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THE GENERAL LETTERS

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The “General letters” are those writings in which the author designated the recipients in general terms rather than with a specific location. Exceptions to this are 2 and 3 John, addressed to specific individuals. Some New Testament scholars do not regard Hebrews as a General letter, pointing out that the author spoke to a specific group of believers (Heb. 5:1–6:12). Most of the General letters take the name of the writer as the title. By contrast most of the Pauline letters take the name of the recipients as the title. We can clearly observe the difference between the specific address of the Pauline letters (“To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi,” Phil. 1:1) and the broad address of the General letters (“To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations,” Jas. 1:1).

The letter to the Hebrews addresses a warning to Jewish-Christian believers who were considering abandoning the riches of Christ and returning to the empty rituals of Judaism (5:1–6:6). James penned a warning to Jewish Christians who were neglecting obedience to the practical commands of the Bible (2:1–13). The apostle wrote 1 Peter to steady both Jews and Gentiles against painful persecution that threatened to consume them (4:12–19). The readers of both 2 Peter and Jude faced challenges from heretical teaching that threatened to sap their spiritual vitality (2 Pet. 2:1–3; Jude 3–4).

John wrote his first letter to urge his readers to right action (2:6), a right attitude (4:11), and right belief (4:1). In his second letter he warned against false teachers (vv. 7–11), and in his third letter he dealt with a church dispute (vv. 9–10).

In the ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, the General letters usually appear before the Pauline writings. In modern listings of New Testament books that order is reversed. The dates of the General letters, which are later than most Pauline letters, make this arrangement best.

With the possible exception of James, all the General letters appeared near the end of Paul’s life or after his death. They discussed problems the church faced in its later growth and expansion. Such writings as 2 Peter, Jude, and 1 and 2 John touch on the subject of false teaching. This was a normal problem in a growing church encountering alien ideas and viewpoints. Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, and 3 John provide encouragement for Christians who faced harassment and persecution.

All the writers presented a picture of a Savior whose strength could sustain them (Heb. 4:14–16). They called for a demonstration of new stamina and steadfastness (Jas. 1:2–4; 1 Pet. 4:19). Some of the writers called on the readers to show compassion for one another (1 John 3:16–20) and basic practices of honesty and integrity (Jas. 5:1–6). Because modern Christians also face these problems, the words of the General letters can provide us strength and help in our spiritual battles today.

HEBREWS

The Book of Hebrews is anonymous in that the name of the author is not mentioned in the book. The original readers knew who the writer was, but he remains unknown to us. Despite the difficulties in determining the author of Hebrews, its majestic picture of Christ commended its contents to the early church.

The writer of Hebrews presented Christ as superior to the Old Testament prophets, angels, Moses, Joshua, and Aaron. He laced magnificent discussions of Christ's person and work into frightening passages warning against apostasy (1:1–2:4). The superiority of Christ led the writer to appeal for faith (chap. 11), stamina (12:3–11), and good works (13:16).

NEW TESTAMENT USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

A study of the New Testament's use of the Old Testament must include not only an assessment of Old Testament quotations as they are found in the New Testament. It also must include matters of a broader scope, such as the relationship of the two Testaments, the nature and meaning of prophecy and fulfillment, methods of interpreting the Old Testament used by New Testament writers, and their development of biblical themes. These aspects of such an important study can only be touched upon in a survey article of this nature.

The relationship of the two Testaments is foundational to our understanding of the New Testament's use of the Old Testament. Without question, the New Testament authors attributed full authority to the Old Testament Scriptures. The New Testament is never viewed as being in conflict with the Old Testament but rather as the fulfillment of what God had begun to reveal in the Old Testament (see Heb. 1:1–2). The New Testament writers viewed the Old Testament as invested with divine authority, and in their use of it by way of quotations they treated it as the very Word of God.

We are surprised to discover that 250 quotations of the Old Testament are in the New Testament. In addition, there are a number of allusions to the Old Testament that are not specific quotations but where it is obvious that an author was employing Old Testament phraseology. Eliminating all allusions that are not of a direct nature, there are at least 278 different Old Testament verses cited in the New Testament: ninety-four from the Pentateuch, ninety-nine from the Prophets, and eighty-five from the Writings.

Something of the authority with which the New Testament authors quoted the Old Testament can be seen in their use of citation formulas. Sometimes the New Testament authors used citation formulas such as "it is written" or "Scripture says." The former emphasizes the permanent nature as well as the binding character of that which has been written. Jesus withstood the temptation of Satan in the wilderness by three times introducing Old Testament quotations with the phrase "it is written." The latter emphasizes the fact that Scripture "speaks" (present tense) to us today. The desire of the author of Hebrews to emphasize the continuity of the old and new covenants is seen in the fact that eighteen of our twenty-five Old Testament citation formulas appear in the present tense.

Many times God is referred to as the Author of Scripture, emphasizing its divine origin. The joint nature of the origin of Scripture is attested in the use of the names of the human authors as well as the divine Author. For example, Matthew 1:22 reads, "What the Lord had spoken through the prophet." In Acts 1:16 we read, "The Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David."

In the Gospels there are approximately thirty-nine Old Testament quotations attributed to Jesus. Many times Jesus' use of the Old Testament reflects a literalist interpretation. At other times He used the Old Testament in a "this is that" or fulfillment type of interpretation. For example, in Luke 4:16–21 the fulfillment theme is prominent in our Lord's use of the Old Testament. Jesus treated the Old Testament as the very Word of God, giving it the highest authority when He said of it that "not the smallest letter,

not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18).

In Acts there are twenty-seven Old Testament quotations attributed to various Christian leaders. Their use of the Old Testament reveals that they understood it from a Christocentric perspective. In the Pauline epistles there are no less than eighty-three quotations (excluding allusions).

As in Acts, Paul’s understanding and use of the Old Testament was couched in a Christological setting as well. Oftentimes Paul’s Old Testament quotations can be found in clusters as he would seek to bolster an argument with quotations from many parts of the Old Testament (see for example, Rom. 3:10–18 and 9:12–29).

The New Testament writers interpreted many of the events concerning Christ and the church as having been prophesied in the Old Testament. In addition, the New Testament writers, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, have taken many Old Testament passages and interpreted and applied them in a greater perspective beyond their original context. For example, Habakkuk 2:4, “The righteous will live by his faith,” is quoted three times in the New Testament: Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; and Hebrews 10:38.

Sometimes a question arises when one compares the New Testament citation with the Old Testament original in that it would appear the New Testament writers used some freedom in their quotations both in respect to form and meaning. Several factors should be kept in mind. First, modern-day rules of precision in quotation did not apply to the biblical writers. Second, as a result, Old Testament quotations were oftentimes paraphrased by the New Testament writers. Third, quotations had to be translated from Hebrew to Greek. Fourth, New Testament writers often simply alluded to an Old Testament passage without intending to quote it verbatim. These and other reasons account for the fact that some quotations are not “exact.”

In conclusion, the New Testament writers believed the Old Testament to be directly relevant to them, and they used it accordingly. Their statements indicate that the Old Testament in its entirety is meaningful and relevant for the first-century church as well as for us today.

Authorship. The early church historian Eusebius quoted the biblical scholar Origen as saying, “Who it was that really wrote the Epistle [Hebrews], God only knows” (*Eccelesiastical History* 6.25). Despite this verdict many varied opinions about the authorship have arisen.

Christians in the Eastern Roman Empire regarded Paul as the author. Hebrews contains statements similar to Paul’s view of the preexistence and creatorship of Christ (compare Heb. 1:1–4 with Col. 1:15–17). Both Hebrews 8:6 and 2 Corinthians 3:4–11 discuss the new covenant. These factors inclined some observers to consider Paul as the author.

Christians in the Western Roman Empire originally questioned Pauline authorship of Hebrews. They observed that the statement of 2:3 suggested that the author was not an apostle. Also the Old Testament quotations in Hebrews come from the Greek Septuagint, but Paul used both the Hebrew text and the Septuagint. Further, none of Paul’s other writings are anonymous; and the polished Greek style of Hebrews does not resemble the explosive, dynamic style of most of Paul’s writings. Shortly before A.D. 400, Christian leaders in the West extended acceptance to the Book of Hebrews. They absorbed it into the Pauline collection of writings without distinguishing it from the rest.

Tertullian advocated Barnabas as the author of Hebrews. Barnabas’s background as a Levite would qualify him to write the book, but support for his authorship is lacking in the early church. Martin Luther suggested Apollos as the author. In Apollos’s favor is his reputation for eloquence (Acts 18:24), but against him is the absence of early church tradition accepting him as author. Some have suggested Luke as the author. His knowledge of Greek would favor him, but Luke was a Gentile. The outlook of Hebrews is definitely Jewish. The nineteenth-century church historian Adolph Harnack mentioned Priscilla, the wife of Aquila, as the author. She and her husband would have known Pauline theology and Jewish practice, but the early church was silent about nominating her as author.

Modern Greek texts of Hebrews bear the title “To the Hebrews.” It is best to accept this title and recognize that we cannot know for sure who wrote Hebrews. Despite our ignorance of the author, we can use and understand what he wrote.

Date. The date of writing Hebrews is difficult to determine. We must date the book before A.D. 95, when Clement referred to it. The writer used present tense verbs in 10:11 (“performs” and “offers”) to describe the ministry of the priests in the Jerusalem temple. This indicates that sacrifices were still being offered in the days of the writer.

The Roman army destroyed the temple in A.D. 70. Persecution intensified as that day drew near (see 10:32–34). Timothy was still alive (13:23). The best option for the date is the mid to late 60s before the Romans destroyed the temple.

Recipients. The above title for Hebrews reflects the conviction that Jewish Christians were the original readers of the writing. Frequent appeal to the Old Testament, extensive knowledge of Jewish ritual, and the warning not to return to Jewish ritual support this conviction.

One might feel that the Jewish Christians who read Hebrews lived in Palestine. According to 2:3, however, the readers may not have seen nor heard Jesus during His earthly ministry. The verse suggests that the readers had been dependent on the first hearers of the Christian message to share it with them. Doubtless, most Palestinian Christians had heard Jesus’ preaching and teaching. According to 6:10 the readers of Hebrews had resources enough to assist other believers. Palestinian Christians were poor and needed aid (Acts 11:27–30; Rom. 15:26). These facts indicate that the readers were not from Palestine.

