that hint of the exodus from Egypt, which is another name for the great city, the oppressor of God's people (11:8), is fully worked out. The wine of God's wrath has been made with the blood of the martyrs (14:19-20) and the oppressors are now to be made to drink it (15:1,7; 16:1,19). The seven last plagues are based on the plagues of Egypt and the salvation of the martyrs on the exodus.

The sea of glass before God's throne (4:6) has now become the Red Sea (15:2) and beside it are the conquerors who have safely crossed from death to life, holding their harps (14:2-3; 15:2) and singing, instead of the song of Moses (Exodus 15:1), the "song of Moses and the Lamb" in praise of God Almighty (15:3-4). Jesus has led his people in a new and greater exodus.

The heavenly Temple is now combined with the tabernacle where the Israelites worshipped in the desert (15:5). The tabernacle was the place of the presence of God (Exodus 25:8-9) and it is from his presence that the angels bring the seven bowls of God's wrath. The smoke (15:8) recalls the smoke which descended on Mount Sinai at the giving of the Law (Exodus 19:18) and the smoke that filled the Temple when Isaiah saw the Lord enthroned above the cherubim (Isaiah 6:1-4). The glory of the Lord is the cloud which covered the tabernacle when it was first set up (Exodus 40:34-35) and later filled the Temple at its dedication (2 Chronicles 7:1-2).

The angels are instructed to pour out the bowls of God's wrath. Like the seven trumpets, the judgements affect earth and sea, rivers and sky, and then the political powers in rebellion against God. They recall the plagues of boils, blood, darkness and hail. The scorching sun (16:8) has no parallel in the exodus plagues but creates a contrast between the fate of those who refuse to repent and those who are redeemed (7:16).

After the four natural plagues come the two political plagues. The darkness falls on the kingdom of the beast, but like Pharaoh its citizens refuse to repent (16:10-11). The kings of the earth who cross the Euphrates to fight the evil empire are summoned there not only by God but by three evil spirits from the mouths of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet (16:13-14). Their own lying and boastful words bring their doom upon them. They gather for the final battle on the Day of the Lord, predicted by Ezekiel, Joel and Zechariah (Ezekiel 38; Joel 3:1-16; Zechariah 14:1-15). Ezekiel placed this battle on the mountains of Israel, Joel in the "valley of Jehoshaphat" and Zechariah outside Jerusalem. John gives it a Hebrew name, "Armageddon" (16:16), or the "mountain of Megiddo", while the words of Jesus (16:15) remind us of his warning about the destruction of Jerusalem (Mark 13:32-37).

16:18 brings us once again to the end of the series of judgements (6:12-14; 11:19). The great city, now called Babylon, is split into three parts and made to drink the cup of God's wrath, prepared by the persecution of his people (16:19; 14:19), while the plague of hail falls on its inhabitants (16:21).

Day 342. Psalm 75; Revelation 17 – 18

The Fall of Babylon

Psalm 75

The rebellious nations drink the cup of the Lord's wrath.

Revelation 17 - 18

Now finally the doom of the oppressor to which all three series of judgements, the seals, the trumpets and the bowls, have led, is celebrated. The vision is introduced by one of the angels who poured out the seven bowls (17:1), so it is a continuation and amplification of the bowl judgements, especially 16:17-21.

In chapter 17, John brings together all the titles by which the Antichrist has been named - the monster who rises from the abyss (11:7), the great city (11:8), the monster from the sea (13:1), Babylon the Great (14:8) and the great whore (17:1) - and identifies them with the city of Rome, the city on seven hills (17:9). By going out into the desert, the place of safety for God's people (12:6,14), John can see the political power in her true colours, as the contemporary representation of the mother of prostitutes, the worship of wealth and power in all ages. Her adulteries are both literal and spiritual, since it is not only sexual license with which the kings are seduced but the love of power. Compared to that of the mother of God's people, however, her finery is tawdry (12:1; 17:4). Moreover, the golden cup from which she drinks is going to turn out to contain the wrath of God, since the abominations and filth in it include the persecution of the saints (17:4,6; see 14:19; 16:19).

