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Hebrews - Revelation

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[9] Hebrews

1. The Lure of the Synagogue and the Threat of Desertion

Authorship unknown. The King James Bible identifies the Letter to the Hebrews as an epistle of *Paul*, but it has been established to the satisfaction of most scholars that Paul was *not* its author. This letter, which some regard as a long address, has also been attributed to Barnabas or Apollos. Origen observed that God alone knows who wrote it.

It is not certain either to whom the letter was addressed. Who were these "Hebrews," and where did they live? Because 13:24 speaks of "those who come from Italy," it has sometimes been assumed that the letter was meant for Jewish Christians in Rome. But other scholars have argued that it was addressed to Christians in Jerusalem.

Time of writing. There is a good deal of disagreement as well as to *when* the Letter to the Hebrews was written. Many scholars assume that it was written during the "second generation," approximately in the year 80. But as ^[10] we consider this matter, we should note that the original text presupposes that the Jewish worship service was *still going on* (8:3, 5; 9:6-10; 13:11), although this is not brought out clearly in the translations.

The present tense is used to refer to certain actions of the priest in the Jewish worship service. Although the present tense does not always mean present time, in this case it seems to indicate that the temple in Jerusalem, where the services of the tabernacle were continued, was still standing. If so, the letter must have been written before the year 70, when the temple was destroyed. The temple service was becoming obsolete; it was almost ready to vanish.

Moreover, the content of the letter makes it clear that the Jews addressed were still very strongly attracted to the Jewish worship services. For the young church of Christ, the synagogue was a strong competitive threat since it claimed that its services were based on the true tradition and liturgy. The persecution and continuing threat must have discouraged the Christians and made them think about giving up. Where was the glory of Christ the Redeemer?

A sermon? Hebrews may well be a long address or "sermon," for it does include some sections of admonition (2:1-4 and 5:11-6:8). If these sections are omitted in reading, the continuity of the exposition and the argument presented in the rest of the book are not lost, as you can easily see.

The sections of admonition and exhortation give us some idea of the spirit prevalent among the readers of this letter. The "Hebrews" were apparently in danger of drifting away from the faith (2:1). Their zeal was flagging; some had already fallen away and turned their backs on Christ (6:4ff).

After the main exposition follows the "application" ^[11] (from 10:19 on), in the form of a series of practical admonitions. Here again a good deal seemed to be lacking. Even though it was clear that the day of the Lord (i.e. the judgment of Jerusalem) was getting closer and closer, there were some who stayed away from the worship services of the Christians. Did they "attend church" at the synagogue instead?

Combatting the synagogue. The apostolic author warns against this withdrawal or desertion in no uncertain terms (see 10:38-9). "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (12:4). The *exodus command* that we find so often in the Bible is also given here: "Therefore let us go forth to him [Jesus] outside the camp, and bear the abuse he endured" (13:13). That would involve a conscious break with the synagogue.

On this basis we can understand why the train of thought in the Letter to the Hebrews is clothed in such thoroughly "Jewish" garments. This is no more an accident than all the "Jewish" allusions and references in I Corinthians and the book of Revelation. The synagogue is combatted here *with its own weapons*. Jesus Christ is sketched as the great High Priest who fulfills the torah, who brings the church to the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22;

see also Gal. 4:26; Rev. 21), and who also gives the church the power to persevere in times of danger and persecution.

2. Christ's Elevation above the Angels, Moses and Joshua

Honor for the Son of man. The beginning of Hebrews strikes a majestic chord: all the stops of the organ are pulled out as Hebrews sings the praises of the Son, who ^[12] participated in the creation of the world and bears all things through the Word of His power. He is mightier than the angels and is seated at the right hand of God.

At this point we hear a theme that echoes throughout Hebrews, a theme borrowed from Psalm 110, which can almost be called the "text" on which Hebrews is a commentary. In this psalm we read: "The LORD says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand' " (vs. 1). Through this quotation from Scripture, it is shown that the Son of God is worthy of the highest honor. The angels are far beneath Him, even though they also function as mediators. They are "ministering" (liturgical) spirits who serve those who are to obtain salvation (1:14). The Son, seated on the throne of His glory, receives the acclaim of the angels.

We must hold on to His gospel. If the law, which is brought by the angels (see Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19), could not be neglected without punishment, how much more powerful the Word of the Son must be! (2:1-4).

A merciful high priest. Opponents of this line of reasoning must have pointed to Jesus' humble state as He came into the world. Indeed, there was little of His glory to be seen then. No doubt the Jewish "counter-reformation" made much of this.

We must not forget that Christ's humiliation in living briefly in a state *below* the angels is bound up with the very heart of the gospel. It was to redeem "flesh and blood" and to be a merciful high priest that He became a genuine human being, like His brothers in all respects, subject to temptations and death. Because He *descended* to a state beneath the angels, He was able to *ascend* to a state above them. Now He is crowned with glory and is in a position to help us, His brothers.

The term *high priest*, which is so important in Hebrews, is also borrowed from Psalm 110, where it is said of the Messiah that He is a high priest after the order of ^[13] Melchizedek. The Letter to the Hebrews sings about the greatness of the Messiah. He is superior to such mediators as the angels (1:1—2:18) and is also superior to Moses and Joshua (3:1—4:16).

Complete sabbath rest. Moses was a servant, but the Apostle and High Priest of our confession is the Son. Conclusive in this argument is the redemptive historical situation in which the church finds itself. What happened to the Israel that refused to listen to Moses? It was refused entry into Canaan because of its unbelief. Neither did Joshua succeed in leading the new generation into complete rest.

Our complete sabbath rest is still ahead; it will be brought by the great High Priest named *Joshua*. But if we hope to enter His rest, we will have to be serious about His Word, which is as sharp as a scalpel. We will have to cling to the confession of Jesus (*Joshua*), the great High Priest.

Christ's suffering as preparation. Now the writer comes back to Christ's weakness once more, for this point seemed to give offense to some. Were there perhaps (Jewish) critics who were confusing the "Hebrews" on this score? Did they suggest that the cross and suffering of Christ did not fit in with Messianic glory and robbed the Messiah of His royal power?

The author of Hebrews deliberately hammers home the point that the King is also the High Priest, and that His suffering prepared Him to sympathize with His people in a genuine way and feel what they felt (4:14—5:10). As the Son, He was a high priest after the order of Melchizedek, which was the priesthood of which Psalm 110 speaks. His greatness is to be sought in His suffering, which elevates Him *above all priestly mediators*.

[14] 3. A Priest after the Order of Melchizedek

Beyond the milk of the gospel. At this point you would expect the author of Hebrews to start explaining how Christ is a high priest in the style of Melchizedek. He does so, but first comes an intermezzo, which deliberately slows down the movement of the argument.

The author of the letter is afraid that some readers might be left behind, finding what he says too difficult, not being able to digest it all. In this regard, too, there is nothing new under the sun, for today there are still many people who favor a simplified gospel or a "mini-gospel." They are not eager to "go on to maturity" but stick with the "elementary doctrine of Christ" (6:1). Anything beyond the elementary doctrine is excess baggage in their eyes. They remain babies in their understanding and are never weaned from milk to solid food.

The Letter to the Hebrews shows us that there is no place for such stubbornness; we must advance in our understanding and knowledge. To make no progress at all represents a relapse, a step backwards—and ultimately apostasy.

If we are to cling firmly to our hope, we must take hold of the Word. There must be no sluggishness in our faith. The promises God has sworn to Abraham are the anchor of our hope (6:18). That anchor remains behind the curtain of the heavenly temple which our High Priest has entered.

A higher priesthood. The author is back to his major theme, namely, Christ as the High Priest after the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek was the king-priest of Salem (Jerusalem) and was indeed honored by Abraham as a priest. Note that Abraham, the forefather of the priestly tribe of Levi, *received* a blessing from Melchizedek and *gave* him a tithe (i.e. one tenth of the spoils).

[15] This recognition on Abraham's part tells us something, namely, that there is a priesthood higher than that of Levi, a priesthood recognized by Abraham himself in his encounter with Melchizedek. Therefore the author of Hebrews goes on to speak of the *imperfection* of Aaron's priesthood and of the old covenant (7:11-28). Didn't Jeremiah 31 already speak of a new and "better" covenant? (7:22; 8:6).

Shadow and fulfillment. Under the old covenant, an endless series of priests entered the earthly holy place. On a certain day of the year (i.e. the great Day of Atonement), the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies in order to atone for his own sins and the sins of his people. There was never an end to this series of sacrifices; they had to be repeated yearly.

The new covenant was not concentrated in an earthly holy place, and it did not involve a repetition of sacrifices and the sprinkling of blood before the ark. The shadow was replaced by the fulfillment! A single sacrifice brought about perpetual atonement.

Christ, the great High Priest, the Mediator of the *new* covenant, gave that covenant or testament the force of *law* through His sacrificial death. He initiated that covenant with His blood, just as Moses initiated the old covenant between the Lord and Israel with blood (6:15-20; see also Ex. 24:6-8). When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He declared: "This cup is the *new* covenant in my blood" (I Cor. 11:25).

4. The Completeness of Jesus' Sacrifice

The old fulfilled in the new. To give you a clear outline **[16]** of the differences between the old and new covenants, I will use a chart to present the points that the author of Hebrews draws to our attention. Note the following contrasts between what Christ accomplished and what the Old Testament priests did on the Great Day of Atonement.

	The sacrificial service of the old covenant	Christ's sacrificial service
Place where the blood was offered	The tabernacle, which was a shadow or copy of the heavenly sanctuary (8:5; 9:24; 10:1). The Holy of Holies was declared inaccessible. Once each year, on the great Day of Atonement, the high priest entered it (9:7ff) in order to sprinkle blood before and on the ark, the throne of the Lord.	The heavenly sanctuary, which is complete and not built with hands (9:11, 24). When Christ ascended into heaven, He went there to present His blood to the Father.
Material used	The blood of goats and calves (9:12-13). This surrogate blood cannot take sin away definitively (10:14).	Christ's own blood, which He shows to the Father and which brings about eternal redemption once and for all (9:12,24; 10:14).
Service in office	Priestly service based on physical descent (7:16). As a result, the ritual becomes a routine. Moreover, the priests themselves are not free of sin but must bring sacrifices on their own behalf too (7:27; 9:7).	Priestly service by the power of an indestructible life (7:16), sinless and unblemished (7:26-8). Not subject to weakness. Unblemished self-sacrifice through the Holy Spirit (9:14).
Frequency	Many, many offerings. No end to the great Days of Atonement. Every year the high priest had to go into the Holy of Holies (10:3).	One sacrifice is sufficient. After the ascension and entry into the true tabernacle (i.e. tent) in which Christ displayed His sacrificial blood, no renewed sacrifice is necessary (7:27; 9:12, 25-8; 10:10, 12, 14).
[17] Position	The priest (<i>kohen</i>) stands (10:11).	After making His single sacrifice, which is sufficient, Christ may sit down (Ps. 110) at God's right hand (10:12). As a sitting high priest, Christ is our liturgist (servant), for He gives us access to the Father (8:2; 10:19-21).
Results	An imperfect purification that must be repeated again and again (9:13; 10:1-3). The repeated offerings manifest the poverty of the old covenant.	Definitive redemption of the church. Opening of the way to the Father. From Christ's completed work the church gains the confidence to enter the heavenly sanctuary (10:19-23, 35).

Thus there was no need for the first readers of Hebrews to be unduly impressed by the Jewish worship service, for Christ had fulfilled that service in accordance with Psalm 40:

Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me. Then I said, "Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God" (10:5,7).

Christ's ascension. Christ's death on Golgotha did not bring His sacrificial work to an end. He did complete His suffering on the cross, but there were still high priestly *results* to come. On the great Day of Atonement, the sacrificial animal was not only slaughtered, its blood was *sprinkled* in the sanctuary before the ark, God's throne. That's why the Lamb Jesus seated Himself on God's throne (Rev. 5:6).

The ascension *completed* Christ's work. At that time He ^[18] entered the heavenly Holy of Holies so that our conversion and forgiveness would be final. Whenever you think of Christ's ascension, remember that He is seated as *Priest* on God's throne. What a comfort for an embattled church! Through Him we can be confident that we have free access to the sanctuary—thanks to "Golgotha" *and* the ascension!

A Reformation emphasis. When you think about this, don't forget to thank the Lord for allowing the sacrificial service of Christ to receive so much emphasis during the Reformation. This emphasis, of course, is a major theme in Hebrews. The Pope's church speaks not only of the sacrifice on the *cross* but also of the *mass* as a sacrifice.

Acrobatic theologians have done their best to show that the sacrifice of the mass is really identical with the sacrifice on the cross, but there is no escaping the fact that the mass does not involve blood, that it is relative, that it is offered not by the solitary Christ but by subordinate priests and the entire church, and that it is only an application of what Christ Himself achieved. Thus the mass was and is an attempt to repeat Christ's unique sacrifice in a non-bloody way with the help of a consecrated priesthood.

The last of the great Days of Atonement has been held. The guilt of the entire land has been removed on a single day (Zech. 3:9). It was the Reformation that taught us to return to Hebrews. The controversial 80th Question and Answer of the Heidelberg Catechism, which seems to embarrass many Reformed Christians today because of its treatment of the "popish mass," points often to Hebrews in its textual references as it formulates the issues in a pithy way: "Our sins have been completely forgiven through the *one* sacrifice of Jesus Christ which he himself finished on the cross *once for all.*"

^[19] 5. Be Faithful and Persevere

Concrete application. Hebrews is like other New Testament letters in that it begins with a doctrinal section followed by some concrete application. In 10:19 we find the connecting point tying the two sections together.

The transition from the one to the other is gradual. First comes a summary of the doctrine taught—the access we are given enabling us to go into the heavenly sanctuary with full confidence, thanks to Christ's sacrifice; the path Christ has laid down for us; and the necessary appearance of our Priest in the house of God. All this material is not presented to the readers without reason; it is intended to make them sure of *their faith* as they cling to the *hope* they confess and put their faith into practice in the form of Christian *love* (10:19-25).

The writer immediately lays out the issues in sharp terms. Attendance at worship services has been lax. There is a danger of apostasy, of profaning the blood of the covenant, of outraging the Spirit of grace—all of this because of people who once suffered persecution and affliction on account of their confession.

Would the Lord let such wickedness go unpunished? The history of Israel and the song of Moses (Deut. 32) clearly indicated that He would not. Therefore there was to be no desertion or shirking or turning back (10:38-9) or siding with Israel, the apostate church, which was doomed. The "Hebrews" must persevere and be faithful at the front lines.

The unseen and unproven. It is in this context that we come upon the famous eleventh chapter of Hebrews, which tells us how the Old Testament church followed the path of faith. The intent of this chapter is not to put the "heroes of faith" on a pedestal so that people will think, ^[20] "We could never be so faithful." No, the purpose is rather to encourage the congregation by showing that faith always involves holding on to the unseen and unproven.

Without faith it makes no sense to speak of creation and redemptive history. Faith explains the actions of Abel and Enoch, Noah and Abraham, and the other patriarchs. It was through faith that Moses, Rahab, the judges, and the prophets were able to do what they did. They all had to live by the promise, without the fulfillment in Christ (11:39-40).

The church of the new covenant knows Jesus Christ, the 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (12:2). With the ancient church as a "cloud of witnesses" (vs. 1), the church of the new covenant keeps its eye fixed on this "pioneer" as it runs its course and fights the good fight. Because of Christ's coming, the New Testament church is even better equipped to believe than the Old Testament church.

Suffering for Christ's sake. The "Hebrews" must not regard setbacks as judgments on what they are doing. Apparently some supposedly friendly observers were asking: "Where is the God on whom you fixed your hopes?" However heavy the cross borne by the church of the old covenant, that church persevered. "God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" (12:7). The discipline and chastisement are for the son's own good.

Therefore no one should feel embittered when he has to suffer for Christ's sake. Instead he should move ahead in new strength. We must not reject the One who speaks to us in adversity, for the fires of judgment are already burning.

The decisive *last phase* in God's plan of action has come. What the church is nearing is not a smoking Mount Sinai out the New Jerusalem or heavenly Zion. The church is nearing the Mediator of the covenant, who is greater than Moses; she is nearing His blood, which signals better things than the blood of Abel.

^[21] The "more and better" of the new covenant should make us more faithful and obedient. This "more and better" brings with it an *even more severe judgment* from the One who is a consuming fire, a judgment for those who persist in their apostasy. The obedience of faith must be worked out in daily life (ch. 13).

A sacrifice of praise. The last chapter of Hebrews is also priestly, for in it we read of Christ's suffering. "The bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood" (13:11-12). Because Christ became a sacrifice for *sin*, we must offer up our continual sacrifice of *praise* for the blood of the eternal covenant (vs. 15, 20).