The statement in 13:24, “Those from Italy send you their greetings,” sounds as if Italians away from their home were returning greetings to friends in Rome. If this is true, Rome is the probable destination of the writing. A second fact favoring this view is that a knowledge of Hebrews first appears in Clement’s First Epistle, which was written in Rome.

Occasion: These Jewish Christians were wavering in their allegiance to Jesus Christ. This letter explains why they should continue steadfastly on as disciples of Jesus.

Purpose. Wherever the recipients lived, they were well-known to the writer. He described them as generous (6:10) but immature (5:11–14). He was aware of their persecution (10:32–34; 12:4), and he planned to visit them soon (13:19, 23).

The writer rebuked the readers for not meeting together often enough (10:24–25). They were in danger of lapsing into sin (3:12–14). Perhaps the readers were a Jewish-Christian group who had broken away from the chief body of Christians in the area. They were considering returning to Judaism to avoid persecution. The author wrote to warn them against such apostasy (6:4–9; 10:26–31) and to help them return to the mainstream of Christian fellowship.

Theme. The writer of Hebrews presented Jesus Christ as the High Priest who offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice for sins (8:1–2; 10:11–18). Christ had superiority over every aspect of Old Testament religion. Understanding this principle could prevent the readers from abandoning Christ and returning to Judaism (10:26–29).

Literary Form. The language of Hebrews is elegant and carefully constructed. Its excellent Greek does not clearly show up in English translations that strive for readability.

Was the writer penning a letter to a specific group of Christians, or was the letter a summary of a sermon made available to several Christian congregations? The reference to “I do not have time to tell” in 11:32 seems to indicate a sermon; however, the writer knew specific details about the congregation (5:11–12; 6:9–10; 10:32–34; 12:4; 13:7). This suggests a letter written to a specific location. The statement in 13:22 also requires that we view the writing as a letter penned in the style of an earnest warning to a specific congregation.

Theology. The letter to the Hebrews emphasizes the person of Christ. It presents a Jesus who is truly human (2:18), realistically tempted (4:15), and obedient to death (3:2; 13:12). The suffering of Jesus taught Him the value of obedience (5:8).

Hebrews also emphasizes the finality of Christ's work. The sacrifices offered by Jewish priests in the temple reminded the worshipers of sin, but the sacrifice of Christ removed sin (10:1–4). The priests of Judaism repeatedly offered sacrifices that did not take away sin (10:11). Christ's single offering of Himself forever removed the sin that hindered fellowship with God (10:12–14).

- I. God Has Spoken (1:1–3)
- II. Angels (1:4–2:18)
- III. Moses (3:1–19)
- IV. Joshua (4:1–13)
- V. Aaron (4:14–10:18)
- VI. Spiritual Endurance (10:19–12:29)
- VII. Final Exhortations (13:1–25)

GOD HAS SPOKEN (1:1–3)

The author emphasized that God had spoken in the past through the prophets at many different times and in varied ways. He stated that the revelation God had given through Jesus was superior to that through the prophets. This was true because Jesus was the Heir, Creator, divine Reflection, Image of God, and Sustainer of the world. Jesus had cleansed our sins and then taken His seat at God's right hand as a token of His finished work.

ANGELS (1:4–2:18)

Our writer presented angels as servants God created to minister to believers. He portrayed Christ as God's Son, who received the worship of angels and had an eternal existence. The superiority of Christ made the failure to believe on Him a fearsome experience. The author concluded that Christ's incarnation and crucifixion enhanced His superiority and qualified Him to become a spiritual trailblazer for believers. This was true because the sufferings of Christ better equipped Him to help us as we suffer.

MOSES (3:1–19)

Christ was God's Son who reigned over the household of God's people. He was superior to Moses, who was merely a servant within God's household. Jesus' superiority to Moses made it a more serious matter to reject Jesus than to reject Moses. Our writer referred to the experience of Israel in Numbers 14:1–35 as an illustration of the seriousness of unbelief.

JOSHUA (4:1–13)

The writer showed that Joshua failed to lead the people of God to rest because of their unbelief. Jesus promised rest to His people if they believe and follow the promises of the gospel. This rest is not fully available in this life, but by faith we may experience a portion of its blessings now (see chap. 11).

AARON (4:14–10:18)

Our High Priest (4:14–5:10). Our writer began with a summary of Christ's work as our High Priest. Christ is our great High Priest who represents us in God's very presence. God appointed Aaron as a high priest to represent people before God. Because Aaron was surrounded with weakness, he was able to

have compassion on other weak, sinful people. Christ also faced hardship, and He learned the value of obedience by His commitment to God's will. God called Christ to serve as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. Our author explained this idea more fully in chapter 7.

Warning against Apostasy (5:11–6:20). The immaturity of the readers prevented their usefulness and skillful performance for God. The writer warned his readers that no one could ever repeat the experience of repentance and conversion if he committed apostasy.

Some see this warning as a teaching that a true Christian can lose his salvation. That position would contradict the teaching of such New Testament passages as John 10:27–29; Romans 11:29; and Philippians 1:6. Others see the warning as hypothetical and not a realistic possibility. The repetition of the warning here and also in 10:26–31 makes this interpretation less likely. Others see the warning as directed at those who are almost Christians but not genuine Christians. In opposition to this view is the fact that a passage such as “shared in the Holy Spirit” could not be used of one who was not a Christian. The preferred interpretation is to view this passage as addressed toward professing Christians. The writer urged them to show the reality of their faith by enduring in their commitment to Christ without falling away. The writer spoke to his readers in accordance with their profession, but he urged them to show their true faith by producing real works.

The work and love the readers showed convinced the writer that none of them were apostates. However, he wanted all of them to press on to achieve full maturity by obeying the promises of God.

Melchizedek (7:1–28). The writer reached back to the story of Melchizedek (Gen. 14:17–20) to explain the nature of Jesus' priesthood. Melchizedek's name and hometown suggest that he was the “king of righteousness” and the “king of peace.” The Bible did not record any beginning or ending for his life. His eternal priesthood of righteousness was like that of Christ. Abraham's action of giving tithes to Melchizedek showed that the priest was a great man.

Because the priesthood of Aaron did not bring people into obedience to God, He changed the priesthood. He installed Christ as the Priest after a new order, that of Melchizedek. Our writer felt that the priesthood of Christ was superior to that of Aaron for three reasons. First, God initiated this priesthood with an oath, not merely by some worldly rules. Second, Christ's priesthood was permanent. Christ would never deliver His office to someone unqualified to handle it. Third, the character of Christ was superior to that of the Aaronic priests. Christ was exactly the type of high priest weak believers needed.

APOSTASY

Apostasy: Defection; rebellion. The classical Greek term *apostasia* brought to mind a military or political context and referred to rebellion against established authority. In the major English translations the actual word apostasy occurs seldom (NASB 6; RSV 3; NEB 2; NIV 0; KJV 0), but as a reference to rebellion against the Lord, the idea is widespread. In the Old Testament it is Israel's greatest national sin, that is idolatry, or forsaking the worship of the Lord (Exod. 20:3; Deut. 6:5, 14; 29:14–28).

The Greek term *apostasia* occurs twice in the New Testament. In Acts 21:21 it refers to an accusation against Paul that he had encouraged Jews to “forsake” Moses. In 2 Thessalonians 2:3 it refers to the great defection or falling away from the faith that will precede the return of Christ.

Various other New Testament contexts point to religious defection, the causes of which vary: affliction or persecution (Matt. 13:21; 24:9–13), false teachers (Matt. 24:11; 2 Tim. 4:3–4), erroneous views of Christ (1 John 2:18–23; 2 John 7–9), and unbelief (Heb. 3:12–14).

The theological issue raised by the question of apostasy is of paramount importance. The historic doctrines of Christian assurance and the security of the believer are not, however, nullified by the fact that there are those who make Christian professions and/or attend Christian worship who later forsake, either by word or deed, their earlier confession.

The Pauline doctrine of the Spirit is an unequivocal scriptural affirmation of the security of the believer. Paul's references to the Spirit as "firstfruits" (Rom. 8:23) and "pledge" (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:14) indicate that Christians have already begun to experience the gift of eternal life.

For Paul all who hear and believe the gospel receive the gift of the Spirit, which is God's pledge (promise, guarantee, earnest) of the resurrection (Eph. 1:13–14; Rom. 8:11, 23, 38–39). In this connection the Pauline verb "to predestine" (Rom. 8:28–30; Eph. 1:5, 11) is not so much a reference to what God decided before the world began (though Paul certainly affirmed Christ's death and the mystery of the gospel as part of God's eternally predestined purpose; see 1 Cor. 2:7–8; Acts 4:27–28). Rather it is a reference to God's unalterable promise to resurrect unto glory the one who believes in Jesus. Christians are predestined to be raised like Christ. Thus, "having been justified by faith" (Rom. 5:1), having received the Spirit as God's pledge of love (Rom. 5:5; 8:35, 39), we may know that "we shall be saved from the wrath of God through him" (Rom. 5:9; compare 5:10).

Hebrews 6:1–8 (esp. v. 6) is interpreted by some to refer to the realistic possibility of losing one's salvation, but the argument is hypothetical. Just as it is impossible for Christ to be crucified twice (see 9:25–10:18), so also is faith a once-for-all experience (see 6:4). Furthermore, Hebrews 6:13–20 is one of the strongest affirmations in the New Testament of the certainty of our future hope, which is grounded in the faithfulness of God.

Certainly the fact of sin is a Christian tragedy, but even extremes of sin cannot nullify the promise of God (note that even the incestuous man of 1 Cor. 5:1–5, who is to be "handed over to Satan," will "be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus"). As for those who make Christian confessions only later to renounce them and defect from the faith, we may perhaps say with John, "They went out from us, but they were not really of us" (1 John 2:19).

A New Covenant (8:1–9:28). Our author indicated that in addition to beginning a new order of priesthood, Christ inaugurated a new covenant. Jeremiah 31:31–34 foretold this new covenant. It provided three benefits for those who lived under it. First, it provided a new awareness of God's laws and a new nature by which to obey God. Second, it gave a personal knowledge of God that inspired a loyalty and commitment to Him. Third, it provided a complete forgiveness of sins. Christians today have inherited the benefits of this new covenant in their relationship with God.