Seven is the number which denotes completeness, so it is useless to ask which seven kings John intends. The number is purely symbolic, indicating that with the seventh king the history of Rome comes to an end. The eighth king, with his satanic travesty of God's name, is the Antichrist (17:8,11), the beast from the abyss. A popular myth of John's time expected the emperor Nero to return to recapture Rome with the armies of Parthia from the east. Parthia was the foreign power the Romans most feared, portrayed in the sixth trumpet (9:13-19) and the sixth bowl (16:12-16). For John though, it is not Nero who will return. This is the time when the powers of evil enjoy

their short lived victory (17:12; 11:7-10). The empire on whom the great prostitute sits enthroned, portrayed as both the beast and the many waters (17:2-3), consists of peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. Like the rulers before Nebuchadnezzar's statue (Daniel 3:4-5), they have been forced to worship the emperor's image. In the end, however, John predicts that they will rise and attack the city which enslaves them (17:15-18). In the process they will also make war on the Lamb through his saints, but as we already know, his victory is assured (14:1-5). Once the fall of the city has been dealt with in chapters 17 and 18, the victory of the Lamb will also be described (17:14; 19:11-16).

The song of doom in chapter 18 combines references to the doom of Babylon in Jeremiah 51, of Tyre in Ezekiel 26 and 27, Edom in Isaiah 34 and Nineveh in Nahum 3. It is important that God's people recognise the city's imminent doom and resist the temptation to get involved in her trade and political life (18:4; see Jeremiah 51:6-7,45-50). Rome is simply the contemporary manifestation of political power organised in rebellion against God. Each in its turn is the successor of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) whose citizens set out to increase their power and make a name for themselves, drawing upon themselves divine judgement.

Like all the prophets before him, including Jesus, John saw the "mystery of lawlessness" already at work in human society (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Any political system organised for its own power and perpetuation carries the seeds of its own destruction - internal strife and the resentment of those on whom its power is built. Like all the prophets, John expected the final judgement to come soon (1:1; 22:20). He used traditional imagery drawn from the Old Testament to predict the fall of Rome, just as Jesus did the fall of Jerusalem. The message of each was primarily for their own generation. The long wait involved in the fulfilment of all these prophecies does not affect either their diagnosis of the situation or the eventual outcome (2 Peter 3:3-13).

Day 343. Psalm 21; Revelation 19 - 20

The Last Judgement

Psalm 21

God's people rejoice in the victory of the king.

Revelation 19 - 20

Now at last we arrive at John's portrayal of the final judgement. In these chapters he is following the time-scale of Ezekiel, in which the judgement arrives in two stages: a first judgement is followed by a period of relative peace, which is broken by the gathering of God's enemies and the final battle. In Revelation the interval of peace between the first and second judgements has become the reign of the martyrs foretold in Daniel.

In 19:1-10 John hears, in 19:11-end he sees. This time the voices rejoice in the salvation Jesus has won. The sounds of a great multitude, rushing waters and thunder (19:1,6) are the praise of the martyrs (7:9-10; 14:2). These begin by rejoicing at the destruction of the Lamb's enemies (19:1-3) to which the voices of heaven add the Amen (19:4). A voice from the throne calls all to worship God (19:5) to which the martyrs respond by celebrating his reign and the wedding of the Lamb. The bride is ready in robes made white by the Lamb's blood (7:13-14) and the wedding arrives in 21:2.

What John sees is a conquering king leading the army of those he has redeemed. But like that of 12:7-12, in which Satan was thrown out of heaven, the battle is a legal battle. The Rider on the white horse is the faithful and true witness (19:11; 1:5). The weapon with which he judges and defeats the nations is the sword of his Word (19:13,15). The blood in which his robe is dipped is that of the conquerors who have died for their witness. It is the blood which flowed from the winepress of God's wrath (14:20) which, even as it flows, prepares God's wrath and the downfall of his enemies. The Rider's robe is stained with the blood of his followers, but theirs are white, made clean by his own death (19:8,14; 7:14). The name on his robe and his thigh is the one because of which he defeats his enemies (19:16; 17:14). The fact that it is written on his robe shows that it is there because of the death of the martyrs; the thigh is the place of the sword, which, as we know, is the sword of the gospel to which they have given

their testimony (19:10). Again the fact that the martyrs have been faithful to death prepares the way for the Lamb's victory.