In Christ all the sacrifices have been fulfilled. For the life of the church this has major consequences: it means that the congregation has no "lasting city" here.¹ In other words, the church is not to cling to the Jerusalem here below, with its Jewish services in the temple, which was about to disappear (see Rom. 11:7ff; Gal. 4:25ff; Phil. 3:7-20).

Priestly service in times of tension. The church is also called to suffer persecution and contempt from the side of the synagogue. The cross of separation and isolation must be borne for Christ's sake. Just as the true sacrifice was cast outside the gates of the city, so God's people must

^[22] have the camp to go to Him. A reminder that we must respect our ecclesiastical leaders would not be out of place in this context: those who have firsthand knowledge of the life of

¹ We are not to quote this text and declare that we have no lasting city here when someone is about to move from one town to another or when someone has died. But this text is indeed appropriate when it becomes necessary for some group to secede from the church (see Rev. 18:4; II Cor. 6:14ff; Acts 18:6-7; 19:9; Gal. 4:21-31).

the church and the pain involved in a secession know how much priestly service is needed in times of ecclesiastical tension (13:3, 7, 17-18).

Here again grace is the first and last word. In the midst of the admonitions in this "word of exhortation," as the writer himself describes his letter (13:22), stands a sentence that comforts the church of all ages: "Jesus Christ is *the same* yesterday and today and for ever" (vs. 8).

What a joy to know that this Lord Jesus Christ is our merciful High Priest after the order of Melchizedek! Golgotha has some high priestly "results," then. Through the blood of the eternal covenant, the God of peace brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep (13:20).

[23] James

1. James and Jesus Christ

Brothers of Jesus. The writer of this letter introduces himself as follows: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." Apparently he regards any further specification as unnecessary, believing that each reader would immediately realize which "servant" was meant.

From the book of Acts we learn that James, the brother of the Lord Jesus, played an important role in the leadership of the original congregation in Jerusalem after the departure of Peter. The James mentioned in Acts is apparently the author of this letter (Acts 12:17; 15:13ff; 21:18ff).

The Lord Jesus made a special appearance to James after the resurrection (I Cor. 15:7). James joined the church during the Pentecost period, as did his brother Jude, the author of the letter bearing his name (Acts 1:14).

No hierarchical attitudes. We know that the brothers of Jesus did not believe in Him before the resurrection, and that they liked to find fault with Him and with His work [24] [John 7:3ff; Mark 3:21, 31ff). Later, however, James and Jude described themselves as servants or slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ. They recognized the Messianic office of this man born of the same mother who bore them, and they saw a task for themselves as servants in the church.

James eventually became a legendary figure and was referred to as an archbishop or a bishop of bishops. But James himself claimed no other title than "servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." No hierarchical attitudes come to expression in his letter.

Echoes of Jesus. As we read James, we see that he echoes the words of his brother and Lord. Consider the following parallels:

James

But above all, my brethren, *do not swear*, either by *heaven* or by *earth* or with any other oath, but let your *yes* be *yes* and your *no* be *no*, that you may not fall under condemnation (5:12).

Jesus

But I say to you, *Do not swear* at all, either by *heaven*, for it is the throne of God, or by the *earth*, for it is his footstool. Let what you say be simply "Yes" or "No"; anything more than this comes from evil (Matt. 5:34-5, 37).

Many other examples could be mentioned. Both the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' address about the destruction of Jerusalem are echoed in James' letter. Compare the following passages in James with the words of Jesus as recorded in Matthew and Luke: 1:4 (Matt. 5:48), 1:3-4 (Luke 21:19), 1:22 (Luke 6:47), 2:13 (Matt. 5:7; 6:14-15), 2:14ff (Matt. 7:21ff; 25:35ff), 3:18 (Matt. 5:9), 4:4 (Matt. 6:24), 4:10 (Luke 14:11), 5:7-8, 11 (Matt. 24:3, 13).

New Testament proverbs. James has sometimes been reproached for preaching a "Sermon on the Mount [25] Christianity" that recognizes Jesus only as a teacher offering moral advice. Unlike Paul, James says little about Jesus as the Christ. But we must bear in mind that it was not James' intention to write a lengthy logical exposition of the doctrine of salvation.

His letter can be compared to the book of Proverbs. Proverbs does not include many statements that make us think of the prophets. All the same, what Proverbs offers is not a universal human morality but a commentary on the law, a commentary intended for the guidance of the people of the Lord.

The covenant of the Lord also forms the background of the "Wisdom of James." Although he does not talk expansively about the salvation that is ours in Christ, James does presuppose

it when he offers his practical wisdom for daily life and lets the Word of the highest Wisdom speak in the form of proverbs.

Hasn't Jesus Christ become "our wisdom"? (I Cor. 1:30). Just as the book of Proverbs does not deal with Messianic hopes at length, James does not present an extensive testimony about Jesus Christ. Yet he does presuppose the confession of the church, and he includes a short statement making it clear that he does not regard Jesus simply as a moral teacher.

2. A Letter to Scattered Jewish Christians

Pastoral assistance via proverbs. James addresses himself to the "twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (1:1). By this he means the lawful continuation of the Old Testament covenant people, i.e. the New Testament church. Thus this letter was intended first and foremost for the scattered *Jewish* Christians, with whom James maintained very close ties.

[26] Because of the persecution that led to the stoning of Stephen, some of the Jewish Christians had scattered across Judea and Samaria and even Phoenicia, Syria and Cyprus (Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19). In this letter, James addresses himself to the Jewish Christians in the "Diaspora" for the purpose of giving them pastoral assistance in a Jewish manner via proverbs, binding them to the basic law of the Kingdom of heaven.

The law of freedom. Forced emigration brings all sorts of perils with it, as powers of endurance are subjected to severe tests. James calls for obedience to the Word, the King's law of freedom, in all difficult situations. He opposes the sins of the tongue just as much as the pride of the wealthy.

In the midst of the dangers arising from life's stresses and irritations, he calls for true wisdom (1:5; 3:13). For those who confess Christ in the middle of a hostile environment, belief and faithfulness must be a source of righteousness, giving them strength to persevere.

The threat hanging over Jerusalem. In this context we should note that James clearly speaks of his time as "the last days" (5:3; see also Acts 2:17). He informs us that "the Judge is standing at the doors" (5:9). Here again he echoes the words of Jesus: "When you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates" (Matt. 24:33).

Like his readers, James was intensely aware of the threat hanging over Jerusalem and the words Jesus spoke in judgment. The Christians found it hard to believe that the Jews, who had rejected Jesus as the Messiah, could live on peacefully and continue to blaspheme the honorable name of Jesus Christ, tormenting the Jewish Christians and turning the lawful authorities against them wherever they could (2:6-7; 5:6). How could the rich in the land of Israel live in such luxury at the cost of the oppressed when [27] the great day of slaughter had already arrived? (Jer. 12:3; Rom. 2:5).

Those who had become displaced persons because they confessed the name of Jesus could not help wondering whether the Lord Jesus would really keep His word. Would He settle accounts with the rich, proud Jewish oppressors? Waiting for vindication was almost unbearable.

An answer to prayer. James appealed to his readers to persevere until the "coming" of the Lord Jesus (in the form of judgment on Jerusalem as they knew it), just as Job and the prophets had to put up with a lot of evil and somehow persevere (5:10-11). Meanwhile, the oppressed were not to accept any "new morality." Persevering means being doers of the Word.

From the proverbs of James we get a sense of what an immense relief and answer to prayer the destruction of Jerusalem must have been, and what a liberating effect it must have had on the Jewish Christians. This letter also gives us some idea of what it means to persevere in our expectation of Jesus' last coming (*parousia*).

3. James and Paul

Luther's problem. It is no secret that Luther was unhappy with the Letter of James,

dismissing it as a "straw epistle." He took this stand because of what James says about works: speaking of Abraham, he declares that faith is "completed by works" (2:22) and that Abraham was "justified by works" (vs. 21).

Luther believed that this conflicted with what Paul taught: "For we hold that man is justified by faith apart ^[28] from works of law" (Rom. 3:28). Others have made the alleged differences between the two even greater, maintaining that James was an advocate of supreme obedience to the Jewish law and therefore a strong opponent of Paul and Gentile Christendom.

Following Paul's path. Scripture gives no grounds whatsoever for accepting such a caricature. Relations between Paul and James were good (Gal. 1:19; 2:9). Paul did oppose certain people from James's circle (Gal. 2:12), but not James himself.

James used all his influence to keep the Gentile Christians from being burdened with the keeping of all the Mosaic laws (Acts 15:13-21). In his letter he did not speak of any ceremonial regulations; his concern was rather with "the perfect law, the law of liberty" (1:25). He reminded his readers: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (2:8). In emphasizing these points, he was moving along the path followed by Paul, who maintained: "He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law" (Rom. 13:8).

The primacy of faith. Like Paul, James puts faith first. When Paul rejects justification by works, he means justification on the basis of a scrupulous adherence to the *ceremonial laws* (e.g. dietary regulations, provisions about circumcision and feast days). But when James talks about 'works,' he does not mean living by such laws. Instead he has in mind what we call the *fruits* of faith.

A living faith must somehow be made manifest—and on this point Paul would agree wholeheartedly. It was Paul who wrote: "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness" (Rom. 6:22 NIV). Faith works through love (Gal. 5:6). These statements are drawn from the same letters that speak out so unequivocally against justification on the basis of keeping the ceremonial law.

^[29] For Paul as well as for James, faith that has no effect on life is dead. Therefore we must not speak of a conflict or contrast between Paul and James. At most Paul would take a stand against those who misuse the wisdom of James in an effort to defend legalism.

4. Doers of the Word

The perfect law. "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created" (1:18 NIV). This second birth or "rebirth" (regeneration) must be made manifest in our deeds. We must not be *hearers* of the Word only (vs. 22).

James works this out in practical terms. Temptations serve to make us persevere (1:2ff), he points out. If we are lacking in wisdom, we must seek strength in prayer. But we must not pray with doubt in our hearts (vs. 5ff). James also warns against feelings of superiority (vs. 10-11). No one is to say that he is powerless to resist when he stumbles into sin, for our desires are rooted in our own hearts (vs.

13ff).

Meekly we are to accept the Word planted in our hearts, the Word that can save souls (1:21). This means immersing ourselves in the perfect law, which is the law of liberty (1:25), the law that requires breaking with hatred, controlling our passions, looking out for widows and orphans, and acting impartially in our dealings with others (1:19—2:13).

Christians in a minority position. Most of the readers of James's letter were persecuted poor people. There was a danger that such a minority group might engage in shady activities simply to get into the good graces of the ^[30] majority. James condemns the custom of giving a prominent seat in the assembly (literally: synagogue) to a rich visitor while an interested poor person is kept at the back. "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love

him?" (2:5; see also 5:1ff; Luke 6:20; I Cor. 1:26ff). And weren't *the rich* the ones who persecuted the Christians? (2:6; 5:6).

James's words are still of great importance and value for churches in a minority position, churches that do not seem to know how to relate to a non-Christian majority and therefore wind up buckling under and being subservient for fear of massacre. James rightly saw that such churches were preparing the way for their own destruction, for they would become rigid and dead.²

Showing partiality to prominent persons outside the ^[31] community of faith violates the brotherhood and is an indication of a dead faith. As an illustration, James points to Abraham and Rahab. If the church members do everything to keep their own heads above water while neglecting the poor, the fact that they belong to a community that recognizes Jesus as the Messiah will do them no good. A dead orthodoxy will not save them.

Sins of the tongue. James uses eloquent language as he discusses the sins of the tongue, giving examples from daily life. The little tongue can be a fire with a much different effect than the Pentecost tongues of flame.

The dispersed Christians could easily make life sour for each other and tear down the congregation by sins of the tongue—through jealous words, policies designed to promote selfish interests, partisan struggles, self-centeredness.

^[32] In all of this, righteousness and wisdom from above do not come to the fore.

What is the real reason for all this misery? The failure to break once and for all with the world, that is, the desire to be adulterers combining friendship with God and friendship with "the world," this present age with its own wicked style.

Undivided hearts. Those who are of two minds (4:8; see also Ps. 12:3) will have to be reminded of what Scripture says (vs. 5) so that they will change and humble themselves before the Lord with undivided hearts (4:6-10; Luke 14:11; I Pet. 5:5). Then there will be an end to the squabbling and envy and quarreling, and the church will no longer be a debating club.

The same applies to condemning fellow Christians in a loveless way (4:11-12; see also Matt. 7:1 ff; Rom. 14:4; I Cor. 4:3-5). We must leave it to God to do the judging (4:12; see

² On the subject of the attitudes of Christians in the (non-Christian) Middle East, J. Glissenaar reports the following observations of a Flemish priest who worked among the Nestorian "Assyrians": the Christians "always cling tenaciously to every little ray of hope, which explains why their opinions can change so dramatically. Thus there are now a lot of Christians in Iraq who are in favor of Communism because they believe that it will give them the freedom and equality they have so long yearned for. But in the process they compromise themselves and become tools in the hands of a foreign imperialist power" (*Arabieren Huilen Niet*, Blaricum, 1961, p. 193). Such churches appear to be dominated by the very "conformity to the world" that James was combatting. Glissenaar further observes that the Christians who were oppressed by the Mohammedans wound up living in ghettos, where they lost touch with the Islamic world outside and sought refuge in specialization and the development of their economic power. This sometimes resulted in dislike and distrust of Christians on the part of the Islamic majority, which then led to outbursts of hate against them and even plunder and greater oppression, to which the Christians would respond with tricks, cunning, deceit, and plotting (p. 142). We also read of internal disputes among the Christians, who formed a threatened minority. On occasion these disputes even led to struggles with weapons (pp. 115ff, 210).

A careful look at the state of the Christian minority in the Middle East can be very helpful to someone trying to understand James's letter. The Jews, who had taken on the role of "Ishmael" and "Hagar," according to the New Testament (Rom. 9; Gal. 4), played *the same role* in relation to the Christians then as the Mohammedans play now. The conduct of the Jews was the reason for the specific dangers and temptations facing the Christians—lip service, relying on one's own power, rigidification, taking over the enemy's methods, formalism, a cold manner in business and in relations with others, materialism, loss of the church's unique style, lack of mercy toward brothers in the faith. To illustrate the conditions presupposed in James's letter, we could also point to the situation of the many missionary churches of Asia and Africa, which live in the midst of political revolution and rising nationalism.

also Eccl. 7:16). Once and for all, James wants to put an end to the unspiritual, earthly, partisan struggles inside the circles of the dispersed Christians. Let us be doers of the Word!

5. A Unique Style for the Last Days

Wealthy persecutors. The "dispersed" Christians were irritated with each other partly because of all the pressure they lived under. Their persecutors were wealthy and acted like snobs in many ways.

In two prophetic statements (4:13-17 and 5:1-6), James demonstrates the rottenness of the deeds of the "rich." What good does it do them to brag about their plans if life is really a mist that vanishes quickly, a flower that fades ^[33] and perishes in the scorching heat of the sun? (4:14; 1:11). What is there left of human wealth when fire and rust have done their work? (5:2ff; Matt. 6:19-20). The injustices committed by the rich cry out to heaven.

In 4:15, a well-known text, we read James's observation: "If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that." It does not say: "If the Lord wills and we live" This text is the basis for adding "D.V." to announcements about future events. "D.V." is an abbreviation for the Latin phrase *Deo volente* (God being willing). "If it is the Lord's will, the wedding will be held"

Judgment on Israel. Pentecost signals the beginning of the "last days." The Judge is at the door; Jesus will fulfill His words about Israel and settle accounts with the wicked generation.

If we read James's words carefully, we see that the portrait of him as a Jewish legalist is a complete distortion. His respect for the Jewish law did not keep him from realizing how close Israel was to the "culmination," i.e. the coming judgment. (When he speaks of the "parousia," the coming of the Lord, he is referring to this judgment—and not in the first place to Christ's final return.)

The death of James. According to Flavius Josephus and Hegesippus, James was killed in the temple in the year 62 at the instigation of the high priest and the Sanhedrin, after he was accused of transgressing the law by confessing that Jesus is the Christ (see Rev. 11:7-8).

The death of James drove the church and the synagogue in Jerusalem even farther apart and made Jerusalem even more ripe for judgment. According to Hegesippus, James was spoken of as "righteous." What he wrote, then, was fulfilled in his own case: "You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man" (5:6).

[34] James calls on his readers to be patient and long-suffering. The "parousia," the coming of the Lord, is near (5:7ff)- If the people of God would only live by their own style and pay careful attention to the prophecies, there would be no more dangerous "grumbling" about each other (vs. 9). Happy are those who persevere until the culmination (5:11; see also Matt. 24:13). James wrote in the light of the fire that was about to destroy Jerusalem's wealth (see Rev. 18:7ff).