ASSURANCE, WARNING AND PERSEVERANCE

For many Christians who struggle to understand their faith and the meaning of salvation, the question of security looms very large. Texts like John 10:27–29 affirm that no one will pluck them out of the hand of the Lord. They seem to provide assurance concerning security.

Texts like Hebrews 6:4–6 and 10:26–27, however, with the warnings of the impossibility of being renewed, seem to offer insecurity. Because this issue of security touches Christians at a deep level, a few would like to reword the texts of Hebrews or dismiss the entire book from their authoritative canon.

This way of dealing with the New Testament will not work because such disturbing texts can be found throughout other parts of the Bible (see 1 Cor. 10:6–22). Instead, we must realize that there is a built-in tension written into the biblical texts. Remember that God knows what people are like and that Jesus was not confused by their "believing" (John 2:23–25). Remember also that in Hebrews 6 there is not just one "impossible" but two (6:4, 18): the one a warning and the other an assurance.

This built-in tension in the Bible reminds us that when God sent Jesus, He was not playing a game. The cross was the most serious moment in the history of the world. God expects us to treat it with utmost seriousness. Believing is not just a matter of words; it involves the way we live (see Jas. 2:14–26). Therefore the entire Bible is laced with warnings about the way we live.

Nevertheless, we must also understand that we do not save ourselves, whether it is at the beginning point of justification (Rom. 3:21–31) or throughout our lives to the point of death and our glorification (Rom. 6:22–23). It is by the gracious working of God that we are renewed daily (2 Cor. 4:16). Our

security then is not rooted in our ability to save or uphold ourselves. Our security is in the power of God to save and to forgive us repeatedly since we all continue to sin (1 John 1:8–10).

This life therefore is a pilgrimage with God. It is a pilgrimage that takes seriously both assurance and warning. In this pilgrimage we have a sense of security outlined in the classical definition of the “perseverance of the saints.” This means that those who continue to believe in Christ *will* attain their heavenly rest (Heb. 4:9–13; 2 Thess. 2:13–15).

The contemporary popularized statement “once saved, always saved,” however, can create a problem because it is an unfortunate oversimplification of this classical doctrine, it makes God’s gracious working with us a static momentary action that loses the emphasis of pilgrimage and the great struggle of Christian life reflected throughout the New Testament, to say nothing of the similar Old Testament messages about God and His people.

The purpose of the Bible is twofold. (1) Everything possible is done in the midst of a hostile world to call Christians to a faithful life. (2) Everything possible is done to remind Christians of the assurance of God, who calls them to draw near to the throne of grace (Heb. 4:16).

This tension between assurance and warning is the context for Christian living. Tension is present throughout the Bible because the Bible deals with the intersection of human weakness and divine strength. Genuine Christians take seriously the warnings of the Bible and rely firmly upon its gracious assurances.

The old covenant made provision for removing external pollution by the use of animal sacrifices and familiar rituals. Under the new covenant Jesus surrendered His life to God in sacrifice for sin. The sacrifice of Christ is more effective for us today in three ways. First, it did not limit itself to the mere removal of ceremonial pollution. It cleansed the conscience from guilt and thus inspired holy living. Second, it resulted in the removal of sin by the shedding of Christ’s blood. Third, by entering God’s presence, Christ showed that He has offered a perfect sacrifice. Because Christ has fully removed all sins, Christians have the hope that He will one day return to complete their salvation by taking them to be with the Father.

Once for All (10:1–18). The author explained the permanence of Christ’s sacrifice. The repetition of the sacrifices offered by the Jews on their Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) could never make the worshipers perfect. Their sacrifices served as an annual reminder of the sins of the people. What God truly wanted was not merely the offering of an unthinking animal but a conscious, volitional choice to follow Him. That is what Jesus gave when He came to do God’s will. Jesus’ choice to offer Himself as a sacrifice for our sin earned for Christians acceptance in God’s sight. The constant offering of Levitical sacrifices testified that sins still remained. The once-for-all death of Christ forever took away all sins. When these sins are removed, no further need for sacrifice remains.

THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL ENDURANCE (10:19–12:29)

Stamina in Obedience (10:19–39). The writer of Hebrews found the readers tempted to pull away from Christ. Hebrews attempted to call them to God and to fellowship with one another by describing a veil by which all believers could enter God’s presence. This veil symbolized the life of Jesus presented to God when He suffered for our sins (1 Pet. 3:18). Because Christians had complete access to God, they could draw near to Him with an inward and outward cleansing. They also needed to consider how to stimulate one another to good works by meeting together.

In no instance should Christians fall into a pattern of neglecting fellowship with one another. The author warned his readers that turning away from Christ would expose them to divine judgment. He insisted that his readers show genuine faith by continued commitment to Christ. They had already suffered for their faith, but they needed to demonstrate stamina in obeying God.

Heroes of Faith (11:1–40). As an incentive to endurance before God, the writer presented a gallery of Old Testament heroes of faith. Faith gives reality to things that cannot be seen. By this faith the Old Testament believers received a positive witness from God. In the generations before the flood, Abel, Enoch, and Noah all responded by faith to demonstrate obedience to God. Their faith pleased Him. Abraham demonstrated his faith by forsaking the comforts of Ur and Haran to follow God to the promised land. By faith Abraham and Sarah bore Isaac as a child of their old age. Moses showed his faith by leaving the wealth of the Egyptian palace to suffer hardship with the Hebrew people. The writer presented Gideon, Samson, David, Samuel, and many other heroes as examples whose faith Christians should follow. The promises the Old Testament believers had expected were coming true in the events New Testament Christians were experiencing.

Endure (12:1–29). The writer also found encouragement for endurance from Jesus' example. Jesus had already run the race of faith, and God had placed Him on the throne. When Christians consider the hardship He faced, they can find strength and fresh courage. God allows all Christians to experience hardship so that they might develop holiness. Even though God's chastisement seems hard for the time, it will eventually produce righteousness in those who follow Him.

The character of God provided another incentive for endurance. God desires that all persons seek after holiness. God will not tolerate a disobedient, self-serving lifestyle. The presence of God at Sinai caused thunder, lightning, and fright among the people who saw Him. If God's speaking on earth at Sinai produced fear, how much more would His words from heaven through Jesus produce fear! The writer showed that God's kingdom was unmovable. This gives Christians the grace to serve Him with stamina and reverence.

FINAL EXHORTATIONS (13:1–25)

Christians have practical duties with one another. They must show sympathy to those in prison, and they must avoid all immorality. God has promised never to leave Christians, and that promise helps to banish greed.

OLD AND NEW COVENANT

Definitionally, a covenant is an agreement between two parties, whether equals or not, that signified a relationship whereby the two bound themselves to each other, either conditionally or unconditionally.

Theologically, the term was used to describe the relationship God initiated by His grace between Himself and humankind to those who were willing to bind themselves through a personal commitment of faith. This is reflected in the oft-occurring phrase in the Old Testament "I will be their God and they shall be my people."

A covenant was made by a sacrifice. Hence the Hebrew idiom for its establishment was "to cut a covenant" (Gen. 15:7–21). From God's perspective His covenant is unconditional and unilateral in establishment, but from humankind's perspective it is conditional and two-sided. God commands His people to keep His covenant through obedience and alternatively judges and blesses them according to their response.

The word *covenant* in the New Testament is *diatheke*, and it functions as the equivalent for the Old Testament *berit*. It occurs thirty-three times, nearly half of which are either Old Testament quotations or references to the Old Testament covenants. But the concept of the "new covenant" did not originate in the New Testament, for Jeremiah 31:31–34 speaks of God's intention to establish a new covenant.

The phrase "new covenant" is found six times in the New Testament: 1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 8:8; 9:15; 12:24. The new covenant is the fulfillment of the old in that it is identified with the death of Jesus and the Christian age. It is superior to the old covenant according to Hebrews 7:20–22; 8:6 and displaces the old according to Hebrews 8:13; 10:9.

The new covenant was established by the shed blood of Jesus on the cross. In the Gospel accounts of the last supper, it was Jesus Himself who related His coming death to the establishment of the new covenant. He is, by virtue of His death, the Mediator of a new covenant (Heb. 9:15; 12:24). The sacrificial offering by Jesus on the cross constituted the beginning of the new covenant and is complete and unrepeatable. Entrance into the covenant relationship is by faith in Christ.

The Book of Hebrews is the New Testament epistle most concerned with the relationship between the old and new covenants. The writer's intent was to show both continuity and discontinuity between the two covenants.

Continuity can be seen in that God is the initiator of both covenants, and both are based on sacrifice. Discontinuity can be seen in that the new covenant supersedes the old due to the final nature of the death of Christ.

The old covenant was enacted upon inferior promises, lacked finality, and lacked efficacy in that it provided no power to keep its conditions. In contrast, the new covenant is unconditional, final, and spiritually efficacious.

Christians must follow the faith of their leaders. When Christians submit to those who care for their spiritual needs, this allows the leaders to do their jobs with joy and not with hardship or frustration.

God is pleased with spiritual sacrifices that Christians offer. These sacrifices are commitment, praise, and unselfish sharing of goods.

In the last section of Hebrews the author urged prayer for himself and reported on Timothy's release from prison. He shared a doxology in 13:20–21 and an expression of greeting in 13:24–25.

Theological Significance. The author of Hebrews points us to the superiority of Jesus Christ. He is superior to the prophets (1:1–3), superior to the angels (1:4–2:18), and to Moses (3:1–4:13). He provides a superior priesthood on the basis of a superior covenant (4:14–10:31). Not only is Jesus superior to the foundational aspects of Judaism, but He also is superior to any aspect of contemporary religion. This means that Jesus is not just one good option among many ways of drawing near to God; He is the only way. Because of the superiority of Jesus we must not neglect such a great salvation that He has provided with His sacrificial death (2:3; 10:1–18).

Jesus, the superior Savior, is also the superior Priest. We can come to Him in times of trouble, suffering, and struggle. In Him we will find a sympathetic Priest (4:14–16) who offers grace in time of need. Thus we can and should draw near to Him in worship (10:19–25), live by faith (11:1–40), persevere to the end (12:1–29), and live a life of love (13:1–25).