The final battle, when it comes, is short and decisive (19:19-21). The beast and the false prophet are captured and thrown into the fiery lake (Matthew 25:41), where they are not killed but tormented day and night (20:10), while their army is destroyed. The call to the birds to clean up the dead bodies recalls the story of Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 39:17-20) which John will be using in his description of the final battle in 20:7-10. Before that, however, comes the thousand year reign promised to the martyrs (3:21). Although they have died and been raised in the first resurrection (20:5-6), they reign on earth over those who have not been destroyed in the battle of Armageddon. This interval of peace at the end of history, during which the devil is restrained, fulfils the hope of Daniel 12:1-3 for a resurrection of the martyrs. They are the "holy ones of the most high" of Daniel 7:27, who reign over the kingdom of God.

However, the millennium is not the end, since death, the last enemy, remains to be destroyed. After the thousand years, the devil is released, and here John reverts to Ezekiel's plan, in which Gog and Magog attack the peaceful city of God's redeemed people (20:7-9; Ezekiel 38:8-9). However, the hordes of God and Magog are also swiftly defeated and this time the devil joins his instruments, the beast and the false prophet, in the lake of burning sulphur (20:10).

After the defeat of the devil comes the second resurrection. The throne of God, which was the first thing John saw when heaven was opened (4:2), appears again (20:11). This time, the old creation, including both earth and heaven, not only disappears but flees, unable to stand the moral grandeur of God's presence. After the judgement, its place will be taken by a new heaven and a new earth (21:1). Each person is judged according to two books. The first includes a record of their deeds, the other, which balances it, is the Lamb's book of life. No one is admitted to life on the basis of their deeds, but only according to whether their names have been recorded from the foundation of the world in the Lamb's book (13:8; 17:8; Ephesians 1:4). Thus God's mercy overrides human sinfulness, although it remains possible for some to be blotted out of the book (3:5). Their fate is the second death, joining death and Hades, the beast and the devil in the burning lake (20:15).

Day 344. Psalm 45; Revelation 21 - 22

The Holy City

Psalm 45

A wedding song for the victorious King.

Revelation 21 - 22

Judgement is complete and the old creation makes way for a new heaven and a new earth. But these are not simply an anticipation of things to come; they are constantly taking shape in the fallen world. As well as living in hope and expectation, God's people are called to discern the signs of his coming kingdom in the here and now.

The earth and heaven, which have fled (20:11), are replaced by a new heaven and a new earth, which is to be the home of God's people. In the new heaven and earth there is no more sea. The element of primeval chaos in rebellion against God, the place from which the beast emerged to persecute God's people (13:1), is no more. In the new heaven and earth all the hopes of Israel for redemption are fulfilled:

- The new heaven and new earth are drawn from Isaiah 65:17-end and 66:22-23. Here there will be no more fruitless toil or early death. Nature will be in harmony, there will be peace and prosperity and all humankind will worship the Lord (66:23).
- The Bride now appears in splendour (21:2,9). Israel, first unfaithful (Hosea 1:2; Jeremiah 2:1-13) then forsaken (Isaiah 54:1-8) is now to be married (Isaiah 62:1-5).
- God dwells in the midst of his people (21:3). The promises of Emmanuel (Isaiah 8:9-10; Psalm 46:7,11; Matthew 1:22-23; 28:20) and the presence of God in the Temple (Exodus 25:8; 1 Kings 9:3) are fulfilled.
- The universalist hope is also fulfilled. All nations come to worship the God of Israel (21:22 - 22:5; Isaiah 19:23-25; 45:22-23; 60:10-14; Zechariah 14:16-21), but now Israel is represented by the Lamb and his apostles (21:14).

The words of God from the throne recall the words of Jesus on the cross as recorded in John's gospel. As Jesus died proclaiming, "It is accomplished," (John 19:30) now God the Father proclaims, "It is done" (21:6). Jesus said, "I am thirsty," (John 19:28) and after his death water flowed from his heart (John 19:34). Now God promises to all who thirst a spring of the water of life (21:6; John 7:37-39). Jesus' death on the cross is the source of all the blessings God's people enjoy in eternity.

The bride, the wife of the Lamb, is described by one of the angels of the seven bowls, to point the contrast with the great whore (21:9; 17:1). This time John is carried in the Spirit to a very high mountain (17:3; 21:10) signalling a comparison with Ezekiel's vision of the restored city and its Temple (Ezekiel 40:1-2). The city shines with the glory of God. Its gates and measurements are all multiples of 12, since this is the fulfilment of the hopes of Israel, but its foundations are the apostles of the Lamb because this is the Church, the new Israel (21:12-14). Its cubic shape is an echo of the Holy of Holies, the place of God's presence. Its size is truly enormous (21:16-17) because it receives the whole world (21:24-26).