"First unction." In keeping with their calling as first fruits, the believers in Israel must bear the stamp of God's Kingdom. They are not to sin by misusing oaths, for that would only bring judgment nearer (5:12; 3:1). They will have to seek their strength in prayer and song. The weak will have to turn to the elders for help so that their anxieties may be stilled by the "intermediate" way of prayer and proclamation of the gospel. May the approaching day of judgment drive the believers closer together, so that they learn to await the Lord in hearing confessions of sin, in praying for each other, and in bringing back those who have gone astray.

James 5:13-16 has sometimes been taken as a Scriptural basis for the Roman Catholic sacraments of confession and extreme unction. This passage has also been used to defend faith healing. But what James is actually doing in 1 his passage is showing the church of his day, which lived in a time of approaching covenant wrath, how to escape.

The church's defense is not extreme unction, which is the sacrament of the dying, but "first

unction," that is, anointment with the Spirit (4:5), which makes possible a true community of saints. Then the mercy of believers will triumph over God's judgment (2:13).

James also points the way for those who await the Lord's final coming. I will persevere in my faithfulness to the name of the Lord and the community of the saints—if ^[35] it is the Lord's will (*Deo volente*). We must be patient and long-suffering, not allowing ourselves to be frustrated by all the apostasy from the covenant.

[36] I Peter

1. Peter Strengthens His Brothers

Peter the rock. Simon Peter, the author of this letter, is familiar to us from the "gospels" and the book of Acts. Simon was originally a disciple of John the Baptist. When he followed Christ, he was given the name *Peter*, which is a Greek form of *Cephas*, his Aramaic name. (*Peter* is derived from the Greek word for *rock*.)

Peter was the man who resolutely rejected the idea of Christ's suffering and even denied his Master in order to escape danger. After the resurrection, Christ appeared especially to him (Luke 24:34; I Cor. 15:5) and later gave him the command: "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17).

When Pentecost comes, we find Peter speaking in the name of the other apostles—and afterward as well. Through Christ's grace he became a rock who rejoiced at being allowed to suffer for the sake of Christ's name (Acts 5:41). What a change in him! Now Peter no longer avoided suffering but understood fully the necessity of Christ's atoning sacrifice. Now he was ready to suffer imprisonment and even worse things for Christ.

[37] *Peter's mandate.* How is it possible that Peter, who denied His Savior, could later appeal to the Jews so boldly to repent and turn to Christ? From Pentecost on, he even threatened them with judgment: "Save yourselves from this crooked generation" (Acts 2:40). Shouldn't Peter take a close look at himself instead of elevating himself above others and trying to set them straight in his usual proud manner?

Such a question could also be raised about this letter. The man who was afraid of a servant girl in the courtyard of the high priest during the trial of Christ now speaks of suffering in lofty terms: "It is a blessing for you when they insult you for bearing the name of Christ" (4:14 JB). Wouldn't it be better for a man like Peter to remain silent about these things—all the more because his *fear of the Jews* (i.e. the Jews of the dispersion, in Antioch) continued to play a role in his conduct *after* Pentecost? (Gal. 2:12).

The answer to this question is no. During the "last supper" Christ not only prophesied that Peter would fall, He also *commissioned* Peter to act on behalf of his brethren after coming to a proper understanding of Christ's mission. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you [singular] that your faith may not fail; and *when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren*" (Luke 22:31-2). Thus there was a task for Peter: he was to *strengthen his brothers!*

In this letter Peter seeks to carry out his mandate. He knows that God does not play favorites (1:17; Acts 10:34). The decisive thing is not his own past but the *commission* he has been given by Christ.

Peter seems to be alluding to Christ's words when he says at the end of the letter: "The God of all grace who called you to eternal glory in Christ will see that all is well again: he will confirm, *strengthen* and support you. I write these few words to you ... to *encourage* you never to let go [38] this true grace of God to which I bear witness" (5:10, 12 IB; see also II Pet. 1:12). Peter had been "converted"; he had come around to a true understanding of the gospel, and he now proceeded to strengthen his brothers in Asia Minor.

A letter from Babylon. Peter's readers lived in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Bithynia, and the Roman province of Asia (not to be identified with the continent of Asia, which borrowed the name of this province). The mention of these areas reminds us of the people present at the first Pentecost service.

Peter speaks of "Babylon" as the place from which he writes (5:13). Some interpreters assume that he is using this name symbolically, while others take it as a literal reference to the region called Babylon.

If Peter was indeed speaking symbolically, then it is not likely that he meant Rome. Peter's attitude toward government (2:13ff) was not such that we would expect him to use a

despised name like *Babylon* when speaking of the capital city of the empire. When Peter speaks of the one in Babylon "who is likewise chosen" (5:13), he means the Christian congregation in the place from which he wrote the letter. This may well have been Babylonia, where many Jews lived.

Silvanus. Peter's secretary is a familiar figure in the New Testament—Silvanus (Silas), Paul's travel companion, who is mentioned at the beginning of the two letters to the Thessalonians. That this letter of Peter parallels certain passages in the letters of Paul can be attributed to the influence of Silvanus.

Moreover, we must not forget that in those days there was a certain language used in preaching and teaching. It would be natural for Peter to make use of that language in his letter. We also find some similarities between Peter's [39] letter and Christ's own words, which should not surprise us. Peter was a disciple who enjoyed intimate contact with the Lord.

Strengthen your brothers! In this letter Peter obeys the Lord's command, with the assistance of Silvanus. The readers were going through a difficult period, for Satan wanted to sift them as wheat. Peter now makes an effort to encourage them as a shepherd.

2. Exiles and Priests (1:1—2:10)

Second-class citizens. The Jews outside Palestine were referred to as "the dispersed," as the Jews of the "Diaspora." They were exiles and outsiders in the lands where they lived. Their real fatherland was Judea or Galilee.

The beginning of Peter's letter uses this language: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the *exiles* of the *Dispersion* in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia." When Peter speaks here of "exiles," he is not characterizing his readers as timid, pale Christians who do not feel at home in this world because they *may* not. He has a different kind of "exile" or "outsider" in mind. (The word he uses for "exile" in 1:17 is *paroikia*, which is related to our word *parish*.)

Peter was simply characterizing the situation in which his readers found themselves—without telling them that *all* Christians ought to feel like exiles and outsiders. The fact of the matter was that the Christians Peter was addressing were treated like second-class citizens; they were oppressed and made to suffer. In that sense they could indeed be regarded as "exiles."

Not for a moment did Peter intend to deny our calling [40] and task in this world. The Christians he addressed were "exiles" only because of the environment and circumstances in which they happened to live. He was not calling into question their rights as heirs of God's creation.

Reason for hope. Peter now proceeds to encourage this "parish" of exiles. The *Father* chose them, the *Spirit* sanctified them, and the *Son* sprinkled them with the blood of the new covenant. Therefore they had reason for hope! Thanks to the resurrection of Christ, an abiding, unblemished, unfading inheritance is being reserved for them in heaven, to be given them one day in a world in which they will no longer be pushed around. The turmoil to which they are now being subjected is intended to test their faith in the inheritance.

The glory of the inheritance will be fully apparent when Christ comes. The words of the prophets long ago are fulfilled in Jesus' humiliation and subsequent ascension into glory. Even though the church does not see its Savior, through faith it knows that the final goal has been reached.

Redemption and renewal. Peter once heard John the Baptist speak of Jesus as a "Lamb." Now he himself speaks of the precious blood of Christ as the blood of "a lamb without blemish or spot" (1:19), that is, a lamb suitable for sacrifice. Through this blood, the congregation has been redeemed from a meaningless life and given a *priestly* task. "But as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct" (1:15; Lev. 11:44). Through the Word, the congregation is reborn; it is renewed to a living *hope*, to *brotherly*

love, and to *faith* (1:21ff).

Rebirth or renewal is not a mysterious event in which man is completely passive. It means a turning or changing on our part as we renew our lives. It is the living, evangelizing Word of God that sets us in motion. "Like ^[41] newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation" (2:2).

A temple of living stones. Peter, whom Jesus once spoke of as the rock (*petra*) on which the church would be built, now depicts Christ as the living stone and the church as a temple of living stones. Christ is a stumbling block for unbelievers, but this Cornerstone rejected by the builders will not put believers to shame (2:4ff; Ps. 118:22; Is. 28:16; Luke 20:17-18).

Peter also goes back to the proclamation of God's covenant and calls the church a *priesthood* (2:9, 5; Ex. 19:6), a royal order of priests, a vassal state of priests bringing Spiritual offerings, of priests subordinate to the Great King. Peter does just what Paul does, then. He encourages the embattled church members by telling them explicitly what they are, namely, a continuation of the Old Testament covenant people. "You are now the people of God (*Ammi*), who once were not his people (*Lo-ammi*); outside his mercy once, you have now received his mercy" (2:10 NEB; Hos. 1:9ff; 2:23). Not the synagogue but the *church* is the heir of the rich covenant promises. On the basis of these riches, Peter proceeds to exhortation and admonition.

3. Spiritual Sacrifices (2:11–3:12)

No undisciplined conduct. The church is a Spiritual house, a holy priesthood that must offer Spiritual sacrifices (2:5; see also Rom. 12:1). In this context the term *Spiritual* does not mean *in the spirit* or *elevated above matter* or anything of that exalted sort; it means *governed by the Holy Spirit*. It is in ordinary life that such sacrifice comes to the fore.

^[42] Those who are outside the church sometimes slander Christians. Christians must not leave themselves open to accusations. Redemption through Christ should not lead to undisciplined conduct and license. Christians must be loyal to the emperor and the governor. They are not to say: "Because Christ has made me free, I don't have to listen to the authorities anymore." Fearing God means honoring the man He has chosen as emperor (2:17). "My son, fear the LORD and the king, and do not disobey either of them" (Prov. 24:21). In this way Scripture can be used to silence superficial critics.

Christ's example. Slaves serving in the home are not to rebel. They may not even rebel against wicked masters who torment them because of their faith. Peter holds up Christ as an example, for Christ did not resist when He had to suffer. Instead He surrendered to the One who judges justly. "By his wounds you have been healed" (2:24). For slaves, offering Spiritual sacrifices means following this Shepherd.

The same principles apply to wives. They often have a hard time of it if their husbands do not believe the Word. Are they then to become rebellious? No. It is their duty to win their husbands for Christ through a God-fearing way of life.

Gentle service. Peter tells the women: "Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a quiet and gentle spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight" (3:3 NIV). These words are by no means out-of-date; they are of great relevance for our age of false freedom.

Christ restores the original order of life. The woman is not reduced to the level of a slave, even though Peter holds ^[43] before her the example of Sarah, who called Abraham her "lord." Peter frees the woman of revolutionary ideas about emancipation. Neither by being bossy nor by adorning herself will she make her existence meaningful. Central to her existence is gentle service.

Naturally, this does not give husbands the right to take advantage of the gentleness of their wives. The life of husband and wife together must be made noble through the hope of the coming inheritance and through prayer.

Such are the guidelines that must govern the ethos of the "exiles." In Peter's words we hear echoes of the Sermon on the Mount. The man of the sword—think of Peter in Gethsemane, cutting off the ear of Malchus—has been "converted" and now encourages and admonishes his brothers.

4. Suffering as Christians—in Hope (3:13—5:14)

Exiles—yet heirs. Once more Peter takes up the theme of suffering—or rather, the *hope* of those who suffer for the name of Christ. Jesus Himself had declared: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all manner of evil against you falsely on my account" (Matt. 5:10-11).

Wives must not let themselves be frightened (3:6), just as Christians in general have nothing to fear (vs. 14), provided they walk uprightly in Christ. Even though "the world" has made them *exiles*, they are really *heirs*.

Peter points once more at Christ. He was killed in the flesh; His enemies finished Him off. But He was made alive in the Spirit. Because of that power, He could then ascend (3:18, 22) into heaven, where all the angels and ^[44] powers are subject to Him. The Christian who dies in Christ's power, who dies according to the flesh because he is persecuted—that Christian will live by God's will. To "the world" he may be a foreigner and an exile (4:4), but in the end he is an heir.

Judgment on God's house. One of the most difficult passages in the entire New Testament is 3:19ff, where we read about Christ preaching to the "spirits in prison." These "spirits" are identified as those who were disobedient during the days of Noah. Their destruction is contrasted with salvation through the ark, which corresponds to baptism in the New Testament.

What does this passage mean? Some interpreters think in terms of Christ preaching in the realm of the dead. Others interpret the passage as referring to a preaching of the Spirit in the days of Noah. It has also been argued that the people meant are those who manifest *the same* disobedience as the people of Noah's time (see II Pet. 2:5; 3:6). What the text probably refers to is the message Christ preached by His ascension.

The idea of the destruction of the first world occupied a good deal of Peter's attention. He now knows that Christ is about to judge the "second world." He announces: "The *end* of all things is at hand" (4:7).

This awareness ought to govern the ethics of Christians. As in Noah's days, the Judge stands ready. The judgment will begin with the house of God, the covenant people (4:17; see also Ezek. 9:6). Only those who suffer as "Christians" may commend their spirits into the hands of the Father (4:16; see also Luke 23:46). There is no virtue, then, in suffering on account of the evil we have committed against the state or society (4:15).

Humility as a uniform. Of course Peter could have said a great deal more on this topic, but the congregations had ^[45] their own elders to teach them. The apostle who was commissioned by the risen Lord to feed the sheep now gives a command in turn to the office-bearers of the congregations: "Tend the flock of God that is your charge" (5:2).

The younger members of the church must subject themselves to the elders. Humility is the uniform in which they should clothe themselves (vs. 5). Was Peter thinking here of how Christ washed the feet of the disciples before the last supper? (John 13:1-17).

Encouragement. Many Reformed churches draw on Peter's letter for their liturgy, using the concluding words of his stirring benediction after the confession of faith: "After you have *suffered a little while*, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you. To him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (5:10-11).

This is the same Peter who had earlier played the role of a satan, saying when he heard that Jesus was to suffer: "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you" (Matt. 16:22). The

author of those bold words is the same man who broke down and cried in Paul's presence because he was afraid of reprisals from the Jews (Gal. 2:12ff). Through His encouraging Word, God strengthens the exiles in the dispersion so that they know how to suffer for His name.

[46] II Peter

1. Peter's Testament

The question of authorship. Peter's second letter differs greatly from his first in style. Some scholars have **therefore concluded** that **the** second letter is **not** authentic.

When we consider this question, we must remember that Peter's first letter was written with the help of Silvanus (Silas) as secretary. Peter apparently used someone else to help him write his second letter, which would account in part for the difference in style. To a considerable extent, the two letters do not deal with the same subjects, which would influence the choice of words somewhat. Finally, who are we to say what kinds of sentences and words Peter may use? Are we to deny him the right to write his second letter in an original way simply because that originality conflicts with our theories and calculations?

Peter and Jude. Another argument used to support the view that Peter is not the author of the letter known as "II Peter" is the similarity between that letter and the Letter of [47] Jude. This similarity has led to speculation that someone took some of the material in Jude's letter, worked it out at greater length, and then bestowed apostolic authority on it by ascribing it to Peter. If so, II Peter would be a piece of plagiarism, falsification, pious deceit.

Now, there are indeed some striking similarities between the two letters.

II Peter

Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as *reminders* to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. I want you to recall the words *spoken* in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our *Lord* and Savior through your *apostles*. First of all, you must understand that in the last days *scoffers* will come, scoffing and *following their own evil desires* (3:1-3 NIV; see also vs. 5-16).

Jude

But, *dear friends,* remember what the *apostles* of our *Lord* Jesus Christ foretold. They *said* to you, "In the last times there will be *scoffers* who will *follow their own ungodly desires*" (vs. 17-18 NIV).

Peter gives us the impression of going into the matter in greater depth.

If there was indeed a falsifier who tried to attribute his letter to Peter, why would he borrow from a letter already in circulation? Furthermore, wouldn't a falsifier take great pains to copy the style of I Peter?

Timely commentary. Take this letter for what it is, namely, a message from Peter, who by this time was very old and could see that his death was not far away. It may be that he gives us some further commentary on statements first made by Jude, the brother of James and of the Lord. In any case, his letter is a helpful, timely commentary on the events of his day.

[48] Peter offers a final testament, in which his readers are urged to cling firmly to the Word and nothing else. If the church does so, there will be no room for the heresy of following our own desires.

2. Clinging to the Prophetic Word Ratified by the Father

Peter's apostolic calling. The false prophets claimed revelation and knowledge from extra-Biblical sources. They appeared on the scene seeming to possess some sort of authority, and they quickly excited people and attracted a following.