JAMES

Martin Luther, whose vigorous voice led to the birth of Protestantism during the Reformation, described the Book of James as a strawy writing. The epistle's emphasis that a believer was justified by works (2:24) clashed with Luther's conviction that the believer becomes just by faith.

Most Christians would feel that Luther erred in his evaluation. The firm demands of the Book of James call wandering Christians back to obedience to God's Word. It is especially useful in pointing out ethical application of the gospel of grace. With the concern of a pastor, James spoke to his readers in urging them to face trial with stamina (1:2–18). He also spoke with the firmness of a prophet in urging them to show evidence of their genuine faith (2:14–26).

Authorship. The Book of James came slowly into widespread circulation in the early church. Many factors contributed to this. Its brevity and practical nature made it seem of small significance in

comparison to a book like Romans. Christians in the early church also disagreed concerning the identity of James, the author of the epistle. Those who identified the name with the Lord's brother tended to view the book as genuine Scripture. Those who rejected the link between James and Jesus tended to ignore the Book of James. Church councils meeting at Rome (A.D. 382) and Carthage (A.D. 397) accepted James as Scripture. This acceptance gave support to the view that James, the Lord's brother, was the author.

The text of James provides little information about the author other than his name, but the mention of the name provides an important clue to his identity. Few persons with the name of James could succeed in identifying themselves merely by their first name. The writer must have been an important James.

Four persons in the New Testament have the name of James. James, the father of Judas (not Iscariot), is mentioned in Luke 6:16 and Acts 1:13. James, the son of Alphaeus, appears in Matthew 10:3 and Acts 1:13. Both are obscure figures who lacked the importance to have been recognized by the mere designation "James." James the apostle was martyred under Herod Agrippa I in A.D. 44 (see Acts 12:2). He died before the time in which most people feel the Book of James appeared. The Lord's brother was an unbeliever during Jesus' earthly ministry (John 7:2–5), but an appearance of the risen Christ to him apparently led him to become a believer (1 Cor. 15:7; Acts 1:14). He rapidly became a leader in the early church (Gal. 2:6–9). The New Testament pictures him as a committed Jew who recognized Jesus as Messiah and Lord and showed spiritual sensitivity to the working of God. James the Lord's brother would be important enough in the early church clearly to identify himself by the designation "James."

Other features of the epistle of James also confirm the likelihood of identifying the author with Jesus' brother. James 1:22 and 5:12 contain echoes of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:20–24 and 5:34–37, respectively. The brother of the Lord could have heard this teaching. James 5:14–18 portrays our author as a man of prayer, and this agrees with the extrabiblical portrait of James, the Lord's brother. The tradition is that the Lord's brother spent such time in prayer that his knees became as hard as those of a camel (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23). It is not possible clearly to prove that the Lord's brother is the author of this epistle, but he is the most likely candidate from among the Jameses in the New Testament.

Date of Writing. Many scholars feel the Book of James is one of the earlier New Testament writings. Three features suggest an early date. First, James described a large gap between the rich and the poor (5:1–6). When the war against Rome broke out in A.D. 66, the rich suffered great losses, and conflict between rich and poor ceased. The impact of this observation pushes the writing to an earlier time rather than later. Second, the church organization mentioned in James seems undeveloped as seen in the mention only of elders as church leaders (5:14). Third, Christians were fervently expecting the return of Christ (5:7–9). It is felt that such fervor would be more true of the initial generations of Christians. All of these features support the acceptance of an earlier date.

Recipients. The address of the epistle of James to "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (Jas. 1:10) suggests that the readers were Jewish Christians who lived outside of Palestine. Several features confirm the truth of the suggestion. First, the term for "meeting" (2:2) is the Greek word for "synagogue." The word does not suggest that the readers met in a Jewish synagogue, but it indicates that Jewish Christians used this name to describe their place of meeting. Second, the statements of 5:1–6 present the picture of poor believers being intimidated by the wealthy. These rich people may have attended church meetings (2:1–3), but their presence did not indicate conversion. Third, the term "scattered among the nations" (1:1) reflects a single Greek word that referred to Jews who lived out of their homeland. All of these facts suggest that the Lord's brother directed a message to Jewish believers who had left their native country of Palestine.

Theme. The epistle of James makes a unique contribution in the New Testament with its strong ethical emphasis. Its ethical teaching is scattered throughout the writing. James clearly taught that a faith that lacked works was empty, vain, and useless. James's frequent use of the imperative mood indicates his passionate feeling about the issues he faced. His fiery words resemble those of an Old Testament prophet. He shared ethical commands that touched upon both personal morality and social justice.

Literary Form. James's writing is similar to the Old Testament wisdom literature in Proverbs and Psalms. Both sources treat such subjects as the use of the tongue, the dangers of wealth, and the need for self-control. Some students of James have also pointed out a similarity with synagogue homilies or sermons.

James's writing reflected a vivid imagination. We can see his use of vigorous figures of speech in his comparison of the wavering man to "a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind" (1:6). He also was a close observer of nature. We can see this from his description of the effects of the sun's heat (1:11), horticulture (3:12), and rainfall (5:7, 18).

- I. Greeting (1:1)
- II. Trials (1:2–18)
- III. Hear and Do (1:19–27)
- IV. Don't Be Partial (2:1–13)
- V. Show Mercy (2:14–26)
- VI. Control the Tongue (3:1–18)
- VII. Avoid Worldliness (4:1–17)
- VII. Be Just (5:1–6)
- IX. Endure (5:7–12)
- X. Pray (5:13–18)
- XI. Lift the Fallen (5:19–20)

Purpose and Theology. James wrote to Jewish Christians facing trials and persecution. Under the threat of persecution the readers considered compromising their Christian commitment and accommodating themselves to worldliness. James spoke as a pastor to urge his friends to develop spiritual stamina in facing persecution. He also spoke as a prophet to urge those who considered compromise to give evidence of their faith.

Some students of James suggest that the book lacks doctrinal emphases. It is true that James assumed some doctrinal similarity between himself and his readers and did not elaborate on all his beliefs. He did affirm the unity of God (2:19; 4:12) together with an emphasis on divine goodness (1:17), graciousness (4:6–8), and judgment (2:13). He emphasized strongly the return of Christ (5:7–11). In 1:12–15 he presented an analysis of temptation and sin, suggesting that human desire was the source of sin. Much of the content of James represented an effort to call individuals and the church back to full commitment to God and to complete concern for one another.

GREETINGS (1:1)

It is significant that James chose not to mention his relationship to Jesus. His statement that he was a servant of Jesus indicated his humility. The expression "twelve tribes" represented the children of Israel (Acts 26:7). The fact that they were "scattered" suggested they were Jews living outside their Palestinian homeland. James spoke to his readers as Christians, for only believers would see Jesus as the "Lord Jesus Christ."

TRIALS (1:2–18)

James urged his readers to look at trial from God's attitude. The trial itself was not an occasion of joy, but it could promote joy by becoming an occasion for producing stamina in the life of a committed believer.

In trial the believer must ask for an understanding of the purpose behind the divine permission of the difficulty. An incentive to do this is that God will give generously to those who ask and will not humiliate them for asking. Those who face trial with perseverance receive a crown of life from God as a reward for their stamina.

James moved from a discussion of trial to a discussion of inward enticement to sin in 1:13–18. First, he warned believers not to blame God for temptation in their lives. God does not dangle evil before people to entice them to sin. Second, he stated that the desires of his readers were responsible for luring them to disobedience. Third, he taught that God gave only "good and perfect" gifts to believers and would not vary from that principle.

HEAR AND DO (1:19–27)

Because his readers might compromise under trial, James warned them of the urgency for demonstrating their faith with works. His appeals can be summarized under the command, "Be doers of God's Word and not mere listeners."

In 1:19–25 James presented three figures of speech that explained how God's Word could help believers. First, he compared God's Word to a seed that could be planted within each Christian to grow into salvation. Second, he pictured God's Word as a mirror that clearly reflected the condition of the one who looked into it. Third, he described God's Word as a law that provided freedom. Listening to God's Word could provide the strength to produce obedient living.

In 1:26–27 James indicated that a true response to God's Word involved both outward activity and inward control. Ministry to orphans and widows was the outward activity. Separation from the world was evidence of inner control.

DON'T BE PARTIAL (2:1–13)

In 2:1–4 James rebuked his readers for demonstrating favoritism to the rich who attended their services while ignoring the poor. The display of partiality for the rich was contrary to their own interests, for the rich were actually their oppressors. Such partiality was also contrary to God's law. James reminded his audience that they would be judged for their inconsistency.

SHOW MERCY (2:14–26)

James warned that a faith that merely spoke kind words to the poor without offering them help was not a saving faith. Just as Abraham and Rahab demonstrated their obedience to God by works, James urged his friends to show their faith by works. James explained that a faith that merely affirmed correct belief without producing a changed life was lifeless.

CONTROL THE TONGUE (3:1–18)

James insisted that Christians show their obedience to God by controlling their tongues and all of their desires. He explained that the tongue had great power for both good and evil. He also pointed out the stubbornness and inconsistency of the tongue. He urged his readers to demonstrate heavenly wisdom rather than earthly wisdom. Earthly wisdom produced envy and selfish ambition. Heavenly wisdom produced peacemakers who were merciful and considerate of one another.

AVOID WORLDLINESS (4:1–17)

James saw an epidemic of worldly living among his readers. In 4:1–10 he warned against worldliness and showed its effects on the prayer life of his recipients. In 4:11–12 and in verses 13–17 he showed, respectively, that worldliness produced a critical spirit and a godless self-confidence.

In describing the effect of worldliness on the prayer life, James showed that his friends resorted to scheming, quarreling, and striving in order to obtain their wishes. They failed to receive what they truly needed because they did not ask. Whenever they did ask, they failed to receive because their request was tinged with self-will. James's description of God in 4:5 demonstrated that God tolerated no rivals and wanted complete commitment from His followers. God could make heavy demands on His followers, but He could also provide the grace to meet those demands. In 4:7–10 James uttered in rapid-fire fashion ten imperative appeals to submit to God and avoid worldliness.

One evidence of worldliness James cited was the presence of a critical spirit. He saw that Christians were defaming one another in the same way that the ungodly defamed Christians. James warned that those who belittled fellow Christians had set themselves up as judges and had assumed a position that rightly belonged only to God.