However, whereas Ezekiel's focus was almost exclusively on the restored Temple, in the new Jerusalem there is no Temple at all (21:22). God and the Lamb are personally present and the people of the city do not need a special place of worship. Instead of carefully and rigidly excluding everyone except God's people, as Ezekiel does, the kings of the earth, who had fought against them, now come into the city (21:24). There is no boundary between secular and sacred; the glory and honour of the nations is acceptable (21:26). It is not the secular which is excluded but the sinful (21:8,27).

Like the city and the sea before God's throne, the river of the water of life is clear as crystal (4:6; 21:11; 22:1). In place of the trees on either side of the river of Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 47:7) stands the tree of life yielding fruit every month, which if a person eats he will live for ever (22:2; Genesis 2:9; 3:22); and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (22:2; compare Ezekiel 47:12).

The servants of God now serve God in his presence and bear his name. They come into his presence because they share his character (22:3-4; John 14:1-6; 1 John 3:1-3). Whereas in the millennium the martyrs rose to reign

with Jesus, in the new heaven and the new earth all God's servants reign with him (22:5; Romans 5:17).

At the end of almost all apocalyptic books comes a command to seal up the book, denoting a set time at which God's promise is to be fulfilled (Daniel 12:9 is an example). To John, however, the command is not to seal the book (22:10). All that is written in it will happen soon. In the meantime, God's people are to be ready for his coming by living holy lives, drawing on the water of life freely available (22:11,14,17). In fact, the holy city is not only a future reality but a present one (3:12). It comes down out of heaven from God eternally and all who love him may have a foretaste of its reality now through the Spirit and the Bride, who both look forward to its final fulfilment (22:17).

Day 345. Psalm 73; Jude

Truth and Error

Psalm 73

The writer relates the experience of doubt, in which he nearly lost his faith (73:2), brought on by comparing the lot of the wicked with his own. Since he is going to relate the thoughts that plagued him during his time of doubt, he begins by stating the conclusion of his struggles (73:1).

His troubles began when he started to pay attention to the prosperity of those who ignored God. This began to affect him in his spirit with an attitude of envy, swayed as he was by the confident arrogance of the rich and godless people among whom he lived (73:3). So he relates how they seemed to him: sleek of body, proud in spirit, evil in mind and arrogant and malicious in speech (73:4-9). Their attitude and behaviour made God seem remote. These rich people seemed more powerful than God (73:10-11). There seemed no use even in trying to live a good life (73:12-14).

Nevertheless, the writer kept quiet. He did not spread his doubts among his friends (73:15). But his efforts to understand the situation met with no success until he came to worship (73:16-17), and in the experience of worship he came back into the right relationship with God. There he began to see below the surface and the real situation of those whom the world looks on with admiration. Their pride and prosperity are merely ephemeral; their wickedness will end in ruin (73:18-20).

"Heart," "soul" and "spirit" (73:21) refer to mind, will and emotions, which had all been affected by his loss of faith. But although he nearly slipped, God remained steadfast (73:23). In the end he realised that a loving relationship with God is its own reward. Nothing on earth can give the joy and fulfilment which it brings (73:25-26). There is no mention of a future life here; "heaven" is a present reality, the dwelling of God and his angels. The writer's hope is for this life only, and even in this life loving, trusting and serving God is the source of all goodness.

Jude

Jesus had taught in the parable of the wheat and the tares that the kingdom of God would include in its midst those who were false and unfaithful

(Matthew 13:24-30,36-43) and this was what the early Church experienced (Galatians 2:14; Philippians 3:2; Colossians 2:8; 2 Timothy 3:6; 1 John 4:1). So although Jude would have liked to write on the subject of truth, the greater need is to warn against error (3). The main characteristic of the false Christians seems to be their licentiousness, rejection of authority and lack of concern for the fellowship (4,8,10,12). It is not clear exactly what their teaching was, but its overall effect was "antinomianism" - refusing to acknowledge the claims of law and rejecting standards of Christian behaviour.

Jude's reply is that these people are certainly heading for judgement and in verses 5-7 he cites the example of the Israelites who died in the wilderness (Numbers 14:26-30; 1 Corinthians 10:1-11), the angels who went astray before the Flood (Genesis 6:1-4) and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:20-21). The smoke from the cities (Genesis 19:27-28) suggests the lake of fire to which the unfaithful will be consigned (7; Matthew 13:42; 25:41; Revelation 20:10,15).