That's why Peter begins by accentuating his own calling as an apostle. He also points out that he and his readers cling to the same precious faith. We enjoy the rich privilege of knowing the One who has *called* us through His glory and power. We are rich in promises! (1:3-4).

This means that we are not in need of any supplement from elsewhere, however "Spiritual" it might look. In fact, we *may not* accept any supplement. We must confirm our calling and election; we must make them valid. Now that we have professed our faith, we must stand by what we have affirmed (1:10). Peter had been commanded by Jesus to *strengthen* his brothers (Luke 22:32). That's exactly what he does in this letter—with all his might (see 1:12; I Pet. 5:10).

A story told by eyewitnesses. The apostle did not believe and preach myths or artificial fables or manmade "revelations." The gospel is a story told by eyewitnesses—not overwrought mystics.

Peter thinks back to Christ's glorification on the Mount [49] of Transfiguration. At that point God actually *declared* that Jesus is His Son and covered Him with glory. He also showed that the old prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus; they were "made more sure" (1:19). Peter goes on to point out: "The interpretation of scriptural prophecy is never a matter for the individual. Why? Because no prophecy ever came from man's initiative. When men spoke for God it was the Holy Spirit that moved them" (vs. 20-1 JB).

3. The False Prophets and Their Theology of Liberation

Wolves in sheep's clothing. False prophets and exegetes interpreting Scripture by principles of their own devising had already appeared under the old covenant. They were a force on the scene in Peter's time as well, offering a gospel adapted to human tastes. Their gospel left out a significant aspect of the Lord's revelation, namely, His wrath directed at any apostasy from the covenant. The false prophets held visions of peace and freedom before the people, even though they were in bondage to corruption themselves (2:19; see also John 8:34; Rom. 6:16).

Jesus, too, warned expressly against false prophets, characterizing them as wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15; 24:4ff, 11, 24). If it were possible, the false prophets would even mislead God's elect. They operated especially where Jewish nationalism and zealotry were strong. The message they preached was that the messianic age had come—an age of freedom from Roman rule.

We also encounter false prophets in later church history. Think of the Anabaptists, who offered prophecies of their own devising and were responsible for the drama at Münster under John of Leiden (1525). The conduct of the [50] Anabaptists led many Roman Catholics to develop misconceptions about Reformed Christians, whom they did not clearly distinguish from Anabaptists. During the time of the Reformation, then, the "way of truth" was slandered because of the conduct of the spiritualist prophets.

Rebellion against Rome. What Peter sees coming is that the Lord will strike Jerusalem with judgment. He knows of so-called Christians who play the role of prophet in order to agitate for rebellion against Rome. The Christians who had left Judea for other areas also had false prophets at work in their midst.

There must have been Christians who were taken in by the false message, letting go of

their confession that Jesus is the Messiah and throwing themselves into the cause of a revolutionary ideal, a false messianic ideal. Therefore Peter felt that he had to say something, as one would normally do in a testament.

The flag of revolution. The gospel brought by those false teachers was a theology of revolution. They did not even shrink from slandering the "glorious ones" whom they did not recognize.

When Peter speaks here of "glorious ones," he does not mean angels but governmental authorities, that is, those who rule. The false prophets behave like animals as they carry out their terrorist activities.

Unfortunately, we sometimes see the same kind of conduct today among Christians who wave the flag of evolution. Peter points out that just as there was judgment on apostasy and revolution under the old covenant, there will be judgment under the new covenant.

The price of sin. We should note that unlike Jude, Peter presents his examples in a chronological order. He ^[51] mentions the apostate angels (2:4), the world of Noah's day (vs. 5), and Sodom and Gomorrah (vs. 6ff)- In the case of the last two examples, he emphasizes the way of salvation: the Lord knows how to deliver the godly from temptation (vs. 9). But those who are taken in by the "traveling salesmen" and trade in the "way of righteousness" (vs. 21) for the way of Balaam (vs. 15; see also Rev. 2:14) will fall prey to covenant wrath. Sin is not cheap for a Christian.

Peter's testament includes a timely message for the Christians of our age. So much has happened in the field of mission activities since the nineteenth century! We now see that there are many in the old world, the new world and the third world who follow the theology of revolution. Peter addresses them in sharp terms: "It would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them" (2:21).

4. False and True Prophecy about the Future

God's time. Even during the time of the Old Testament prophets, there was a "God of the covenant is dead" theology. "Son of man, what is this proverb that you have about the land of Israel, saying, 'The days grow long and every vision comes to nought'?" (Ezek. 12:22; see also Is. 5:19; Jer. 17:15; Mal. 2:17).

Christ warned expressly against any relaxation in our perseverance, any feeling that the Lord might somehow delay His coming. "He who endures to the end will be saved" (Matt. 24:13). Jesus made this statement when He was talking about the temptation to join in the spirit of rebellion.

^[52] God's time is not our time. For Him a thousand years are like a day. If He delays judgment, it is because of His *patience* and *mercy*—and not because of any weakness (3:9-15; see also Luke 18:1-8; James 5:7-11; I Pet. 3:20). Delaying the judgment on Jerusalem leaves more time to preach the gospel and call for conversion (Matt. 24:14; Rom. 11:5, 13-14, 25-6).

False optimism. Today there are people who declare that the idea of judgment is only a projection of human fears. World history is its own court of judgment! There are also some who await a "brave new world," a Utopia along American or Communist lines. They look ahead not to a "parousia" or coming of the Lord but to an evolution made possible by human civilization and technology.

The Bible rules out any such Humanistic optimism. But it also rules out the existentialistic pessimism that sees the whole world as caught in an accelerating downhill slide. The Bible gives us divine promises about the new heaven and a new earth. In Christ all things are made new.

Redemptive purposes. The approach Peter adopts is to apply the Word of his Savior to his own time. When he speaks of the "second letter" (3:1), he may well mean Part 2 of his letter (i.e. Part 2 of II Peter). Part 2 ties in closely with Part 1.

The judgments Peter mentioned earlier, such as the flood, make it apparent that the evil cannot continue indefinitely. If the Lord postponed judgment, it was not because of any weakness on His part but because of some redemptive purpose. The Lord did not want anyone to be lost (3:9, 15). Yet the judgment that had long been predicted would surely come.

Judgment sketched in cosmic terms. What Peter now goes on to say about the day of the Lord is generally ^[53] applied to the final judgment. People even speak of the entire world going up in flames, which would fit in with the way of thinking prevalent in the ancient world.

But we should ask ourselves whether Peter's mention of the day of the Lord in this context might not be a reference to the coming judgment on the "present Jerusalem" (Gal. 4:25). Are we to understand the word *elements* (3:10) in terms of modern chemistry? Or could this word be a reference to the ABCs of the Jewish world (i.e. Jerusalem, the temple, and the services in the temple), as it is in Galatians 4:9 and Colossians 2:20? Bear in mind that there are more passages in Scripture where we see a specific judgment sketched in cosmic terms (Deut. 32:22; Joel 2:30; Acts 2:19-20; Matt. 24:29).

Sober and stable. For believers, this proclamation of judgment was not a reason to be pessimistic. It was rather a spur to continue down the path of holiness, keeping an eye fixed on God's great promises—the coming of a new heaven and a new earth on which righteousness dwells (3:11ff).

This expectation is not to be interpreted in horizontal terms, as though we await such tremendous progress that human civilization will one day develop into "a new heaven and a new earth." The promise should serve to help us remain sober in our outlook and stable in our attitudes, keeping both feet on the ground.

Peter, the rock, is called to strengthen his brothers and sisters. He does so by way of this letter, in which he points to what Paul also wrote. Today, as in Peter's day, we can be strong, mature Christians in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ only if we cling to His Word, His prophetic Word.

[54] I John

1. John's "Gospel" and His Pastoral Letter

Similar in style and diction. John is not expressly named as the sender of this letter. Yet it is clear from the content that he is the author. When we compare the beginning of the Gospel according to John with the beginning of I John, we see great similarities in style and choice of words.

Gospel	First Letter
<p>In the <i>beginning</i> was the <i>Word</i>, and the <i>Word</i> was with God, and the <i>Word</i> was God. He was in the <i>beginning</i> with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was <i>life</i>, and the <i>life</i> was the <i>light</i> of men. The <i>light</i> shines in the <i>darkness</i>, and the <i>darkness</i> has not overcome it. For the law was given through Moses; grace and <i>truth</i> came through Jesus Christ (1:1-5, 17).</p>	<p>That which was from the <i>beginning</i>, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the <i>word of life</i> ... God is <i>light</i> and in him is no <i>darkness</i> at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in <i>darkness</i>, we lie and do not live according to the <i>truth</i>, but if we walk in the <i>light</i>, as he is in the <i>light</i>, we have fellowship with one another (1:1,5-7).</p>

[55] You see immediately that these two passages were written by the same author. The same witness is speaking to us in both.

In typical "Semitic" style, the argument keeps coming back to the same point, but each time on a higher level, advancing in *spiral* fashion. We see this when we arrange a passage from John's first letter in verse form:

Beloved, I am writing you no *new commandment*, but an *old commandment* which you had from the beginning; the *old commandment* is the word which you have heard. Yet I am writing you a *new commandment*, which is true in him and in you, because the *darkness* is passing away and the true *light* is already shining. He who says he is in the *light* and *hates his brother* is in the *darkness* still.

He who *loves his brother* abides in the *light*, and in it there is no cause for stumbling. But he who *hates his brother* is in the *darkness* and walks in the *darkness*, and does not know where he is going, because the *darkness* has blinded his eyes (2:7-11).

When we put down the words used repeatedly in this passage one beneath the other, we come up with the following result:

	darkness	loves his brother
new commandment	light	light
old commandment	light	hates his brother
old commandment	hates his brother	darkness
new commandment	darkness	darkness
		darkness

As sober, businesslike citizens of the Western world, we **[56]** usually fail to notice such details of style. It would help if these letters were printed in verse form in our Bible translations. Although this would require more paper, it would open our eyes to the power

of the New Testament's poetry. Our Lord Jesus was a poet, and John, who was so close to Him, was a poet as well.

Similar in terminology. The coherence between John's first letter and his "gospel" is no doubt clear to you by now. In this context arises an important question that is all too often ignored: Is the meaning that certain words take on in John's "gospel" also determinative for understanding I John? To take two examples, do the words *world* and *darkness* have the same meaning in these two Bible books?

In the passage from John's "gospel" quoted above, the term *darkness* is used in reference to the covenant people of Israel, who did not accept Jesus as the light. "His own people received him not" (John 1:11). But when we come across the term *darkness* in I John, are we to give it the Same meaning? In John's "gospel," the word *world* is used repeatedly to speak of this world or this age, which is under satan's power and is concentrated in the leadship of Israel. Does *world* also have this meaning in I John?

Pointing back to the gospel tradition. There are some scholars who believe that I John was written as a letter to introduce the Gospel according to John. But this hypothesis has never been proven, for we have no information about the exact time when the letter was written.

The fact that the same words are prominent in these two Bible books—we don't need a computer to see that for ourselves—does indicate that they *belong together*, they have the same author, are addressed to the same readers, and spring from the same intellectual climate. This leads ^[57] me to conclude that I John was written around the same time as the Gospel according to John. Like all the other books of the New Testament, I John was written *before* year 70, that is, before the destruction of Jerusalem. This letter *points back* to what is revealed in the Gospel according to John and also opposes the Jewish synagogue.

The author of I John repeatedly alludes to things his readers already know. He quotes the words of Jesus as recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke,³ but *also* as recorded in the "gospel" he wrote himself.

Because he does so, we are safe in interpreting the terms he uses as having the meaning he gives them in his "gospel." Thus the "hatred" of the world is not hatred in general but hatred from the side of the "synagogue of satan." The false prophecy referred to in I John is not purely heathen but issues from a bastardized church.

This is the reason why John makes a point of going back to the tradition, the testimony handed on (2:7-27), the Word itself. All too often, scholars fail to realize and point out that John himself supplies the *key* to understanding his ^[58] letter when he emphasizes the gospel tradition. The church suffers as a result of this failure in interpretation.

³ Compare the following passages from I John with the "gospels": 2:17 (Matt. 7:21), 3:1-3 (Matt. 5:8-9), 4:1 (Matt. 24:11, 24), 5:3 (Matt. 11:30), 3:7 (Mark 13:5), 5:15 (Mark 11:24), 3:13 (Luke 6:22). The parallels between I John and the Gospel according to John are numerous, as we see from the following examples:

Gospel according to John	I John
3:36	5:12
13:34 (see also 15: 10-12)	1:8, 10 (see also 2:10)
15:11	1:4
14:16; 16:13	4:6
17:3	5:20
18:37	3:19

Look into this matter for yourself. I'm sure you will be able to find more parallels.

Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you (3:13 NIV).

2. Opposition from Within

The synagogue of satan. John's readers were suffering under the hatred of "the world." Given the meaning of the term *world* in John 15:18ff, we must think here of the "synagogue of satan." The Lord Jesus had said to His disciples:

If *the world* hates you,
remember that it hated me before you.
If you belonged to *the world*,
the world would love you as its own;
but because you do not belong to *the world*,
because my choice withdrew you from *the world*,
therefore *the world* hates you (John 15:18-19 JB).

Jesus likewise spoke of His disciples being killed and cast out of synagogues (John 16:2). John, who repeatedly goes back to what was heard and said, speaks in his first letter, too, of the covenant people who did not recognize Jesus and hated those who confessed His name.

It is clear from 2:22 and 5:1 that John is not talking about the pagans or the wicked world in general. At issue is the confession about the *Messiah*, the *King of Israel*, a confession involving the testimony of the Old Testament. (The same point comes out in verse 9 of II John, where we should read "doctrine *about* Christ" in place of "doctrine ^[59] of Christ.") The recognition of Jesus as the *Messiah* and also the *Son of God* is the real issue.⁴

The threat of heresy. It has often been argued that I John opposes the same heretics as the Gospel according to John, namely, such Gnostics as Cerinthus, who did not confess that the Christ had become a human being, a man of flesh and blood. The Gnostics made a distinction between Jesus and the Christ. They were not willing to go any further than to say that Christ had what appeared to be a body.

Now, it is not to be denied that John's writings were ideally suited for use in the struggle against this rising heresy, but we must not forget what John is talking about first of all in I John, namely, the refusal to accept the basic, original Christian confession about the Son of God who became man. Anyone who denied this confession was joining the synagogue of satan.

Prophecy gone wild. In the churches addressed by John, there were false teachers who believed that the confession about the Christ was not a matter of central importance. They declared that they, too, had "the Spirit." What we face here is "Christian" prophecy gone wild, a false prophecy (4:1) that also appealed to "revelations" (vs. 12, 20) and regarded itself as legitimate, "anointed" prophecy.

These prophets taught that it is possible to cling to God and confess His name without joining in the confession about Jesus as Messiah. Atonement was not regarded as necessary (1:8ff). God was not just the Father of those who confessed the Son. Thus it was not really necessary for ^[60] Jesus to shed His blood at Golgotha (5:6, 8).⁵ Golgotha was not an essential part of the gospel.

For teaching such things, these heretics had to be forced out of the church (2:19). They refused to obey the truth of the gospel and stood on the side of "the world," that is, the Sanhedrin and the synagogue, with its hatred of Jesus (see Rev. 2:2-3, 6).

⁴ On the confession about the Son of God, see 2:22; 4:15; 5:11-12; Matt. 26:46; 27:40ff, 54; Mark 14:61.

⁵ The KJV includes some words in 5:7-8 that the RSV and NEB leave out because many ancient manuscripts do *not* have them. Even if we are forced to leave out these words, which speak of the three persons of the Trinity, we are still left with many other texts that mention the Trinity.

3. A Warning about Antichrists

False messiahs. The word *antichrist* refers to anyone who unlawfully sets himself up in the place of Christ, struggles against Christ, and is opposed by Christ. The church was taught that antichrists would one day appear in its midst. When Paul left Ephesus, he told the elders: "After my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30).

It's likely that Ephesus was one of the congregations John's letter was meant for. Moreover, Jesus' own predictions about false messiahs and pseudo-prophets were known from the gospels (Matt. 24:5, 11, 24). John, who may have been on the island of Patmos when he wrote this letter, now declares that things have gone so far that many antichrists have already appeared.

[61] *The eleventh hour.* This indicates that it is the "last hour" (2:18). Many false prophets have gone out into "the world" (4:1), that is, the apostate Jewish world. "Every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already" (4:3).

John's words make it clear that we must not think of the "antichrist" in connection with a misty future when the "last hour" finally comes. John looks at the clock of church history and discovers that the last hour is already here. It is the eleventh hour! Thus we must be sure to let his word shape our conception of the "antichrist" and not try to weaken that conception by saying that the false teachers he speaks of are only *forerunners* of some future antichrist (see vs. 7 of II John).