Probably the arrogance James denounced in 4:13–17 came from self-confident Jewish businessmen who planned their lives without reference to God's will. James warned his readers that life resembled a transitory vapor and that all of life must be planned with reference to God's will. The sin James described in this paragraph is an example of a sin of omission.

BE JUST (5:1–6)

James leveled harsh warnings against wealthy landowners who valued the dishonest accumulation of material goods above the demonstration of justice. He accused the rich of the sins of dishonesty, wanton living, and injustice. He implied that God had heard the cries of the oppressed and would punish the unjust treatment meted out by the rich.

ENDURE (5:7–12)

James used three illustrations to encourage a lifestyle of persistent devotion in serving the Lord. First, he spotlighted the farmer who planted and then waited for rains in order to produce a crop. Second, he mentioned the Old Testament prophets who spoke boldly for God despite suffering. Third, he commended Job, who faced tragedy, family misunderstanding, and physical suffering in obeying the Lord.

In times of distress Christians could easily use God's name in a careless, irreverent way. James warned against invoking God's name to guarantee truth and instead called for truthfulness so consistent that no oath was needed.

PRAY (5:13–18)

James urged believers to use prayer in all the seasons of life. In times of affliction Christians are to pray to God for help and strength. In times of blessing believers are to praise God instead of congratulating themselves (5:13b). In instances of critical sickness the sick person was to summon the leaders of the church for prayer. Prayer for the sick could result in either physical healing or spiritual blessing. In times of sin and struggle mutual intercession could promote spiritual victory. Elijah prayed with such force that God withheld rain from the earth for three and a half years and gave it again at his request.

LIFT THE FALLEN (5:19–20)

James operated with a realism about the spiritual life. He insisted that those who continue in sin show their lostness despite their profession of faith. He promised that the believer who won back a wanderer would save the sinner from eternal death and win blessings for himself.

Theological Significance. James reminds us in a forthright way that faith involves doing. It is not enough to be hearers of the word; we must be doers as well. We cannot just say we are believers; we must show it in our lives. This must be evident in the way we control our tongues and the way we relate to others. The rich must share with the poor. The Christian community must live out its faith by demonstrating love and a working faith to those inside and outside the body of Christ.

1 PETER

The epistle of 1 Peter was written to Jewish and Christian believers living in the northern part of Asia Minor. They faced persecution because of their commitment to Christ. Peter wrote to urge them to show stamina and commitment. Peter also wanted his readers to show a Christian lifestyle that would convert pagan sneers and accusations into appreciation and respect. To accomplish this, he urged all Christians to obey their leaders, servants to be subject to their masters, and husbands and wives to demonstrate honor and submission to one another. The vivid descriptions of Christ's suffering and death (2:21–25; 3:18) could serve as an encouragement for Christians to conquer evil and endure to the end.

Authorship. Leaders of the early church made frequent reference to 1 Peter, and there is no evidence of any dispute about authorship at this time. In the twentieth century some students of 1 Peter have questioned whether the apostle wrote the book.

Some have pointed out that the polished Greek of 1 Peter could hardly come from a man viewed as “unschooled” and “ordinary” (Acts 4:13). However, it is certainly possible that Peter could have developed ability in Greek in the years after Jesus' death. Also, Silas (5:12) may have served as a secretary, or amanuensis, to assist Peter in the expression of some of his ideas. Other students of 1 Peter have felt that the type of persecution mentioned in 4:14 refers to a time when it was a crime merely to be a Christian. They generally locate this time in the 90s or in the second century A.D. Peter would have been dead by this date. However, the expression “insulted because of the name of Christ” may mean only that believers were insulted because of their loyalty to Christ, not that it was a crime to be a Christian.

It is best to accept Peter's claims for authorship in 1:1. Added support for this acceptance comes from recognizing the similarity between statements in 1 Peter and the Petrine speeches of Acts (see Acts 10:42 and 1 Pet. 4:5). Such statements as those of 1 Peter 2:13–17 sound as if Peter could have learned them by listening to Jesus' words in Matthew 17:24–27. The similarity to Jesus' teaching provides added support for Petrine authorship.

Date. Each chapter of 1 Peter contains a reference to suffering by someone (1:6–7; 2:21–25; 3:13–17; 4:12–19; 5:10). It is known that Nero brought persecution on Christians in Rome in the early 60s. Many feel that the Neronian persecutions caused a ripple effect in outlying provinces such as those in Northern Asia Minor.

The Neronian persecutions probably did not reach such an intensity that Christians were forced to choose between obedience to God and obedience to the state. Peter had articulated the Christian position concerning this choice in Acts 5:29. The teaching of the Christian attitude toward the state in 2:13–17

more resembles the response to the government we would expect during Nero's time. When persecution intensified in the late 90s and the early second century A.D., the Christian response would be to call for commitment to God rather than the state.

Recipients. The area in which Peter's readers lived, mentioned in 1:1, was far off the beaten path of travel and commerce. The Bible contains no record of how the gospel reached this area. Although the area contained colonies of Jews, Gentiles were numerically predominant. The order in which the provinces are mentioned might suggest the route followed by the letter carrier. He could have landed in Pontus, followed a circuit through the provinces, and left the area at Bithynia.

Peter's references to preconversion sins of idolatry (4:3) and evil desires they had when they lived in ignorance (1:14) suggest a way of life more true of Gentiles than Jews. The statement in 2:10 that they "were not a people" could not be made of Jews. Although the term "strangers" is the Jewish term for those dispersed from the homeland of Palestine (1:1), it is likely that Peter used it to refer to the church. Peter saw believers as a pilgrim people on earth who had been set apart by God to do His will.

Theme. Peter elaborated upon the subject of suffering throughout the entire epistle. He offered words of hope to his readers as they faced suffering (1:4–5; 5:4). He pictured suffering as purposeful (3:14; 4:14). Christians were to endure it patiently (2:21; 3:9), and they were to demonstrate joy despite hardship (4:13). They could draw encouragement from following the example of Christ in suffering (2:21–25). God's will often demanded that believers endure suffering (4:19).

Literary Form. Students of 1 Peter have discussed widely the literary forms within the book. Many find extensive evidence of the presence of hymns, creeds, or fragments of sermons in such passages as 2:4–8 and 2:21–25. Some view the entire writing as a sermon preached at the baptism of a group of Christians. They view the opening section through 4:11 as a message spoken to candidates for baptism. They locate the performance of baptism at 1:21–22 and feel that the "Amen" at 4:11 concludes the address to the candidates.

The concluding section beginning with 4:12 is viewed as an address to the entire church gathered for the rite of baptism. Although these discussions are enlightening and enriching, they are often inconclusive and unconvincing. Peter may have used material from different sources in writing this book, but it is best to see that he made it his own material under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

Peter made frequent reference to the Old Testament, sometimes by quotation (2:6–8) and sometimes by allusion (3:6, 20). This frequent use suggests that Jewish readers were at least among the recipients of the letter. Some of Peter's emphases resemble those of Paul. For example, there is a similarity between Peter's words about relationships between wives and husbands in 3:1–7 and Paul's discussion in Ephesians 5:22–33.

- I. Greetings (1:1–2)
- II. Salvation (1:3–12)
- III. A Demand for Holiness (1:13–2:3)
- IV. God's People (2:4–10)
- V. Christian Witness (2:11–3:12)
- VI. Suffering as Christ (3:13–4:19)
- VII. Assurances (5:1–9)
- VIII. Praises to God (5:10–14)

Purpose and Theology. Peter urged his readers to live in accordance with the hope that they had received in Christ (1:3). He gave guidance for them to use in their relationships with one another (3:1–12), and he urged them to endure suffering joyfully for Jesus' sake (4:19). His chief aim in writing was to provide them encouragement in Christian living.

Peter often used theological ideas to drive home his ethical demands. He presented the death of Christ as a stimulus for Christians to endure suffering (2:21–25). He also affirmed the resurrection as a chief source of Christian hope and confidence (1:3). He presented the return of Christ as an incentive for holy living (1:13). He portrayed the nature of the Christian call (2:9–10) as a basis for individual Christians to obey Christ at home (3:1–7), to obey Him as servants (2:18–20), and to follow Him as citizens (2:13–17).

GREETINGS (1:1–2)

Peter addressed his readers as “God’s elect” and “strangers” who were “scattered.” Although such terms as “chosen” were sometimes used in reference to the Jews (Isa. 43:20), Peter designated the church as a special people temporarily away from their heavenly home. Election began with the foreknowledge of God the Father, included the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, and was sealed by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

SALVATION (1:3–12)

Peter’s first epistle alternated between teaching and preaching, between proclamation and application. In this initial section Peter pictured salvation as based on the hope inspired by Jesus’ resurrection. This salvation produced an unfading and imperishable inheritance given to them by God. The believers are promised protection with God’s power through faith.

The faith of Peter’s readers was deepened by their trial. These trials came because of their commitment to Jesus, they were a necessary part of their experience, and they could deepen their faith. The faith of the believers filled them with joy and brought them into living contact with Jesus.

In 1:10–12 Peter indicated that the prophets had reported the grace and glory of salvation. Peter stated that the prophets understood that Messiah must suffer, but they tried to learn the time and circumstances when this would occur.

A DEMAND FOR HOLINESS (1:13–2:3)

Peter explained that the character of God and the high cost of redemption were incentives to produce holiness in his readers. He also demanded that holiness show itself in earnest love for other believers and in a forsaking of all malicious attitudes.

Peter’s words in 1:13 are equivalent to saying, “Roll up your sleeves and go to work.” He mentioned that the return of Jesus Christ was to give them hope and stability in the face of persecution. Christians would show their response to God’s holiness by leaving the “evil desires” of their past ignorance and by adopting God’s own behavior as their pattern.

In 1:17–21 Peter indicated that a proper reverence for God and an appreciation of the high cost of redemption demanded holy living. The readers would understand redemption as the freeing of a slave by paying a price. The payment that released Christians from an “empty way of life” was the “blood of Christ.” Peter noted that God had determined the performance of this work of Christ before the beginning of time. He had only recently made His plan evident in the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of Jesus.