The reference to Michael and his dispute with the devil (9) is based on the Jewish book, the "Assumption of Moses", most of which is now lost. Here Michael is given the job of burying Moses' body when the devil tries to intervene. Enoch (14) was an especially important figure for Jews of the first century, the seventh (the perfect number) in descent from Adam (sixth in our counting) and the one who "walked with God" (Genesis 5:24). The prophecy in 14-15 is drawn from the apocalyptic book of 1 Enoch.

These false Christians may be claiming to have the Spirit, but they do not (19). The fruit of the Spirit enables people to keep the law by nature (Galatians 5:22-25) whereas they are law-breakers. Those who want to live the life of Christ must avoid evil and live by the Spirit, whose fruit is love (20-21). Towards those who waver in the face of false teaching they are not to be unduly harsh (22), persuading them to return to the right path if possible, but avoiding the pollution of their doctrines or their lifestyle (23). Faced with the danger of being led astray themselves, they must be sure that God is able to keep them from falling (24-25).

Day 346. Psalm 7; 2 Peter

A Defence Against Falling

Psalm 7

A call for God to judge the wicked.

2 Peter

Despite its claim to have been written by Peter, the early Church was slow to accept this letter as Scripture. In the second century there was a large number of "pseudonymous" writings, many of them claiming Peter as author, and in all probability 2 Peter is one of them. Its style and atmosphere is very different from Peter's first epistle. Comparison of chapter 2 with Jude suggests that the latter is original and it is the author of 2 Peter who has borrowed. 3:4 suggests that it was written at a time when the apostles had died and 3:15 that a collection of Paul's letters was already in existence and accepted as Scripture. The reference to Paul as a colleague (3:15), the mention of the Transfiguration (1:16-18) and a former letter (3:1) can be seen as literary devices by which the author establishes the character of the one in whose name he is writing.

Why should a Christian writer pretend to be one of the apostles? The content of this letter provides the answer. Our author saw the genuine and apostolic Christian faith under attack from opponents similar to those whom Jude denounced and frequently faced by Paul. He writes to reassert the truth of the orthodox teaching he has inherited, warning his readers that by abandoning it they are abandoning their salvation. For this, he calls on the authority of Peter, the chief of the apostles, who were the foundation of the Church (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14).

The danger is that Christians, especially those recently converted, may be enticed by false teachers preaching a spurious "freedom" and fall away from the faith (1:10; 2:18-19; 3:17; see Jude 24). The freedom they offer is probably that of antinomianism similar to the error of Jude's opponents, although some of these teachers apparently add to their licentiousness a scepticism about the return of Jesus (3:3-4).

In reply, the author points his readers back to the Scriptures of both Old and New Testaments (3:2). The prophets were those who spoke of the

coming of Jesus, inspired by the Holy Spirit (1:19-21), the apostles were eye-witnesses of the glory of God displayed in Jesus (1:16-18). Paul, though not an eye-witness, has written some impressive letters, difficult to understand and easy to twist, and yet on a par with the other Scriptures (3:15-16).

All these contain one message: faith in Jesus is only the beginning of the Christian life. We must go on from there to draw on the qualities which are ours not by our own efforts but by God's gift (1:3), whose end is love (1:5-7). Only if our lives display these qualities can we be said to have a real knowledge of Jesus. Without them, we are not only unfruitful (1:8) but likely to fall back into sinful ways (1:9-11). This is especially a danger for those new to the faith, who have just escaped from worldly corruption (2:18). Without their hearts and minds thoroughly moulded by Christian faith, they may easily accept an attractive substitute and fall back into sin like their teachers (2:20-22).

Although he uses Jude's earlier letter, our author is not a slavish imitator. The point he wants to make in particular is that as well as condemning the wicked God is able to save the righteous, and for this purpose he adds the examples of Noah and Lot, who was saved from the punishment which fell on the rebellious angels, and on Sodom and Gomorrah (2:4-10). For the false teachers, the threat of judgement seems to hold no fear (3:3-4). They forget the Flood, through which God demonstrated his ability to judge the world and after which he promised to preserve it (3:5-7). His reason for preserving it was to have mercy, by the sending of Jesus. So now, although the world awaits inevitable judgement, God waits to give everyone a chance to repent (3:8-9). Eventually, however, the Day of the Lord will come, the earth be destroyed and a new heaven and earth appear in which only righteousness will be at home (3:10-13).