Within the covenant circle. *Antichrist* was and is the name to apply to any false prophet who emerges from within the covenant circle claiming to be "anointed with the Spirit." When John reports the vision of the beast in the book of Revelation, he is not telling us about a future political antichrist with the reins of world government in his hands; he is indicating that some beastly devil will arise *out of Israel* to attack the church. II Thessalonians 2 follows the same line of thought. In 3:9, John distinguishes sharply between the seed of God⁶ (the children of God) and the children of the devil (see John 8:44).

John is sometimes branded an apostle of love in the [62] sense that he preaches philanthropy and general human solidarity. But a syrupy Christianity mainly concerned with not hurting or offending anyone would have to regard John's use of the keys of the Kingdom of heaven as a strange sort of love. The modern apostles of love get a great deal of mileage out of certain snippets of I John (e.g. the statement that God is love), but they want nothing to do with such words as *antichrist* and *false prophet*, words that this "son of thunder" used to characterize those who supported the Jewish counter-reformation.

4 God's Love and Our Love

The fruit of Christ's work. People today are overflowing with the milk of human kindness. All good liberals love the starving millions in faraway lands. God has become the Father of all men. We are all brothers and sisters. Even the Bible is allowed to contribute a couple of stirring texts!

But when John speaks of *brotherly love* in his first letter, he means a love grounded in *God's love* for His church, which is manifested in the forgiveness of our sins on the basis of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Here, too, everything begins and ends with Jerusalem. Love is not a general human quality rooted in human goodwill; it is the fruit of the work of Christ and first becomes manifest within the covenant circle.

Love put to the test. It is within our own circles that brotherly love is put to the test. This

⁶ The RSV reads: "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God" (3:9). Today's English Version has: "God's very nature is in him," while the NEB reads: "The divine seed remains in him." This text could better be translated: ". . . for His seed [His people] abide in Him and cannot sin." Being *God's seed* means being born of God.

happens especially in times of persecution. The readers of I John had to suffer the hatred of "the world." This led to material shortages (3:7). Anyone who chose not to bear the "sign of the beast" was boycotted by the (Jewish) "world" (see Gal. 6:12). ^[63] The background of I John has a lot to do with what we read in Matthew 10, John 15, and the book of Revelation.

What happened to those who did not regard the confession of Christ as essential, preferring instead to concentrate on the general fatherhood of God? They refused to go out of their way to help their brothers in the church who were suffering on account of the gospel. (See the Letter of James.)

Wouldn't those brothers be better off compromising on the question of Christ? Because they did not love *both* the Son and the Father, the halfway Christians did nothing to support their fellow church members in their hour of need and peril. They loved "the world" and wanted to live a life of luxury (2:15ff).

A cup of cold water. Loving "the world" is not the same as loving God's creation. Everything created by God is good. Loving "the world" means taking the side of the apostate synagogue and profiting from that decision in business! Such a loveless attitude flows naturally from a *denial of the confession* (1:6ff; 2:9ff; 3:14ff; 4:20).

Someone who is acquainted with God's true love also knows what it means to bear a cross for Christ's sake. Such a believer shows his true colors when he gives a cup of cold water to one of Christ's disciples (3:17; 4:21).

5. No Crisis about Certainties

John's manifesto. Through his firm and steady words, John helped the brothers. Precisely because there were some who doubted, he felt impelled to speak decisively.

^[64] The congregation was not to go around wondering whether the false teachers were right or the apostle.

John's manifesto contains a rich message for our confusing time. As an apostle and witness, he brings the Word of life. Over against those who wanted to do away with the confession about the Christ who gave His blood, he maintained that anyone who claimed to have no sins in need of atonement is a liar.

Confident of Christ. Over against those who were so "broad" in their outlook that they did not put brotherly love into practice in the church, thereby knowingly and willingly committing a great sin, he declared: "No one born of God commits sin" (3:9; see also 5:18). This does not conflict with his earlier statement, for the sin he is referring to here is the sin of betraying the community of the saints.

We must be sure not to forget this: faith is revealed in its fruits, and those fruits make us confident of Christ. "By his we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments" (2:3). John also affirms: "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit" (4:13).

The believers are the anointed. They know what the issue is and should not suffer from inferiority complexes. They can be sure of what they believe, and therefore they should stay far away from the morass of doubt.

Their love for their brethren is not a product of their own choice but the fruit of Jesus' sacrificial work (3:16). Therefore John can affirm: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments" (5:2).

Anyone who stands up for the true confession and consequently loves his brothers need never worry about the danger of becoming a Humanistic philanthropist or an adherent of the social gospel. True faith *leads to* right ^[65] conduct that overcomes "the world" and fear of "the world." Therefore such a believer is not afraid to take the side of Christ's sacrificial lambs. God is love, and anyone who abides in love (i.e. a *covenantal* love that comes to expression *within* the church community) abides in God (4:16).

6. Mortal Sins and the Worship of Idols

No forgiveness for the unrepentant. At one point Jeremiah was told: "Do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf" (Jer. 11:14; 15:1). We find the same sort of command in I John, although it is not formulated explicitly. We must pray for those who do not sin in a fatal way, but John advises his readers not to pray for those who sin *consciously* and *deliberately*, who commit mortal sins for which there is no forgiveness. Thus John distinguishes between "weaker brothers" who stumble and fall and those who live in pure rebellion against God.

Of course God's fatherly arms are open to the latter if they repent. But John maintains that it is senseless to pray for forgiveness on behalf of people who sin deliberately and make unrighteousness their policy. No doubt he was thinking of those who had left the community of the church because they were in love with the present age (II Tim. 4:10), those who denied Christian brotherhood (Matt. 10:34-42).

A constant danger. We know, John concludes, that the whole world is in the grip of the evil one. "We are in [communion with] the true God, as we are in [communion with] his Son, Jesus Christ. This is the true God, this is eternal life" (5:20 JB).

[66] Then follows an admonition: "Little children, keep yourselves from *idols*" (vs. 21). Some scholars interpret this literally, as meaning that the heretics were somehow in favor of a rapprochement or alliance with heathendom. It seems to me that this statement must be regarded as an instance of Old Testament language instead. Idolatry is putting something else in the place of the true God who has revealed Himself in His Word.

Falling back into official or sectarian Judaism just to escape certain difficulties is just as serious an offense for a Christian as offering sacrifices to idols. It represents a denial of communion with the Father and the Son and a surrender of life. We could also think of the song of Moses in this context: "They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods" (Deut. 32:16; see also I Sam. 15:22; Ps. 81:10ff).

Do we still understand John's Biblical language today? Even someone who lives a decent and proper life, attending church every Sunday, is in danger of committing the great sin of idolatry. How? By not wanting to share in the *scorn* and *contempt* that will surely be the lot of those who confess Christ.

[67] II John

What do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? (II Cor. 6:14 NIV).

A letter to the "seed." This short letter begins: "The elder to the elect lady and her children." Who is this woman, who is also spoken of in verse 5 as a "lady"? No doubt a certain *congregation* is meant.

The "elect sister" referred to at the end of the letter is a sister church in whose midst the apostle was living at the time he wrote the letter. In Scripture the church is often referred to as a woman (see John 3:29; Rev. 12:1ff, 17; 21:9; 22:17). The church is also referred to as the "seed," the offspring of the woman.

Living out of the truth. Even if you did not know that tradition ascribes this letter to the apostle John, you would quickly recognize him as the author from the style and content, provided you were familiar with his "gospel" and his first letter. It is striking how often he uses the word *truth*, for example, a word that occurs frequently in his [68] other writings as well. For John this word does not mean agreement with reality, with what is genuine and just. When John speaks of "truth," he is referring to God's *covenant faithfulness*, His *yea and amen*, the revelation of His salvation, His unchangeable will, the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises.

"The Truth" is the power that gives shape to the life of the church and binds the church together. The Truth abides with the church forever, that is, even in the great future after the return of Christ (vs. 2; see also John 14:16). The truth also makes us say amen repeatedly to the *old* commandment of brotherly love.

The life of the church is not to be governed by any emergency morality arising out of the needs of the hour. The church that lives out of the unchanging truth of the unchanging God knows that it must walk farther along the old path of this commandment (vs. 4-5).

False progress. The church may not join the progressives who favor going ahead but fail to abide in the doctrine of Christ (vs. 9). To preach this kind of progress is to declare that God is changeable, that His will and commandments change. The heretics with their new doctrines are always talking about progress. Yet, those who follow them do *not* in fact progress. Why? Because they *lose* what they have gained if they do not cling to the *old* doctrine. Only those who abide in the old doctrine "have" the Father and the Son.

The church must make short work of false teachers. They are not to be accepted as office-bearers, and they must not be welcomed. To welcome them would be to enter into communion with their wicked works (vs. 7-11).

Today people are in favor of reducing differences to some "common denominator" on which all can agree. What should strike us as we read II John is that it is the ancient "apostle of love" who teaches us to boycott such [69] progressive attitudes. John hammers on the anvil of the received doctrine. Is that love—not receiving people with a "different viewpoint"?

Christian love. The problem as stated in this ancient letter is by no means antiquated. In the future, the struggle of the church will revolve around the question what Christian love really is. According to the successors of those heretics in John's day, Christian love promotes a reconciliation and fusion of mutually exclusive doctrines. Thus it is progressive and ecumenical, and "receives" those who do not abide in the old doctrine.

But those who wish to abide in "truth" and "love" see things entirely differently. They are not polite and compliant when faced with heresy. Failing to deal firmly with heresy amounts to giving up truth and love, as well as the unity of the apostles with the Christ, the unity of John 17. The true church has no choice: love and truth leave *no room for heresy*.

[70] III John

Time of writing. It is often argued that III John dates from a much later period and was not written during the apostolic era. The reasoning is that Diotrephes, the man John complains about in this letter, was already a bishop of sorts governing the church by himself. If so, the letter would have to date from a post-apostolic period and could not have been written by John.

But something is overlooked in this line of reasoning: the fact that the author so strongly opposes the hierarchical conduct of Diotrephes indicates that it was not yet the era of the "monarchical" bishops. In other words, the attitude of Diotrephes was not standard practice at that time.

The danger of tyranny. The third letter of the apostle John can be viewed as a counterpart to his second letter. In the second letter John protests in a pastoral way against welcoming heretics, but in the third letter he raises objections against the conduct of Diotrephes, who refused to welcome to the congregation faithful servants from elsewhere and even made things difficult for those who did welcome them and show them hospitality.

[71] The "elder" addresses this letter to a certain Gaius, about whom he had recently heard good things. This Gaius (of whom we know nothing further) helped Christian brothers when they passed through his area. After all, weren't these brothers going out for the sake of Christ's name? When Christ sent out His disciples to preach, he made hospitality a commandment: "He who receives you receives me. And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward" (Matt. 10:40, 42).

The apostle had heard good reports about Gaius. But Diotrephes, another member of the congregation to which Gaius belonged, was intent on playing "first fiddle." Preaching that the local church should be *independent*, he combatted any influence that came from the apostle John. He even suppressed a letter John had written (vs. 9). Using wicked words, he put the apostle down and built himself up. He refused to receive the brothers sent to the church by John, and he saw to it that anyone who did dare show them hospitality was forced out of the congregation (vs. 10).

Diotrephes, then, was an office-bearer with strong leanings toward tyranny. His outlook was an example of *hierarchical* church government, a rule from above that applies discipline out of a love of power. From church history we know what such tendencies finally led to—bishops, a pope, a hierarchical apparatus, a church completely dominated by the clergy.

Serving the truth. John concludes this letter with a few positive words about a certain *Demetrius* and a promise to come soon (vs. 12-14; see also vs. 10). Gaius is instructed to continue "receiving" the brothers. The important thing to remember is that all are "fellow workers in the *truth*" (vs. 8).

The apostle's work, then, is to *serve* the truth, but the [72] desire of Diotrephes is simply to *dominate*. Insofar as he opposed the authority of the apostle by appealing to the "sphere sovereignty" of the local congregation, Diotrephes is to be regarded as a beacon in the sea showing the church of all ages how easy it is to run aground.

Now that the apostles are no longer with us and the churches must do without their patriarchal leadership, John's words should resound in our ears: "Do not imitate evil but imitate good" (vs. 11). If the office-bearers heed this appeal, they will *serve* the truth. Then love (for the *right* brothers) and truth will harmonize. If II John warns against false unity, III John appeals for true unity and shows how it can be achieved.

[73] Jude

Do I not hate them that hate thee, O LORD? (Ps. 139:21).

1. A Warning in Strong Language

Brother of James. The name *Jude* has a familiar ring. Jesus' circle of disciples included two men named *Judas* (another version of the same name). One was Judas Iscariot, and the other is referred to simply as "Judas the son of James" (Luke 6:16).

The Judas who wrote the short letter we are now considering introduces himself as "a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of *James*." This James is not the brother of the apostle John but the brother of the Lord Jesus (see Mark 6:3), the man who played a major role in the leadership of the church in Jerusalem.

At first Jesus' own brothers did not believe in Him. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared expressly to James (I Cor. 15:7), who became part of the church, together with Jesus' other brothers (Acts 1:13-14). Paul speaks in I Corinthians 9:5 of travels undertaken by the brothers of the Lord in the service of the gospel.

[74] Jude was not only a familiar figure in the congregation in Jerusalem, then, but also a preacher to the dispersed Jews and Christians. His letter, which was written in Greek (like the rest of the New Testament), was no doubt meant for the dispersed Christians, especially those of Jewish descent. Jude saw that there were false teachers who posed a great danger to the church. Therefore he felt the need to sound a warning against their false prophecy.

Strange language. The Letter of Jude is not popular in our time. It just doesn't fit in with contemporary thinking.

What sharp language Jude uses! Just as in II Peter, we find crass expressions used to combat the false teachers. In our squeamish age, which wants nothing to do with norms or absolute statements, the Letter of Jude is completely unacceptable. It is simply assumed that there is no place for strong language in Christian circles. Jude's approach is cut of place in our modern era, for now all men are brothers.

In other respects, however, Jude is strikingly modern. Some of his expressions sound almost like the titles of paintings done by expressionists, surrealists and magic realists. He speaks of "waterless clouds, carried along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars for whom the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved for ever" (vs. 12-13).⁷ A [75] painting of a spooky landscape in which death and barrenness are dominant should speak to us today.

The reason Jude is not popular today is not that his letter is too difficult to be understood; the fact of the matter is that people *refuse* to accept his message. Jude does not speak in general terms but points to a specific doctrine as a deadly danger. That's just the sort of thing people don't want to hear.

⁷ Peter uses similar language: "These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm; for them the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved" (II Pet. 2:17). Thus, Jude and II Peter could well be illustrated by way of the works of Heronymus Bosch, A. C. Willink, Pablo Picasso, and other artists who have given expression to the oppressive anxiety of the Middle Ages and our own time in their work.

It is unfortunate that so many artists never go beyond a depiction of man's bleak, oppressive, gloomy situation, his vague and ominous destiny. It almost appears as though they want man to be reconciled to the truly hellish atmosphere in which he lives. But the Bible points to the origin of all that barrenness and helps us *flee* from it. Next time you see an exhibition of existentialist art, think about the Letter of Jude.

2. The Struggle against the False Gospel of Self-redemption

Seeds of dissension. Jude recognized the threat to the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. People had infiltrated the church to preach a "theology of liberation," a theology that clashes with the gospel of the grace of God and rebels against our only Ruler and Lord, Jesus Christ (vs. 3-4).

These people recognized the authority of Christ at first but later grew dissatisfied and began to sow seeds of dissension against the existing (Roman) regime (see vs. 8). They rejected authority and scorned the "glorious ones," that is, those who ruled as government officials.

In verse 8 we also discover how the people are misled: the false teachers are full of dreams. Precisely because Jude quotes Jewish apocalypses *against* these false ^[76] teachers, we can be sure that they made use of such resistance propaganda to stimulate Jewish rebellion among the members of the church. They even kept this up during the love feasts (vs. 12). What Jude was talking about, then, was social criticism under a "Christian" flag, a social criticism that held a Utopia before the people as something to strive for (vs. 16).

A revolutionary outlook. Jude's letter, like all the other books of the New Testament, was written before the year 70. Earlier we saw that it bears considerable resemblance to II Peter. The letter is a concrete warning against the zealotry of the false prophets—the same kind of warning that we find so often in the New Testament (Matt. 7:15; 24:11, 24; II Thess. 2:9-12; II Pet. 2:1; I John 4:1; Rev. 13:14; 16:13-14).

Those who prophesied on behalf of the "Jewish Patriotic Front" traded in the gospel of grace for a gospel of self-redemption. Thus Jude was not combatting some Gnostic heresy or other; he was opposing a revolutionary way of thinking that still enjoys a lot of support in our days. This revolutionary outlook is castigated throughout the New Testament, especially in the "Catholic letters" (I Peter—Jude) and the book of Revelation.