Peter urged his readers to express their holiness by genuine love for one another. The quotation of Isaiah 40:6–8 (vv. 24–25) showed that the experience of this love came from the creative activity of God. Peter directed his readers to put aside malice and hypocrisy in their response to God’s holiness. He also encouraged them to grow as believers by appropriating the nurture inherent in the gospel message.

CHURCH AND STATE

Throughout church history the Christian community has sensed a somewhat ambiguous relationship to civil government. This relationship tends to follow a variant of three basic models. The first is characterized by a close link between the two realms almost to the point of fusion, sometimes with the state co-opting the church for its own purposes.

In the second model this situation is reversed, as the church seeks to utilize the civil power to its own benefit. The third model maintains that church and state are to exist side by side, each exercising authority in its own sphere and not interfering with the other. Advocates of each model claim the support of the Bible and the Christian heritage.

Similar to other ancient nations, the Hebrew commonwealth saw no division between the civil and religious spheres. Israel was in some sense a theocracy, for Yahweh was to be the sole sovereign over the nation. Yahweh exercised rulership through various representatives, including judges, prophets, and kings, who for this reason exercised both political and religious authority. Nevertheless, these two aspects of national life were not completely fused, as was the case among Israel's neighbors. This is evidenced, for example, by the prophetic movement, which provided a religious critique of the monarchy.

The New Testament was written in a quite different context. For the Christian church, in contrast to Israel, was an entity quite separate from the Empire. As a response to this situation, the New Testament writers offered two basic principles, one positive and one negative, for the proper Christian relationship to the state.

The Pauline epistles and 1 Peter enjoin believers to be good citizens. This includes submitting to and honoring those in authority (1 Pet. 2:13–17), paying taxes (Rom. 13:7), and praying for leaders (1 Tim. 2:2). For this they appeal to the function of government in acting as God's agent in punishing persons who do wrong. Yet the underlying motivation appears to be the authors' interest in the good reputation of the Christian community, and this for the sake of the gospel proclamation.

At the same time, believers must always follow a higher allegiance—to God. Peter and John articulated this during their conflict with the Jerusalem authorities (Acts 4:19–20). This principle likewise lies behind the conflict presented in Revelation, as the martyrs defied the injunctions of the satanically influenced civil order (see Acts 6:9; 13:7–8).

Both principles build from Jesus' response to the Pharisees' tricky question concerning paying taxes (Matt. 22:15–21). In external matters—taxes and perhaps social conventions—disciples are to honor civil laws because these matters fall under the jurisdiction of civil authority (the coin carries Caesar's imprint). But the emphasis of Jesus' response rests with the matter of personal allegiance. Here God alone has claim to lordship, as indicated by the implied but unstated parallel: the human person carries the imprint of the Creator.

In keeping with these principles and as a result of historical experience, certain Protestant groups (such as the Baptists) have generally advocated the third model, the separation of church and state. This outlook places restrictions on both spheres. It denies the civil government the prerogative of seeking to shape the religious beliefs of its citizens, of meddling in the church's internal affairs, or of determining the nature of the church's message. The separation model, however, is not intended to eliminate religion from national life or to silence the voice of the church in matters of civil concern.

GOD'S PEOPLE (2:4–10)

Peter used three images to describe the church in this section. First, he portrayed the church as a living body that gave sacrificial service to God. Christ was a life-giving Stone who enabled His followers to produce such spiritual sacrifices as obedience (Rom. 12:1), praise, and practical ministry (Heb. 13:15–16). Second, he described the church as a building or structure founded on Christ as the cornerstone. He

quoted Old Testament passages from Isaiah 8:14; 28:16 and Psalm 118:22 to show that Christ was a foundation stone for believers and a rock which caused tripping for unbelievers. Third, he used the language of Exodus 19:5–6 and Hosea 2:23 to portray believers as a select nation reflecting the glories of God. God had fashioned special recipients of His mercy from those who previously never belonged to anyone.

CHRISTIAN WITNESS (2:11–3:12)

Peter was eager for God's people to demonstrate distinctive, obedient behavior in order to convince critics of their faith. He urged them to apply this behavior in relation to their rulers, their earthly masters, in their families, and to one another.

In 2:11–12 Peter suggested three reasons Christians must discipline their lives. First, Christians were foreigners to their pagan environment and were not adjusted to it. Second, if Christians yielded to the flesh, they would wage battle against their best selves. Third, self-discipline and obedience had a wholesome influence on unbelievers.

In relation to the government Peter urged voluntary submission for the purpose of commending Jesus' lordship. In relation to their owners slaves were to be subject. An incentive for showing this subjection even in the presence of provocation was the moving example of Christ's obedience. In the home women were to win their unsaved husbands to Christianity by serving them and showing them respect. Husbands in return were to live in an understanding way with their wives and treat them as full heirs of God's grace. Peter concluded this section by urging all Christians to practice compassion and forgiveness. They were to treat others not as they had been treated by their accusers but as God had graciously treated them.

SUFFERING AS CHRIST (3:13–4:19)

In this section Peter directly faced some of the difficult suffering of his readers. He encouraged them to respond righteously to those who had caused their suffering by reflecting on Christ's vindication despite His suffering. He urged a full commitment to God's will, and he presented Christ's return as an incentive for watchful action. He demonstrated that a knowledge of future glory provided an additional encouragement to obedience.

Peter instructed his recipients that even if they suffered for righteous living God would bless them (Matt. 5:10). He urged them to serve the Lord even in the face of unjust treatment, for that unjust treatment might be a part of a divine plan to glorify Himself.

In 3:18 Peter presented Christ's suffering as mediatorial because through it He brought believers to God. The death of Christ took place in the realm of the flesh, but the resurrection of Christ occurred in the realm of the Spirit.

Christ's experience in 3:19–20 took place at a time after Christ was made alive in the realm of the Spirit. The "spirits in prison" refer to supernatural beings or wicked angels who opposed the work of God (see Gen. 6:1–4; 2 Pet. 2:4–5; Jude 6). Preaching to them was not an offer of an additional chance for repentance but an announcement of doom.

The exact location of these disobedient spirits is not specified. Some interpreters have seen this as a description of Jesus' descent into hell. Peter stated that Jesus went to the place where these spirits were confined, an unnamed location. If we equate the spirits in prison with the angels who sinned in 2 Peter 2:4, then their location is Tartarus ("cast them down to Tartarus," 2 Pet. 2:4). In Greek thought this place of punishment was lower than Hades. Peter's readers would understand that evil spirits lay behind their persecution. The coming defeat and doom of these spirits would be a source of encouragement to the readers. The knowledge of their ultimate vindication would give believers an additional incentive to

obey. The judgment of the flood served as a warning of God's coming judgment on the world (3:20). The ark that saved a few through water illustrates the salvation available in Christ.

In verse 21 Peter presented baptism as a copy of the Old Testament deliverance from judgment. The conviction of sin calls for a faith response to Christ. The act of baptism portrays this response. Salvation comes to believers because Christ has arisen from the dead. Not only has He arisen from the dead, but He has also been installed in a place of power and authority over all His enemies.

In 4:1–6 Peter issued a further call to holy living. He called on his readers to arm themselves by a crucifixion with Christ so that sin would no longer be an option for them. Some who had received the gospel message earlier had since died. Their death showed that they experienced the common judgment that sin brings on all people. Despite their death they had entered into life eternal.

In 4:7–11 Peter presented the return of Christ as an incentive for disciplined, watchful behavior. The fact of Christ's return should promote love, hospitality, and a proper use of spiritual gifts.

Peter urged his friends to prepare themselves for a coming trial by commitment and stamina. Instead of offering complaint, they should rejoice that their suffering allowed them to share in Christ's glory. Peter warned his readers against disgracing Christianity by evil deeds or indiscreet action. Peter argued in 4:17–18 that even if believers must face difficulty, the fate of unbelievers would be absolutely terrifying.

ASSURANCES (5:1–9)

In 5:1–4 Peter outlined the duties of elders and assured them of divine rewards for faithful service. Peter urged the elders to assume their tasks for the right reasons, not because they felt obligated but because they freely chose to do it. At Christ's return the faithful leaders were promised an unfading crown of glory.

In 5:5–9 Peter urged Christians to practice humility and endurance. Christians were to show this humility to one another. They were also to demonstrate a lowliness in the face of circumstances that God allowed. Christians needed to avoid carelessness because their adversary Satan could overpower them.

PRAISES TO GOD (5:10–14)

Peter expressed praise for God's grace, which allowed Christians growth even after suffering. Silas is probably the same as Paul's helper in Acts 15:40. "She who is in Babylon" is a reference to the church at Rome.

Theological Significance. First Peter calls the contemporary church to faithfulness in Christian living and Christian duty. Peter provided guidance for the church in times of persecution and suffering and offered hope for difficult situations. This hope is grounded in the death and resurrection of Christ. The sufferings and sacrifice of Christ on the cross were central for Peter's theology and ethics. He called for the church to be holy since Christ has redeemed us from an empty way of life (1:18). The church must respond to persecution and oppression with patience and perseverance "because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (2:21). The church must do good and live for God in all situations since "it is better if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (3:17–18). The church can take heart and gain courage from this stirring letter that encourages us by testifying about "the true grace of God" (5:12).

2 PETER

Peter wrote his second epistle to counter the influence of heresy within the church (2 Pet. 2:1). He appealed for spiritual growth as an antidote to defeat heresy, and he urged his readers to live holy lives in anticipation of Jesus' return (2 Pet. 3:11–12).

The brevity of the letter resulted in its being ignored for centuries by the church. Few Christians made use of it until the time of Origen (A.D. 250), and today many feel that the name Peter is a pseudonym.

Authorship. The author claimed to be Peter in 1:1 and asserted that he was an eyewitness of Jesus' transfiguration (1:16–18). His claim to be an apostle and the admission of friendship with Paul (3:15) clearly indicate that the writer intended to be seen as Peter.

Several features have contributed to the questioning of the genuineness of Petrine authorship. The epistle was little used in the early church. No clear second-century usage of the book appears. There are few usages in the third century, and only in the fourth century did it gain general acceptance. Origen's use of the book indicated that he knew of it, but he classified it among the disputed books of the New Testament. Despite these difficulties the church eventually accepted it as genuine and as worthy of inclusion in the canon.

Some have questioned the relationship of 2 Peter to Jude. Second Peter 2 and Jude have sections that are almost identical. Did one copy the other, or did both copy a common source? Many feel that Peter copied Jude, and this would lead to dating the book far beyond Peter's lifetime. Some evidence exists that the false teachers are seen as future in 2 Peter (2:1) but already present in Jude 4. This feature would point to an earlier date for 2 Peter.

Still others have found that the cumbersome language of 2 Peter is unlike that of 1 Peter. Some of the words used in 2 Peter are difficult, unfamiliar words which a Galilean fisherman might not know. It is possible that a helper assisted Peter with the writing and that this fisherman had learned better Greek with the passing of time.

Peter's reference to Paul in 3:15–16 is interpreted by some as a suggestion that Paul's epistles had been written, collected, and distributed. This would obviously have been at a time long after Peter's death. A reading of Peter's statements in 3:15–16 demands only that Peter had read those writings of Paul available up to the time of Peter's own writing. Peter could have found these writings through his widespread travels.

Those who deny Petrine authorship of 2 Peter have not succeeded in showing how a pseudepigraphical author could avoid being called dishonest. Despite some difficulties it is better to accept the claim of the epistle for Petrine authorship.

Date. Peter anticipated that his death would be soon (1:14–15). Assuming Peter wrote both 1 and 2 Peter, we can observe that Peter called this his second writing to the same readers (3:1). There is little specific information by which to arrive at an exact date, but it seems likely that 2 Peter was written shortly after 1 Peter. A time in the mid to late 60s shortly before Peter's demise seems acceptable.

Recipients. This letter lacks a specific address as 1 Peter contains. If we assume that Peter wrote the letter, "my second letter" (2 Pet. 3:1) would indicate that he was writing to the same group that received the first letter. The statement of 1:16 suggests that Peter had spoken or preached to this group, but we have no knowledge of when or how this occurred. It seems best to suggest that Peter wrote to churches located in the northern part of Asia Minor.

The letter contains little indication of Peter's location as he wrote. We may leave this as an open question, for a decision on this issue does not affect our interpretation of the book.

Theme. Peter centered his emphasis on an exposure of the work of malicious false teachers (2 Pet. 2). Whereas the first letter of Peter dealt with external opposition to the readers, this letter focuses on internal opposition within the church.

In chapter 1 Peter urged that his readers grow in the virtues of faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, kindness, and love (2 Pet. 1:5–9). Growing Christians would not be susceptible to heretical influence.

In 2 Peter 2 he described the moral errors of the heretics, and in 2 Peter 3 he exposed their doctrinal error in the denial of Jesus' return. He concluded with an appeal for growth as an antidote to pernicious heresy.

Literary Form. Several passages in 2 Peter indicate that Peter wrote to a specific congregation (2 Pet. 1:16; 2:1; 3:1). The entire letter is an earnest warning against false teachers and an appeal for growth in maturity. Peter made little use of the Old Testament in quotations (but see 2 Pet. 2:22), but there is frequent allusion to Old Testament characters and events (2 Pet. 2:4–8).

- I. Greetings (1:1–2)
- II. God's Provisions (1:3–21)
- III. Danger (2:1–22)
- IV. Hope (3:1–13)
- V. Closing Commands (3:14–18)

Purpose and Theology. Peter felt strongly that his death was near (2 Pet. 1:14–15). He wanted to leave a spiritual testament that would provide helpful instruction after his departure. He provided warning against the character and false teaching of heretics who would infiltrate the church (2:1–19; 3:1–4). To provide protection against their errors, he urged a development of proper Christian virtues (1:3–11) and a constant growth in God's grace (3:17–18).

Peter held to a high view of Scripture (1:19–21), and he viewed Paul's writings as "Scripture" (3:16). He designated Jesus Christ as "Savior" and "Lord" (1:1–2), and he outlined his observation of Jesus' transfiguration (1:16–18). He affirmed the return of Christ (3:1–4) and asserted God's sovereign control of the events of history (3:13). He used the certainty of Christ's return as an incentive to appeal for godly living (3:14).

GREETINGS (1:1–2)

Peter identified himself as a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ. He addressed his words to those who had received faith in Christ. His references in 1:16; 2:1; and 3:1 suggest that he had a specific congregation in mind. Peter wanted his readers to experience God's loving favor and spiritual wholeness because of their clear, personal knowledge of Jesus.

GOD'S PROVISIONS (1:3–21)

Peter presented four sources of power for spiritual development in his readers. He wanted the commitment of his readers to be a throbbing, pulsating experience that was maturing in its understanding.

First, he assumed the calling and election of his readers. Their special position in God's plan had provided a union with Christ which allowed them to overcome the moral corruption of the world. The new birth of these readers and their receipt of God's blessings provided an incentive to nurture eight qualities of Christian character in their lives. If Peter's readers developed these Christian graces, they would not fall into spiritual ruin, and they would have a glorious entrance into God's presence.

Second, Peter mentioned his own witness as an incentive for spiritual growth. Peter's use of the future tense may suggest that he was considering writing a document in the future that would remind his

readers of his teaching. Peter felt that his coming death made the writing of this testament imperative. He intended, as long as he was alive, to stimulate his friends to devoted commitment by repeated reminders.

As a third source of power Peter mentioned the majestic glory of Christ. The recipients of 2 Peter had likely encountered those who mocked the idea of a powerful, heavenly Christ who could strengthen them for godly living. Peter had been an eyewitness of Christ's majesty in the transfiguration. He could testify that the glory of Jesus was a reality they could experience.

A final source of power for the readers was the prophetic message of Scripture. Peter felt that the transfiguration and other events in Jesus' life made the scriptural picture of Jesus more sure and certain. Christians are able to find guidance from this word until Christ returns in person. Peter stated that the Scripture was reliable because it had a divine rather than human origin.

DANGER (2:1–22)

Peter used pictorial words to warn his readers of the danger they faced from the false teachers. In 2:1–3 he pictured the immorality and greed of the false teachers. In 2:4–9 he used Old Testament examples of judgment on sin in order to show the certainty of punishment for followers of the false teachers. He described God's condemnation of the angels who sinned (v. 4), the judgment of the world of Noah (v. 5), and the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. He promised deliverance for the godly by referring to the preservation of Noah and Lot. He denounced the pride, lust, and greed of the heretics. He indicated that those who followed the empty teachings of the heretics were deluded by empty promises.

In 2:20–22 Peter warned that those who had made a superficial commitment to Christ and had turned back to sin were in a more culpable state than before their response. The false teachers had experienced some knowledge of Christian truth which had given them short victory over worldly corruption. A true knowledge of Jesus would have affected them permanently. They were in a worse condition because they had turned from the truth about Christ which they had once received. Their condition of willful rejection made their disobedience a more blameworthy experience. The two proverbs in verse 22 show the folly of returning to a lifestyle of disobedience after an initial response toward Christ. Peter would scarcely use the terms "dog" and "sow" of believers. The passing of time had demonstrated that the false teachers had made a pretense of faith in Christ, but their faith was not genuine.

HOPE (3:1–13)

Peter discussed a doctrinal failure of the false teachers, their denial of Jesus' return. In 3:1–4 he reminded his readers of the incentive to obedience provided by the promise of Jesus' return. False teachers were looking skeptically at such promises because the stability of the universe did not indicate that God was about to break again into history.

Peter responded to the denials of the heretics by suggesting that the present regularity of the world was not an argument for permanent continuance in the same form. The God who held the universe together by His word could alter it with the same word. In favor of a belief in Jesus' return, Peter also argued that God viewed time differently from human beings. The true explanation for the delay in Christ's return was to allow an opportunity for sinners to respond in faith to Jesus. Peter believed that Christ's promise to return would be fulfilled with destructive power at a time when sinners would least expect it.

The fact of Jesus' promised return could provide strength for a new attitude of holiness and commitment. Peter hinted that Christians could "speed" Jesus' return by renewed vigor in evangelism and devout living.

CLOSING COMMANDS (3:14–18)

Peter reminded his readers that an anticipation of Christ's future return carried with it the incentive to produce a holy life. He referred to Paul's writings as a support for Peter's belief that divine patience was a factor in the delay of Jesus' return. Many see a reference by Peter to Romans, but Peter left his Pauline source unstated. Peter acknowledged the difficulty of some of Paul's teachings, but he suggested their authority by naming them as "Scripture." Peter boldly stated that his recipients could protect themselves spiritually by mature Christian growth. The "knowledge" they needed was a development in personal acquaintance with Christ.

Theological Significance. The abiding emphases in 2 Peter, with its call for spiritual growth (chap. 1), its warning of false teaching (chap. 2), and its call for holy living in view of the Lord's certain return (chap. 3) are just as relevant for our generation as they were for Peter's. Such features as these have commended it to the consciousness of the church as an inspired writing. Peter's two letters help the church focus its response to external opposition (1 Peter) as well as to evildoers who have come into the church (2 Peter).

1 JOHN

Leaders in the early church assumed that John the apostle wrote this letter although the author never identified himself by name. Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Tertullian all argued for apostolic authorship of this epistle.

Evidence supporting apostolic authorship is the similar vocabulary between the Gospel and the epistle. Such terms as "light" and "eternal life" appear in both writings. The author claimed that he was a companion of Christ during His earthly ministry (1:1–4). His description of his readers as "dear children" (2:1) indicates a person of sufficient authority to address his audience in this manner. All of these features point toward apostolic authorship. Some who question apostolic authorship favor an authorship by "John the elder" mentioned in Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39). Some feel that the term "John the elder" is merely an alternate way of referring to John the apostle.

Date. Little specific material is available for a precise dating of 1 John. Tradition indicates that John later spent a significant ministry in Ephesus. The epistle is usually dated during that ministry. The close link with the Fourth Gospel demands a date during the same period as the writing of that Gospel. Most who assume a common authorship for Gospel and epistle will date the epistle in the mid-90s.

Recipients. The letter has no named recipients mentioned within it. Identification of the readers as "dear children" (2:1) and "Dear friends" (2:7) suggests they were a group well known by John. It is best to view the letter as addressed to a group of people perhaps in more than one Asian community. John personally knew them and wrote to warn them of the infiltration of false teaching (4:1–2).