The same fate. Jesus is the Lord of lords. The governmental authorities serve Him. Hence revolutionaries will suffer the same fate as the rebels in the wilderness who refused to listen to the minority report of Joshua and Caleb. Their fate will be the fate of the fallen angels, of Sodom and Gomorrah, of Cain, Balaam and rebellious Korah.

Salvation will not come to us down the path of self-redemption. Any materialist or Utopian revolution will be judged and condemned. "See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands [i.e. armies] of his holy ones to ^[77] judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly . . ." (vs. 14-15 NIV).

Jude's letter must never become a forgotten chapter among us. Today "our common salvation" and "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (vs. 3) still stands diametrically opposed to the false gospel of self-redemption, the gospel that seeks to destroy created structures in order to replace them with a realm of perfection on earth.

3. Protect Yourself and Be Merciful

Scoffers and schismatics. False prophecy did not appear on the scene unexpectedly. The apostles had warned against it in advance. Because things had now gone so far, the Christians had to take a stand.

Precisely because he wants to point out the danger, Jude uses strong language. The believers must stay far away from scoffers and schismatics. Jude's words served to show the believers that false prophecy is not unnatural or unexpected.

No accommodation. His words were also useful for those who stood between the two sides. Jude did more than curse: he also called for mercy toward those who had been misled. If possible they were to be plucked as burning brands from the fire.

Think about this carefully: Jude's letter, which is simply unacceptable to so many people today, calls for mercy! To point out the dangers is to act *mercifully*. Christians must learn to live "in fear." They must not seek "solidarity" with people who are far gone by

accommodating themselves to them or letting themselves be influenced by them.

[78] Many an evangelism project has run aground by showing the wrong kind of mercy, by failing to hate that which is stained with sin. We can only be a salting salt if we maintain the full apostolic tradition, the faith that was handed on to us—whatever objections we may have. God has the power, through Christ, to keep us from stumbling.

[79] Revelation

1. The Political Approach

An almanac of world history? The manner in which the book of Revelation has been interpreted throughout the ages is reminiscent of how modern art is viewed: one interpreter finds this, and the other finds that. For some people, the Revelation to John is an almanac of world history from which we are able to squeeze all sorts of predictions about the future.

During the second world war, an interesting "discovery" was made about the number 666, which is the number of the beast (13:18). If we assign the letter A a value of 100, make B = 101, C = 102, D = 103, and so forth, we can identify the beast as follows: H = 107, I = 108, T = 119, L = 111, E = 104, R = 117. When we add these letters up, we see that 666 — *Hitler*.

The number 666 has also been equated with the name of this or that pope. It has even been identified with such names as Calvin and William of Orange. More recently, the flying angel with the "eternal gospel" (14:6) has been identified with Christian radio broadcasting, the locusts of ^[80] chapter 9 with modern weapons, and the star called Wormwood (8:11) with bombs that make water radioactive.

An almanac of church history? From the explanatory notes in the "Statenvertaling," an influential Dutch translation of the Bible dating from the seventeenth century, we see that the visions in the book of Revelation have also been identified with events in church history. When we read about water changing into blood (16:3ff), we are to think of Luther's time, when many lands broke with the Roman Antichrist, which led to the shedding of much blood, "blood that is still being shed daily."

At the time the "Statenvertaling" notes were written, the Thirty Years' War was going on in Germany while in the Netherlands the Eighty Years' War was not yet at an end. These background events came to expression in the interpretation of the book of Revelation. The explanatory notes also offered another interpretation: changing water into blood could be a reference to Roman Catholic councils—especially the Council of Trent, where a false, idolatrous doctrine was officially sanctioned, a doctrine fatal to those who believed it.

Judgment on Rome? Today the dominant view is that John received the visions recorded in the book of Revelation around the year 95 and communicated them to the churches in the province of Asia to strengthen them at a time when the emperor Domitian unleashed persecution against those who refused to join in the obligatory emperor worship. The Revelation to John would then be a proclamation of judgment on Rome.

Now, Rome was never destroyed in the same way that "Babylon" (which would then be a symbolic name for Rome) is destroyed in the visions of John. This has led some interpreters to conclude that John made a mistake, ^[81] although they hasten to assure us that the mistake in itself is not so serious. After all, what John sketches is a constant danger, especially in our time of mammoth organizations and great empires. The threat of a single government seizing control of the entire world is always with us.

Others maintain that John was sounding a warning about a great world empire at the end of time and was only using Rome as an example. In that case, John did not make a mistake.

A revelation of Jesus Christ. These two interpretations agree in one important respect: Revelation sketches a *political* threat, the threat of a world empire, even if that empire is sketched in religious terms. The empire is either Rome or some empire like Rome during the "end time."

Given these and other interpretations, you might well wonder whether the words we read at the beginning of Revelation are indeed true: "Happy the man who reads this prophecy, and happy those who listen to him, if they treasure all that it says" (1:3 JB). Wouldn't it be more accurate to say that we lose our bearings when we read such a difficult book?

We must not forget that the book we are studying is presented to us as a "revelation of *Jesus Christ*" (1:1). Therefore we may not shrug our shoulders and say, "Let the theologians figure it out." Remember that you, too, are anointed with the Spirit, and that theologians are all too apt to imitate each other and fall prey to intellectual fads. It is *your* task to immerse yourself in this book, trusting from the outset that God's Word never leads us into a land of twilight or darkness.

[82] 2. The Covenantal Approach

The role of the Roman empire. The current view of the Revelation to John (which is not yet two centuries old as a mature interpretation) presupposes that the last book of the Bible pronounces judgment on imperial Rome. The Roman emperor Domitian, it is argued, had banished John to the barren island of Patmos.

The pillars on which this interpretation rests are far from unshakable. In the first place, if Revelation were a book of glowing hatred toward Rome, it would be somewhat out of place within the New Testament, which favors loyalty to the authorities (see Rom. 13:1 ff; Titus 3:1; I Pet. 2:13ff). Would the same apostle who informs us that Pilate derived his authority from above sketch the Roman government as the red beast?

Secondly, if Revelation is a polemic against Rome, the ancient church did not learn the intended lesson, for the early church fathers failed to follow its lead. Melito of Sardis—Sardis was one of the seven churches addressed in the book of Revelation—directed an "apologia" to the emperor around the year 170 in which he pleaded for peaceful coexistence between the church and the Roman authorities.

Thirdly, the alleged worldwide persecution of the Christians by Domitian can well be doubted on historical grounds. Domitian was a highly suspicious tyrant who had good reason to fear plots of all sorts. He liquidated anyone he distrusted. When he was murdered, the *entire* Roman empire breathed a sigh of relief—not just the Christians. His name was removed from the imperial temple at Ephesus, and statues of him were destroyed.

Fourthly, it has never been proven that the book of Revelation stems from the year 95. This date goes back to a statement made by the church father Irenaeus, who was [83] sometimes completely mistaken in such matters. We must examine the *content* of the book for clues as to when it was written.

Covenant wrath. When we take a careful look at the content, we cannot help but recognize that the book of Revelation speaks Biblical, covenantal language. Although the Old Testament is not quoted directly, there are many allusions to it. These allusions are not mere echoes, for Revelation goes back to the characteristic element in the Old Testament, namely, God's sure covenant promises as well as His covenant threats.

In Revelation we read the familiar statement that the Lord wishes to be the God of His people (21:3; see also Gen. 17:7; Ex. 6:6; 29:45; Lev. 26:11-12; Deut. 29:13; Is. 7:14; Jer. 7:23; Ezek. 11:20). We find references to the plagues of hunger, the sword and pestilence—all *covenant judgments*! When we read about the sevenfold plagues of the trumpets and the bowls, we are really reading about the sevenfold covenant wrath mentioned in Leviticus 26. Thus the book of Revelation continues the line begun in the law and the prophets.

The style of the Great King. This is also apparent from other features of the book. When we dealt with Deuteronomy, we noted that the Lord speaks in the style of a great king. This style is present throughout the Old Testament. (Think of the "royal psalms.") In Revelation we find the same style: the *King of kings* speaks and acts like a great king and is addressed as such (see, for example, 11:15ff; 12:10; 17:14; 19:11ff).

Wasn't Yahweh first and foremost King over *His own people*? Who, then, would be the object of His covenant wrath? Wouldn't it be His own people, apostate Israel?

There's no getting away from this troublesome question: How can the book of Revelation

draw constantly on terms ^[84] derived from the covenant relationship between Yahweh and His people if His wrath is really directed against Rome? Rome, after all, is not included in the covenant.

Therefore we must conclude that the book of Revelation speaks in the spirit of Moses and the prophets (see the song of Moses in Deut. 32). The issue is not Rome but *the church*—the Christian churches (which were subject to the dangers of apostasy) and the "Jewish church" (which is spoken of in Revelation as the "synagogue of Satan").

Prophecy against Jerusalem. When we realize this, we see that Jesus' own prophecy against Jerusalem is carried further in the book of Revelation. (Compare Luke 23:30-1, which quotes from Hosea 10:8, with Revelation 6:16-17; and Matthew 24:15-16 and 23:35 with Revelation 17:6, 16 and 18:4, 24.) In the book of Revelation, Jesus continues His denunciation of the city of blood that kills the prophets, the city that has sunk below the level of Sodom and Egypt. (Compare Revelation 18:24 and 11:8 with Matthew 21:34ff; 23:37; and 11:20ff.) If Jerusalem has sunk below the level of such cities as Sodom, Tyre, Sidon, and Nineveh (Luke 10:12ff; 11:32), couldn't it be spoken of as "Babylon"? Wasn't Jerusalem guilty of murdering the witnesses of the Great King?

The Revelation to John must not be read as a strange book alien to the rest of the Bible. We must learn to view it as an *apocalypse*, a genuine *revelation*. The Lord does not *hide* things from those who revere the Scriptures and study them diligently; instead He *reveals* His purposes to them.

Swimming against the stream. The difficulty is not in the book of Revelation itself but in us. I have already pointed out that the Bible does not speak about human affairs in general but about God's dealings with His *covenant people*. (See Isaiah 24-27, the book of Habakkuk, and the ^[85] Gospel according to John.) This statement also applies to the last book of the Bible.

Unfortunately, anyone seeking to interpret the book of Revelation on such a basis is swimming against the stream, for the people of our time like to hear about universal atonement and listen eagerly to news about global catastrophes. Yet, they don't care to hear about covenant wrath and God's judgment on the unfaithful church.

3. Neither World History Nor Roman History

Dark shadows. The view that the book of Revelation presents us with a political calendar or that it runs back and forth through world history is accepted by many interpreters as the basis for further work. Such a view speaks to the people of our time. Contemporary journalists and literary figures like to use "eschatological" language; they like to speak of "Armageddon" and "bowls of wrath" and "the beast." It is widely believed that our civilization is on the decline. The book of Revelation is then read as fitting into this picture because of the dark shadows it casts.

Revelation is placed on the library shelves alongside all the other "apocalyptic" writings. As a result, people lose sight of the uniqueness of this book; they fail to recognize that it speaks the language of the covenant. Their faces are covered with a "veil" when they read Revelation (see II Cor. 3:14-16). They do their best to come up with ingenious answers to the riddles it seems to pose—hence the many bizarre interpretations. (I once came across a French book in which I read that the two witnesses of Revelation 11 are Hitler and Mussolini!)

^[86] *Victory through Christ.* We must break with the notion that the last book of the Bible offers political perspectives on the fall of the Roman empire and of the anti-Christian world state in general. Revelation does use some of the language and imagery of the apocalypses of the Jewish Zealots—but in such a way as to oppose the Jewish nationalism that sings: "We shall overcome." Revelation shows us that we will overcome *only* through Jesus Christ. If the Jews viewed the Passover as the feast that guaranteed their national liberation, Revelation makes it clear that Christ fulfilled the Passover through His self-sacrifice. This book shows us how the Passover Lamb turns against unbelieving Israel.

Revelation does talk about objects found in the synagogue—lampstands, trumpets, scrolls, palm branches, an incense shovel (censer)—but the context in which they find their meaning is the Messiah's coming in justice to deal with the holy city and the people of the promised land. Thus Revelation is an apocalypse that directly opposes any nationalistic Jewish apocalypticism.

Once we let go of the view that the book of Revelation was written in the year 95 during the reign of Domitian and recognize that it was written *before* the year 70, we create room for an appreciation of the book's main thrust. Revelation does not put prophetic language to brand-new uses; it retains the emphases of the Old Testament prophets while speaking out against the covenant people—not against Rome. It carries forward the line of thought developed in the prophets and in Jesus' prophetic address recorded in Matthew 24. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem!"

The church and Roman rule. As we already saw, the church of the first few centuries rejected opposition to the authority of the Romans. Instead the church *prayed* for the Roman rulers. We should not allow ourselves to be led astray by movies that present caricatures of Roman rule ^[87] and stress the tyrannical methods of certain emperors.

The early church did not view the Roman emperor as the Antichrist. Neither should we fall into the trap of supposing that the book of Revelation represents a theology of revolution or liberation. It is the Lamb who speaks to us in this book—and the subject is *covenant wrath*.

4. Purpose and Content

The prospect of apostasy. On the small island of Patmos, not far from the coast of Asia Minor, John received visions and heard messages. Apparently the seven churches of the area had sent a deputation to the apostle, who was in exile because he "bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ" (1:2). Since John prophesied against Jerusalem, it follows that the destruction of Israel's center in the year 70 had not yet taken place.

Various congregations were suffering on account of the "synagogue of satan." The Jews in Ephesus and other cities formed a large proportion of the population and were very well organized in the area of trade and commerce. Thus they had the means to establish boycotts of Jews and "God-fearing" Gentiles who had become Christians.⁸

^[88] This left many congregations facing the prospect of apostasy on the part of their own members. There were some congregations that resisted (Smyrna, Philadelphia), but others slept or became lukewarm (Sardis, Laodicea). In some churches, prophets of compromise appeared (Pergamum, Thyatira). The problems that formed the background of such letters as Hebrews, I John, II Peter, and Jude were also present in the churches of Asia Minor.

Lampstands as symbols. Jesus Christ appeared to John in a vision as King (ch. 1). It is striking that He was surrounded by lampstands. This detail of John's vision is rich in meaning, for the lampstand symbolized the temple and Judaism, which was to be a light to the nations.

The risen Savior declared that the lampstands now symbolized the seven Christian churches. This shows us how Christ regarded His churches and addressed them. He took the lampstand motif away from the synagogue and gave it to the church. But this covenantal transfer was not unconditional. The lampstand could also be taken away from the churches.

⁸ According to some calculations, the Jews formed one seventh of the population of the Roman empire. In addition to the half million Jews in Palestine, there were some six million of them in other countries. The later synagogue at Sardis was a large building even by today's standards: 19 meters wide and 80 meters long. The feasts of the Jewish guild members were no doubt held there. In the synagogue at Alexandria (Egypt), men of the same trade sat together in groups during the services. Apparently the Jews controlled a substantial proportion of the commerce and also had a lot of political influence.

Israel's example. The conditional character of the covenant is emphasized in the seven messages: "If you do not repent . . ." The same theme comes through in the visions—in the form of the refusal to repent. The example of Israel stands as a warning to the churches (Rom. 11:21; I Cor. 10:1-12).

In the first of the visions, John sees God's throne. The Lamb is seated on the throne and receives the right to open ^[89] the book of life. The breaking of the seals is accompanied by judgment, as John is shown covenant wrath.

Between the visions of judgment, there are comforting visions in which it is made clear that the Lord still preserves a "remnant" of Israel (the 144,000), even though Israel's judgment is near. Seven trumpets announce the judgment on the hardening of hearts.

These visions should be viewed as *illustrations* of the messages. The churches were shown that Jerusalem, their tormenter, was about to be judged and punished.

In the image of satan. In chapter 10 a new section begins. John receives a vision in which he is called again to prophesy. He hears about two witnesses who were killed in "the great city" by "the beast that ascends from the bottomless pit." This is developed in more detail later.

What motivates this "beast"? In chapter 12 we are shown that satan is his "father," that the beast bears his image and likeness. Satan lashes out against the seed of the woman. That's why he calls forth this beast, which is in turn helped by another beast—the false prophet. In Scripture, false prophecy appears only within the covenant context. We must regard these two beasts as devils, colleagues of the great serpent satan.

The purpose of the visions. In this context we must look for a moment at the seven messages. There we find two references to the synagogue of satan (2:9; 3:9). We also read about the throne of satan (2:13), the deep things of satan (vs. 24), and the devil's activities (vs. 10). This shows us once more that the visions clarify and illustrate the messages.

The woman (the church) has seed or offspring (12:17). There is also the seed of the serpent, which opposes the seed of the woman (see Matt. 3:7; 12:34; 23:33). What Revelation 11-13 tells us, then, is already familiar from the ^[90] "gospels" and the seven messages. The only major difference is that the material now comes to us in the form of visions.

Thanksgiving for judgment. What happens to the great city in which the beast appears? The Spiritual, typological name *Sodom and Egypt* is supplemented by another name—*Babylon* (14:8; 17:5). But this does not mean that the author of Revelation is turning to a new subject. When he speaks of "Babylon," he means Jerusalem, the city in which there are "abominations" to be found (see Ezek. 8-9). The church gives thanks for the judgment on Jerusalem (16:7).

When the seven bowls of wrath are poured out, we are shown in visionary form how the sevenfold wrath of the covenant will be administered. The "bowls of wrath," like the 10 trumpets, remind us of the plagues that struck Egypt.

Parallels. The book of Revelation presents us with two callings of John. The following chart illustrates the parallels that follow upon them.

Revelation 1-9	Revelation 10-16
1:9-20 A revelation of the glory of the Great King Jesus Christ. First calling.	10:1-11 A revelation of the glory of the Great King's messenger. Second calling.
2:1—3:22 Messages from the Great King to the seven churches.	11:1-14 A message from the Great King's messenger to John.
4:1-11 Liturgy before God's throne.	11:15-19 Liturgy before God's throne.
5:1-14 Accession to the throne by the Lamb. Liturgy of praise.	12:1-12 Accession to the throne by the male child. Satan banished from heaven. Liturgy of praise.
[91] 6:1-17 Wrath of the Lamb. Visions of judgment (seals).	12:13—13:18 Wrath of the dragon. Accession to the throne by the Beast.
7:1-17 The ones who are sealed, and their liturgy before God's throne. Their deliverance from the great tribulation.	14:1-20 The ones who are sealed, and their liturgy before God's throne. Voices and visions about the coming judgment of Babylon.
8:1-5 Heavenly liturgy before the "Egyptian" judgments.	15:1-8 Heavenly liturgy before the "Egyptian" judgments.
8:6—9:21 "Egyptian" judgments (trumpets).	16:1-21 "Egyptian" judgments (bowls).

The next chapters of Revelation deal with "Babylon" and the New Jerusalem. They also touch on the return of Christ, the exaltation of the church, the doom of Satan and his henchmen, and the final judgment.

A perpetual warning. This is what makes the book of Revelation so appealing. As the great, adulterous, defiled city falls, the churches should look to her fate as a perpetual warning.

The New Jerusalem that is above (Gal. 4:26) descends to earth, but those who wish to enter the gates of this city must break with the Jerusalem of the present (Gal. 4:25).

Come out of her, my people,
lest you take part in her sins,
lest you share in her plagues;
for her sins are heaped high as heaven,
and God has remembered her iniquities (18:4-5).

[92] *Contemporary relevance.* It hardly needs to be said that Revelation has a clear message for our time, a time which loves to erase boundaries. Let this book help you understand the *covenantal* language of the other books of the Bible, which all find their center in Christ the Lamb. Revelation illustrates once more that the Bible does not just deal with humanity in general; it deals with *the church*.

Don't let the contemporary relevance of the book of Revelation escape you. Don't shrug your shoulders and say to yourself that this book is really about the wickedness of the ancient Romans, or that it deals with a world state and an antichrist that will appear on the scene at some vague, faraway future date.⁹

[93] 5. The Priest-King Speaks to His Churches

Seven messages. On a certain Sunday, the apostle John on Patmos saw Jesus Christ in royal majesty. Yet Christ was clothed as a priest and appeared in temple-like surroundings (trumpet, lampstands). The risen Savior dictated to John some messages for the seven churches in Asia Minor. The "angels" or "messengers" sent to John on Patmos are supposed to have gone to the various churches with copies of the Revelation to John.

Each of the seven messages was composed according to a certain inner order. The beginning mentions a certain *title* of Jesus that occurs in the vision in which John was called: "The words of" Here we recognize the style of the Great King. Then follows a *characterization* of the church to which the letter is addressed: "I know" This leads to some *encouragement* or some words of *reproof*. In the case of reproof, the opening words are usually: "But I have this against you" The message concludes with an *appeal* ("He who has an ear . . .") and a *promise*. The promises, which come first in the last four messages, point ahead to images in the visions that come later in the book of Revelation—the tree of life, the book of life, the second death, the throne of God, and so forth.

The Nicolaitans. When you read through these passages you can't help but notice what a difficult time the churches [94] had because of the "Nicolaitans." You also read that the synagogue is to be regarded as the synagogue of *satan*. The Jews in Asia Minor had a great deal of influence through guilds and through their political and financial standing. They did not make it easy for the Christians, many of whom had been recruited from the ranks of the Jews and the "God-fearing" Gentiles who attended the synagogue.

Apparently the Nicolaitan sect favored a *compromise* between the church and the synagogue. To understand the rest of the book of Revelation, it is important to remember the threat posed by this anti-church and its fifth column. You will then grasp the connection

⁹ The idea that the Revelation to John is concerned first and foremost with the church has been around for centuries, even though it is not popular. During the Middle-Ages, some people regarded the pope as "the Antichrist." Dante, who did not reject the papacy as such, addressed the following words to Pope Nicholas III, who was pope from 1277 to 1280: "Of such as you was the Evangelist's vision / when he saw She who Sits upon the Waters / locked with the Kings of earth in fornication" (*Inferno*, Canto 19, Ciardi translation; see Rev. 17:1-2, 9).

In the Reformation era, it was customary to refer to the temporal and spiritual power of Rome in the language of the beast, the false prophet and the harlot. The Scottish Confession of 1560 speaks of the false church as the "filthy synagogue" and "that horrible harlot, the Church (Kirk) malignant." Article 29 of the Belgic Confession refers to Revelation 2:9; 3:9; and chapter 17. Although the interpretation current during the Reformation era did not pay enough attention to the original purpose of the book of Revelation, it did grasp the main thrust of the final Bible book better than the later interpretation that identifies the harlot and the city with imperial Rome or with some state and society in the future.

In the entryway to a number of gothic churches (e.g. the Notre Dames of Paris and Reims and the cathedral in Strasbourg), we find depictions of the defeated and blinded *synagogue* and the shining *ekklesia* (church). The idea this conveys is that the (papal) church can *never* become a synagogue of *satan*. Today such thinking, which was denied by the Reformers, is again dominant. Its widespread acceptance is one of the factors hindering the application of the book of Revelation to our time. We are told that *all* churches are part of the true church.

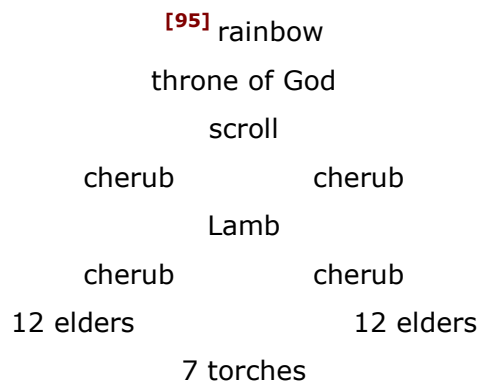
between the so-called letters and the visions that follow.

A preview. Jesus comforts and encourages His churches by giving them a "slide show," an advance peek at the covenant judgment that will strike Jerusalem because of its rejection of the Messiah. In fact, the visions can be viewed as an explanation of the "letters" and a commentary on them.

When we realize this, we see that the Revelation to John is not a dark and mysterious book that takes up bizarre themes but a rich book that contains the same message as such beloved favorites as Matthew, Luke, Acts, John, and Hebrews. "Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp, and bear the abuse he endured" (Heb. 13:13). Come out of her, My people! Leave the synagogue, the apostate church!

6. The Lamb of God

A heavenly worship service. Chapters 4 and 5 can be clarified by means of the following diagram:



John sees a heavenly worship service around the throne of God. The lightning flashes issuing from the throne remind us of the events at Mount Sinai. The 24 elders form the throne council. The angels function as ruling priests (see I Chron. 24-25). God is feared in the council of His holy ones.

The "animals" or "living creatures" are cherubs. We encountered cherubs elsewhere in the Bible—in Genesis 3, in the description of the ark of the covenant, and in the calling of Ezekiel. These cherubs have some features in common with the seraphs that appeared at the time of Isaiah's calling (Is. 6). They *guard* God's throne, and at the same time they serve as His *coat of arms*, for their formidable appearance says something about Him.¹⁰ These creatures and elders stand in a liturgical relationship to each other; that is to say, they serve each other.

[96] *The scroll.* The One who is seated on the throne has a scroll in His hand. This scroll is generally viewed as the book of God's counsel. Because Revelation speaks repeatedly of the "book of life" (3:5), we should also regard it as a list of the names of the elect.

¹⁰ Since the time of the church fathers, these "elders" have been seen as representatives of the church. Hence the King James Bible has them saying: "Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed *us* . . . and hast made *us* unto our God kings and priests" (5:9-10). In newer translations, the pronoun *us* is replaced by *them*. The old reading fits in well with a hierarchical climate and the worship of the saints. The "animals" are often mistakenly regarded as representatives of the creation. Since the time of Irenaeus, the four creatures have also been interpreted as symbolizing the four gospel writers. The one with the face of a man is Matthew, in whose "gospel" Jesus often refers to Himself as the "Son of man." The lion is Mark, who wrote a great deal about what the Lord did. The ox is Luke, who depicted Christ as the sacrifice and Priest. The eagle is John, who soars high in his thoughts and writing. In the tympanum of many a Gothic cathedral (e.g. Chartres), these four flank Christ in glory seated in a mandorla, while the "elders" are placed along the arch. In small medieval churches, these four creatures sometimes appear in the ceiling of the chancel on frescoes above the altar (e.g. in Selligen and Anlo, which are located respectively in the Dutch provinces of Groningen and Drenthe, and in Büren and Rübi, which are both near the Swiss city of Berne).

No one can open this book; there is not a creature anywhere worthy to do so. Then a Lamb whose throat has been slit steps forward and takes the scroll, which becomes "the book of life of *the Lamb*" (13:8; 17:8).

Jesus Christ is truly man (the lion of Judah, the Root of David), a righteous man allowed to get by the cherubs guarding God's throne. He is also truly God, bearing the seven Spirits! This Lamb of God fulfills the theme of Moses' Torah, i.e. the church and the royal priesthood (Ex. 19:6; Rev. 5:9-10).

Your name is recorded in the book of life—not as a number but as a name of an *office-bearer* with a great calling ahead of him! Salvation is not a haven for tired souls; rather, it is a realization of the meaning of our existence as image-bearers of God.

[97] *Martyrs under the altar.* The opening of the seals shows us how the trio of hunger, the sword and pestilence, with which we are already familiar from Old Testament prophecies, springs into action (see Jer. 14-15; Ezek. 4-6, 14). We are shown wars, famine and disease taking their toll. Horses like the ones we read about in Zechariah 6 are sent out.

The rider on the white horse is not Christ Himself, who already appears in this vision as the Lamb, nor is it the gospel. The rider is sent out to make war, which is God's way of bringing judgment. He rides forth with the red horse of revolution and the pale horse of famine and pestilence.

The fifth seal reveals the driving force behind these judgments. The martyrs under the altar of incense in heaven cry out to be avenged. It is at this altar that the prayers of the saints are received.

The city of blood. When we compare Revelation 6:10; 16:6; 17:6; and 18:24 with Matthew 23:33; 24:6-14; 27:25; Luke 18:8; 21:22; and 23:28ff, we see clearly that the last book of the Bible pronounces judgment on the city of blood that kills the prophets. The wrath of the Lamb is manifested (6:16; see also Luke 3:7).

John the Baptist had pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God. His disciple now sees Jesus as the Lamb who takes peace away from the land (6:4; see also Luke 2:14) and pours out the wrath to come because Israel did not do what is necessary in order to achieve peace (Luke 19:42-4).

The Feast of Tabernacles. The great question that torments John is: "Has God rejected his people?" (Rom. 11:1). A double vision of comfort gives him his answer. He is shown that 144,000 from *Israel* are among those who bear the seal (see Ezek. 9). John hears the number and sees the throng—an innumerable host bearing the palm [98] branches of the final feast of the year—the Feast of Tabernacles.

Here we are shown again what we already learned from the "gospels," namely, that the Passover, through the sacrifice of the Lamb, culminates in the Feast of Tabernacles. Those who persevere to the consummation will be saved (Joel 2:32; Matt. 24:13; Acts 2:40).

Plagues reminiscent of Egypt. It is important to read such prophecy within a historical framework: the Jewish Christians are promised that they will be saved, despite all the catastrophes that strike Jerusalem and Israel. This prophecy, which has already been fulfilled, should be of great comfort to us since we, too, live in a time when judgment is drawing near. Fortunately, the church still has firm promises to cling to.

From the seventh seal come the seven trumpets. (The trumpet is a temple instrument, but it is also used to signal judgment.) Like the bowls of chapter 16, the trumpets inaugurate plagues reminiscent of the ones that struck Egypt. This should not surprise us, for we are told that the Jerusalem below has become like "Egypt" (11:8). Like the Israelites in Egypt, those who bear the seal are protected from harm (9:4; see also 7:3).

A warning to us. We do the book of Revelation an injustice when we seek speculative fulfillments of its words in today's events and assume that John was talking about nuclear weapons and the destruction of the environment through pollution. In the last book of the Bible, Jesus Christ is continuing the line of thought begun in Matthew 24: judgment *begins*

with the house of God, with the sevenfold wrath of the covenant (see Lev. 26:18ff).

This is indeed a serious matter for our own time. What happened so many centuries ago should be an example to us, warning us not to make the same mistake. "Behold, the Lamb of God!" This appeal is not to be taken lightly!

[99] *Why has the LORD dealt thus with this great city? (Jer. 22:8).*

7. Jerusalem and the Church

Sodom and Egypt. A new section of the book of Revelation begins with chapter 10. John is again called to prophesy. Like Ezekiel, he is instructed to eat a scroll (Ezek. 2:9ff). What he now hears and sees is a continuation of his earlier prophecy. In the new disclosures, the earlier prophecies are deepened and clarified.

Chapter 11 makes it clear that Jerusalem is central to these prophecies. The judgments are not universal world judgments but judgments striking the city that has forsaken the covenant with the Lord and murdered the witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jerusalem has become Sodom and Egypt.

The "beast." John was to see even more in connection with this metropolis, this city of the Great King, this "great city" also referred to as "Babylon." But the most horrible thing of all, which he is shown first, is the appearance of the "beast" from Jerusalem's bottomless pit (11:7-8).

As you read on, don't forget that the beast appears within the framework of the life of the "church"! The beast is not a universal political phenomenon. He makes the "synagogue of satan" his bridgehead.

Chapters 12 and 13 present further details about this wild animal. First of all, we see satan, the old serpent from Paradise, standing over against the woman, the church of the Lord. He does not succeed in taking away her child, Jesus. Through Christ's victory, satan's power is reduced and he is cast out of heaven. He is no longer allowed to slander those whom Christ has redeemed. This makes him [100] even more insane with rage in his struggle against the seed of the woman.

False prophecy. To make his persecution of the church more intense, satan summons a beast out of the sea, a beast that looks just like him and willfully joins in his plans. This beast is assisted by another one that appears on land—the beast of false prophecy.

It is significant that the first beast appears in Jerusalem. According to the Old Testament, prophecy is possible only within a covenant context. Therefore false prophecy, which always seeks to imitate true prophecy, is an indication of deformation within the church. Remember that Jesus foretold the coming of the false messiahs and false prophets. The basic message is obvious.

Messianic dreams. The devil calls for the help of two other devils. Soon we will see how completely the "great city" is in their power. Through false prophecy, they arouse messianic dreams in the "synagogue of satan," the congregation of the seed of the serpent, of those who are in the devil's grip. Because of God's Immanuel promise, the Jews believed firmly that Jerusalem would hold out in the struggle against Rome.

Yet Jerusalem and the surrounding area had rejected the Christ and persecuted the Christians, who then sought their strength with Christ and other believers in heaven, in the heavenly Jerusalem (13:6-7, 16ff). The Jewish Christians in Asia Minor were painfully aware of the consequences of loyalty to the Christian church—economic boycotts and exclusion from the guilds.

Satanic inspiration. When we consider all this, we must conclude that there is no justification for applying Revelation 13 to some future antichrist. This chapter contains a

concrete message addressed to the first Christian ^[101] readers. Political interpretations that turn the first beast into a Roman emperor or some other tyrant reminiscent of Nero must also be avoided. Revelation 13 is not a prophecy about a dictator in the "end time."

What this chapter points to is how satan and his hosts seek to mislead God's people, using something that resembles the church, namely, the synagogue. Today's Christians must be aware that the danger of satanic inspiration within the church is always at hand. We must be on guard.

Gathered around the Lamb. To comfort the congregation, John is allowed to show how the church is gathered on Mount Zion around the Lamb (14:1-5) and may stand on the banks of the sea of glass (15:1-4). There God's people sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb (see Ex. 15 and Deut. 32) as *victors* over the beast, despite the beast's apparent triumph over them (15:2; 13:7).

John is shown the basis of the victory: *the Lord* will avenge the blood of His church and the indignities heaped upon her by His apostate people. For modern man, it is a horrible thought that the church prays for vengeance. The modern world has very definite ideas about God and what He is—or should be—like. It's almost as though it wishes to dress Him in a Santa Claus suit.

Prayers for vengeance. Our attitude toward John's apocalyptic visions of judgment will hinge on the attitude we take toward the Old Testament. In the song of Moses, the cry of vengeance is a promise: "Vengeance is mine, and recompense," says the Lord. Moses adds, "He avenges the blood of his servants" (Deut. 32:35, 43). Think of all the psalms that go back to this promise and call for vengeance. Revelation shows us repeatedly how God's judgments are accompanied by the prayers of the church, that is, prayers for vengeance presented in heaven in a liturgical manner (6:10; 8:3ff; 16:7).

^[102] Revelation shows us how heaven *gives thanks* when the Lord carries out His judgments (16:7; 18:20; 19:1-2). When Jerusalem turns into an Egypt and a Babylon, it must suffer the judgment of Egypt and Babylon. Believing means accepting the offensive gospel. Chapter 16 shows us those unbounded "Egyptian" plagues that are now released. (See also chapters 8-9, which speak of a destruction limited to "one third.")

Seven mountains. We are used to hearing the apostate covenant people called a "harlot" in the Old Testament (Jer. 2; Ezek. 16 and 23; Hos. 2). This characterization also appears in the book of Revelation, which is a further indication that "Babylon" is not some universal *political* power (Rome or a future global empire) but a *covenantal* entity (i.e. the Jerusalem below, which sheds and drinks the blood of the prophets).

The seven mountains on which the woman is seated (17:9) have sometimes been identified with the seven hills on which the city of Rome was built. This identification must be rejected, for hills are not mountains. Moreover, there are more cities that claim to be built on seven hills.

We must remember that the number seven is repeatedly used in the Bible as a symbol. Thus we could better think of the seven mountains as a whole series of mountains piled one on top of the other. Jerusalem, we read in the Old Testament, "shall be established as the highest of the mountains" (Is. 2:2).

The definitive exodus. Josephus describes the fall of Jerusalem, which was a horrible event. In John's Apocalypse, we see the background of this event: the Lamb is engaged in battle, and the rider on the white horse smashes the troops of the beast (17:14; 19:11ff). Fallen is Babylon, the great city! Chapter 18 is like a great drama in that it contains three lamentations for the great city, the ^[103] city that chose as its father the one who was a murderer from the very beginning and did not dare stand in the truth (John 8:44).

What is the purpose of these prophetic film strips? The churches must be warned not to let go of what they have. Never go back to the house of bondage! The tone is the same as the tone of the fourth "gospel," where we read: "In the world you have tribulation [see also Rev. 17:14; 3:10; Matt. 24:21]; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John

16:33).

In the Gospel according to John, *the world* is a term referring to the Jews, the "synagogue of satan." The book of Revelation does not leave covenantal concerns behind to take up political questions instead. No, like the other books of the Bible, it is concerned with *the church*. The Lamb brings about the definitive exodus from Egypt, and the militant church believes in Christ as Victor.

Why has the Lord dealt thus with this great city? Because it forsook the covenant with the Lord, its God (Jer. 22:8-9).

8. The Day of the Lord

A firm guarantee. Prophetic language often ignores the great temporal distances between events. The book of Revelation speaks the language of prophecy and ties in Christ's coming in the destruction of Jerusalem with His final coming.

The connection between the two is not intended to deceive or confuse us. The purpose is to clarify a prophetic point, a point we tend to overlook: since the judgment on the city of the covenant represents a real *return* of Christ, it is also a firm guarantee of His final coming.

[104] While Jesus was still on earth, He declared: "You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes" (Matt. 10:23). He also told His disciples: "There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom" (Matt. 16:28). Now we realize what He meant.

Final judgment for satan. Because the one "coming" points to the other, the prophecy of the book of Revelation moves easily from the one to the other. The marriage supper of the Lamb is approaching. It contrasts sharply with the "great supper of God," which symbolizes the punishment of the beast, the false prophet, and their followers (19:7, 9, 17).

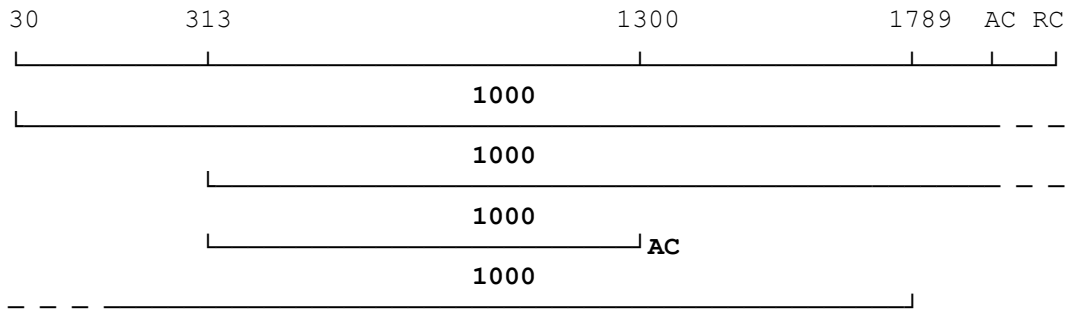
The time of final judgment comes for satan. The judgment is carried out in stages. In phase 1 he is cast out of heaven (12:7-8). Then comes phase 2, when he is bound. In phase 3 he is thrown into the lake of fire.

The binding of satan (phase 2) is said to last a thousand years (20:2). While he is bound, the righteous can rise from the dead and reign with Christ undisturbed.

The thousand-year period referred to in Revelation 20 is often called the "millennium." Because there are so many strange views of the millennium in circulation, I will review the main positions briefly.

Amillennialism. The addition of an "a" at the beginning of a word can have the effect of changing the word's meaning into its opposite. (Think of the word *ahistorical*.) Thus "amillennialism" is the view that there is no millennium in the literal sense. To be more specific, the thousand years of Revelation 20 are understood as a symbolic reference to our entire dispensation—or perhaps a reference to a period that is already past.

At the end of the millennium, which is simply our dispensation, the Antichrist will appear. The "thousand [105] years" began with Christ's ascension—or perhaps with the liberation of the oppressed church by the emperor Constantine in the year 313.



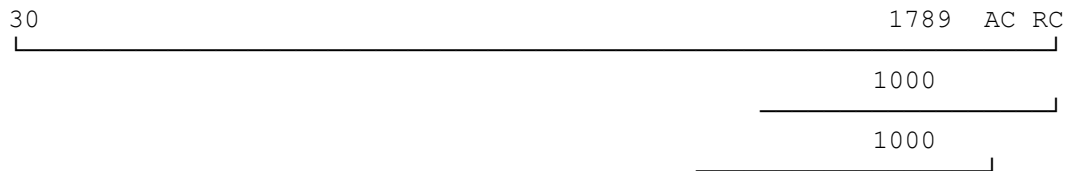
AC = Antichrist

RC = Return of Christ

Postmillennialism. Many Christians are convinced that Christ will return after (post) the millennium. The thousand-year period is then seen as the time of the church's blossoming. Some postmillennialists believe that the Antichrist will appear on the scene once the thousand years are over.

The postmillennialist position has its proponents within the orthodox camp. Its defenders criticize the amillennialists for maintaining that things are getting worse and worse. The amillennialists respond by pointing to two catastrophic world wars as evidence that the world is indeed going downhill rapidly.

There is a liberal version of the postmillennialist position according to which a better and better world is evolving. The advocates of the "social gospel" preach that the development toward higher forms is clearly visible in history.



[106] *Premillennialism.* Very popular today is the view that the millennium or thousand-year kingdom will be inaugurated by Christ's return. In other words, Christ's return comes *before* (pre)—not after. The defenders of this position are called premillennialists or Chiliasts. (The Greek word *chilioi* means *thousand*.)

Chiliasm circulates in many variations. Some Chiliasts maintain that there will be a seven-year period (the seventieth week of years referred to in Daniel 9) after the believers are taken up to heaven (the so-called Rapture) and before the beginning of the thousand-year kingdom. Halfway through this period, the Antichrist will unleash a campaign against the Jews, who by that time will have turned to the gospel and rebuilt the temple. This event will signal the beginning of the "Great Tribulation," which will end with Christ's return.

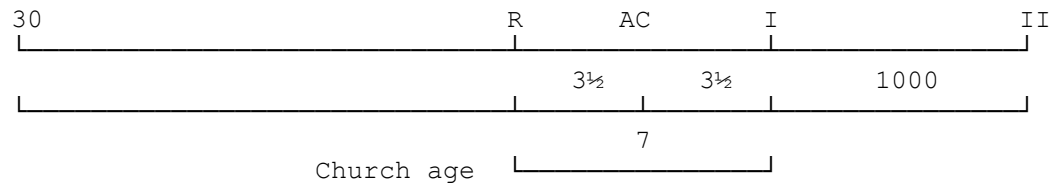
The Chiliasts believe that Christ will reign on earth for 1000 years. In this thousand-year period, all the "unfulfilled" promises to Israel will finally be fulfilled.¹¹ According to these

¹¹ Defenders of the Chiliast outlook presuppose that the Old Testament prophecies will be fulfilled *literally*—and in "material" terms. The Jews will return to Palestine, where they will be converted (in accordance with Romans 11:25-6). This event will inaugurate a very fruitful era: the entire world, with Jerusalem as its center (the residence of Jesus after His provisional return), will become Christian.

In this outlook, we find a desire to take God's promises seriously and to live in expectation of Christ's "day" (just as Paul did, for example). Yet, because the Chiliasts fail to see that the Old Testament promises will be fulfilled in the "new heaven" and "new earth"—also in "material" respects—they accept *Jewish* speculation about an "earthly" kingdom between the present order and the new order to come.

dispensationalists, the church will disappear from the scene before the so-called week of years, i.e. the seven-year period.

[107]



R = Rapture

I = First return of Christ, to inaugurate the millennium

II = Second return of Christ, to begin the final judgment

For many Christians, this eschatological program has become a shibboleth, a touchstone used to determine who the real believers are. But can such an eschatology be defended on Scriptural grounds? And what about amillennialism and postmillennialism?

A roaring lion. According to amillennialism, there is a period of history during which satan is bound. This allegorical interpretation of the thousand years as a period of church history, which was defended by Augustine in his later years, finds no support in Scripture. On the contrary: "The devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour" (I Pet. 5:8). He is not a vicious dog on a short leash.

The view that satan is bound can all too easily lead to a *triumphalist* attitude, as the history of the church in the Middle Ages reveals. It also opens the door to *complacency* on the part of the church. The "churches of gold," that is, the golden domes of the churches in Constantinople, were a symbolic declaration that the millennium had come. Thanks to Constantine the churches were finally free of persecution. Before long, however, there was little left of the yearning for "that day," the day when the church would be vindicated. The yearning for Christ's return is always stronger in times of persecution, when the churches are made of wood rather than gold.

[108] *No natural outcome.* As for postmillennialism, it sought to answer amillennialism by relying on the doctrine of evolution. There is a glorious period in store for the church, according to the postmillennialists.

This outlook, too, must be rejected. Even though God has promised us blessings in this dispensation, we are not to assume that a glorious kingdom of peace will be established on earth as the natural outcome of historical developments.

The church and Israel. The premillennialist position, finally, winds up importing nationalistic Jewish apocalypses by introducing the idea of a thousand-year period as an interim phase between the present dispensation and Christ's final return. The church itself becomes an interim phenomenon; the "church age" is over before the millennial kingdom begins.

Premillennialism goes wrong in failing to recognize that the church is the successor and continuation of Israel, the Old Testament covenant people. Once this mistake is made, there is plenty of room left for the view that the period we live in is not decisive since the earth will receive a 'second chance.'

The important question to ask when examining these eschatological doctrines is: What about the covenant? Nowhere does the Bible teach that the covenant in force during our dispensation is to be replaced by another covenant with an entirely different structure during a special thousand-year period. Neither does Scripture give us any reason to suppose that those who do not meet Christ "in the air" when He returns will have another chance to repent and turn to Him in a special period dominated by Jewish converts.

The day of Christ's return. If we are to reject all three views of the millennium discussed above, how are we to ^[109] interpret Revelation 20? A good way to begin answering this question would be to look at the early church. How did the church of the first few centuries (including Augustine in his earlier years) view the "thousand years"?

The "thousand years" were interpreted as a reference to the day of the Lord. (Think of Psalm 90:4, where we read that a thousand years in God's sight are but a day.) The thousand years represent the day of Christ's return. On that day the believers will rise from their graves to be vindicated and justified. Then they will rule with Christ (Dan. 7:22; II Tim. 2:12).

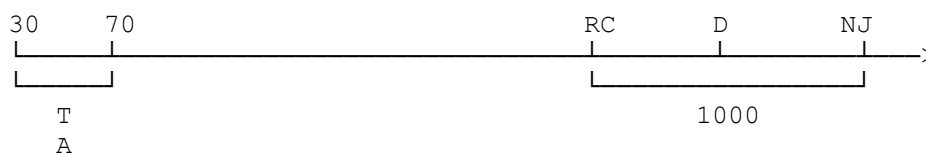
Revelation 20 does not speak of a kingdom on earth—and certainly not of a *Jewish* kingdom. The believers are taken up into the army of the saints in the beloved city. Satan is unable to harm them. And when he is let loose at the end of the day of the Lord, his liberty only leads to his final condemnation and destruction.

A time of reckoning. The New Testament points repeatedly to the day of the Lord. Therefore we may not let our yearning for His final triumph fade away. We should not let ourselves be frightened by predictions of horrors to come made by those who misinterpret Revelation 20.

What we await confidently is the day of the Christ (Phil. 1:9; 2:16; I Thess. 2:19), and not "personal immortality" or "heaven." Together with all the saints, we long for the great day (see Article 37 of the Belgic Confession). Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

That day will include a time of reckoning for all the powers that have set themselves up against God. This is what the conclusion of Revelation 20 shows us. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

[110]



A = Apostolic era

T = Time of decision for Israel

RC = Return of Christ

D = Day of the Lord

NJ = The New Jerusalem descends to earth

9. The Great Consummation

Contrasts. In the last two chapters of the Bible, the New Jerusalem is sketched in contrast with Babylon. We are shown woman opposed to woman, mountain opposed to mountain, city opposed to city. The glory of the New Jerusalem is contrasted with the collapse of Babylon as depicted in earlier chapters. After covenant wrath comes covenant blessing.

How clearly these chapters show us that the apocalypse of Jesus Christ directly opposes any patriotic Jewish apocalypticism that fixes its hopes on the Palestinian Jerusalem! The New Jerusalem will come only through the Lamb.

Note the following parallels:

Babylon	New Jerusalem
<p><i>17:1-18</i></p> <p>A vision about the covenant between the city of harlotry and the beast.</p>	<p><i>21:1-8</i></p> <p>A vision about the covenant between God and His bridal city.</p>
<p>[111] <i>18:1-24</i></p> <p>A communication from the heavenly messenger about the judgment of Babylon.</p>	<p><i>21:9–22:5</i></p> <p>A vision via the heavenly messenger about the New Jerusalem and the New Paradise.</p>
<p><i>19:1-10</i></p> <p>Heavenly liturgy as an amen. Worship God.</p>	<p><i>22:6-9</i></p> <p>Voices raised as an amen in response to the message. Worship God.</p>

A proclamation of the Great King. When John speaks of the "New Jerusalem," we are led to think in terms of the old Jerusalem—but not in terms dictated by the wishes of the Jewish nationalists. Everything the Old Testament has to say about the honor and glory of the future Jerusalem is brought together here as pointing to the new city in which the Lord establishes His throne, the throne on which the Lamb is seated. Paradise is regained, complete with the river of life and the tree of life.

At the very end voices are heard. Once more we are confronted with the style of the Great King, in the warning not to add anything to the book or subtract anything from it. This sober warning underscores the authoritative character of the Revelation to John, which is not a book of riddles but a proclamation of the Great King. The end echoes the beginning.

The Great King binds us to His covenantal Word. We live by faith alone, by grace alone, by Scripture alone!

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