Theme. The epistle of John presents three criteria for testing the Christian profession of teachers and individual Christians. First, professing Christians needed to present righteousness as the right behavior (2:3–4). Second they must demonstrate love as the correct attitude of Christian living (4:8). Third, they needed to hold to the correct view of Christ as the proper teaching of Christians (4:3). Those who demonstrate these three traits have eternal life. John would repeat these three themes several times in the epistle as tests to determine the presence of eternal life.

Literary Form. The letter lacks an introduction and greeting from the author. It expresses no thanksgiving and lacks a concluding salutation. The author never mentioned the name of another Christian in the writing. He never quoted the Old Testament. The epistle reads like a sermon, but there are sections in which there are clear indications that John wrote to specific people with specific problems (2:1, 26).

The style of writing involves much repetition, often with deceptively simply phrasing of words. John alternated emphases on the necessity of right attitude, right action, and right belief. John believed that the practice of these patterns demonstrated the possession of eternal life and distinguished believers from unbelievers.

- I. Fellowship with God (1:1–2:6)
- II. New Commandment (2:7–17)
- III. False Teaching (2:18–28)
- IV. Right Living (2:29–3:10)
- V. Priority of Love (3:11–24)
- VI. Right Belief (4:1–6)
- VII. God’s Love (4:7–21)
- VIII. Victory of Faith (5:1–12)
- IX. Eternal Life (5:13–21)

Purpose and Theology. John wrote to strengthen the joy (1:4) of his readers and to give them assurance of their relationship with Jesus Christ (5:13). He also wanted to prepare them for dealing with false teachers (4:1–3).

John advocated the genuineness of Christ’s humanity (1:1–2), and he called those who questioned the reality of Jesus’ incarnation “antichrists” (4:1–3). He presented the death of Christ as an atoning sacrifice for sins (2:2), and he taught the return of Christ (2:28). He denied the idea that Christians could make a practice of sinning (3:8–9), and he called for a demonstration of the reality of faith by ministry (3:16–18).

He opposed both moral laxity and theological errors centering around the person and work of Christ. He opposed Docetism, the denial of the reality of Christ’s body, by teaching that he had heard, seen, and touched Christ (1:1). He also emphasized that the same Jesus Christ appeared at both the baptism and the crucifixion (5:6).

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD (1:1–2:6)

John began the epistle with a proclamation of the apostolic message. He proclaimed the preexistence and genuine humanity of Christ. He expressed that he was a reliable witness of Jesus’ message. In verse 4 he expressed that producing joy in his readers was one of the purposes of this letter. John emphasized that a full experience of joy depended on genuine fellowship with Christ.

In 1:5–2:6 John emphasized the importance of right action in the Christian life. He began with a declaration of the divine character in 1:5–7. John stated that God had revealed Himself as a God of perfect purity. Anyone who desired fellowship with Him must walk in obedience to His revealed will. John explained that those who denied the practice of sin were deceived, but those who admitted their sin experienced forgiveness and cleansing.

John wrote these words in order to prevent his readers from committing sin. He felt that whenever we commit sin, Christ functions as our advocate in the Father’s presence and assures our standing before Him (2:1). Christ functions for believers both as a defender and as an atoning sacrifice. The sinlessness of Jesus qualifies Him to be our defender or advocate.

Christ volunteered to serve as our atoning sacrifice for sin. The term translated “atoning sacrifice” is sometimes rendered “propitiation.” The term suggests that our sin against God demands that some form

of sacrifice be given to satisfy God's offended holiness. Something in God's nature demanded this propitiation, but something in that same nature was moved with love to provide it. The love of the Father led Him to provide the sacrifice of His Son.

The revelation of God's purity and holiness led John to emphasize that obedience to God's commands provides fellowship with God. Those who would enjoy fellowship with God must follow in the love, holiness, and service that characterized Christ.

NEW COMMANDMENT (2:7–17)

John emphasized the importance of right attitude as an evidence of genuine Christianity. A believer will love Christian brothers and not the world.

John indicated that the command to love others was a new command. It is new in that Christ's own example of love filled the command with new meaning and application. The response to the command of love clearly indicates character. One who habitually fails to love others shows that he lives in the darkness of sin and not in the light of God's presence.

ATONEMENT

The English word *atone* means *to make reconciliation*. It is based on the English phrase at one. Generally the word atone refers to the condition "atone-ness" or "reconciliation." Specifically the word is used to refer to the process by which obstacles to such reconciliation are removed. The entire Bible demonstrates that outside of some atoning action, humankind is estranged from God. This alienation, brought on by sin, must be remedied.

In the Old Testament *atone* and *atonement* are based on the Hebrew *kpr*, which means *to cover* or, as some have suggested, *to wipe clean*. Words based on *kpr* are found primarily in the Pentateuch with a few references elsewhere. The Septuagint translated *kpr* and its derivatives primarily by the word family containing *exilaskomai*, *exilasmos*, and *hilasterion*.

The word *atonement* is not found in most translations of the New Testament. (However, the NIV has "atone," "sacrifice of atonement," "place of atonement," and "atoning sacrifice." Also note that Romans 5:11 in the KJV has "atonement," but it renders *katallage* and is properly translated "reconciliation," as seen in all modern translations.)

The *concept* of atonement pervades the fabric of New Testament thought. In the New Testament atonement is centered in Christ's incarnation and especially His work on the cross. The New Testament presents human beings in their natural condition as totally estranged from God. They are "alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds" (Col. 1:21). This alienation and hostility outside of Christ is the basic presupposition of New Testament anthropology. It graphically presents humanity's need for atonement. The cause for human estrangement is persistent rebellion to the will of God. God's holiness and righteousness make clear that sin cannot be ignored; sin has its retribution, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Outside of God's intervention and provision, humanity is absolutely helpless to remedy the situation (Rom. 5:6, 8). The sinner is "dead in ... trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1).

God provides deliverance from that which held humankind away from Him. In His infinite compassion and love, He provides atonement in the person of Jesus Christ. The stated purpose of the incarnation was that Jesus came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Christ's atoning work is particularly connected with His death on the cross. "We are reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (Rom. 5:10). This death provided "propitiation in His blood," which must be accompanied "by faith" (Rom. 3:25).

God is the source of atonement. In the Old Testament God had provided the sacrificial system to effect reconciliation, but in the New Testament God not only initiates atonement but He also brings it to completion. In no sense is the merciful Son championing the rights of humankind against the severe

Father who gives forgiveness only grudgingly. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19).

The result of the atonement is that the breach between God and humanity is bridged. Fellowship with God is restored because that which has disrupted that relationship has been removed. Through Christ’s sacrifice not only is humanity’s sin removed, but we also are delivered from our former “futile way of life” (1 Pet. 1:18). Another consequence of the atonement is that the individual in Christ is delivered from selfishness and enabled to live with Christ as Lord (Rom. 14:9; 2 Cor. 5:15).

The New Testament presents a rich and varied treasury of expression concerning the atonement. The words *hilasterion*, *hilaskomai*, and *hilasmos* are from a root word meaning *appease* or *propitiate*. In Romans 3:25 the word *hilasterion* is rendered “propitiation” in the KJV and NASB. It is translated “sacrifice of atonement” in the NIV and “expiation” in the RSV. In Hebrews 9:5 the same word is translated “mercy seat” in the KJV, NASB, and RSV and “place of atonement” by the NIV. In Hebrews 2:17 the word *hilaskomai* is translated “reconciliation” by the KJV, “propitiation” by the NASB, “atonement” by the NIV, “expiation” by the RSV. The same word in Luke 18:13 is rendered “be merciful” in the KJV, NASB, and RSV and “have mercy” in the NIV.

In both 1 John 2:2 and 4:10 the word *hilasmos* is translated “propitiation” by the NASB, “atoning sacrifice” by the NIV, and “expiation” by the RSV.

A second word family containing *lytron*, *lytroo*, *apolytroosis*, and *antilytron* should be explored. The first of these words is fairly consistently understood as “ransom” by the KJV; the second is given as “redeem” or “redeemed”; the third and fourth are “ransom.” The Bible student should also consider the sacrificial terminology applied to Christ.

Sin effectively keeps people from God. In His atoning work God has secured reconciliation through the work of Jesus Christ. “For he himself is our peace, who ... broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in his flesh the enmity ... establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity” (Eph. 2:14–16). In Christ atonement for the believer has been made complete.

In 2:12–14 John assured his readers that they were recipients of strength and help from the Word of God to assist in their spiritual struggles. In 2:15–17 John urged his readers not to love the pagan, self-centered lifestyle that surrounded them. Such a worldly love excluded love for God and also led the Christian to focus on a style of living that was slowly dying.

FALSE TEACHING (2:18–28)

John emphasized the importance of right belief as an indication of genuine Christianity. The term “antichrist” described those who disrupted fellowship in the churches by holding the wrong doctrine about Christ. The distinctive beliefs of these false teachers are in verses 22–23.

Believers stood secure against the false teaching of the antichrists because of three sources of strength. First, they had the anointing of the Holy Spirit. This provided the capacity to understand spiritual things. Second, they had made a personal commitment to the Christian message. Third, they were living in union with Jesus Christ.

RIGHT LIVING (2:29–3:10)

John again emphasized the importance of right action as a demonstration of Christian commitment. Christians who had been divinely begotten of God had the privilege of experiencing God’s love and living as members of His family. They were to demonstrate their family membership by righteous living. John indicated that Christ had come to take away our sins (3:5). Jesus had died for the purpose of causing us to stop sinning.

John pointed out that the person who made a practice of sinning had never known Christ. In verse 9 he indicated that the experience of a believer in conversion rendered the practice of sin a moral impossibility. John was not suggesting that a Christian will never commit an act of sin. He did indicate that a believer could not live in the practice of sin.

The conclusion in verse 10 pointed out the importance of righteous behavior and also underscored the significance of loving other believers. It makes a good transition from discussion of right action to another presentation of the proper attitude, an attitude of love.

THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE

What does it mean to be human? What is person-hood? Is it ever morally justifiable to take human life? These and other emotionally charged questions, all of which revolve around the perennial issue of the value of human life, are being raised anew in the current debates concerning a host of complex ethical issues.

The Bible clearly puts forth what may be termed a high view of the value of human life. In contrast to many contemporary outlooks, however, the Scriptures do not ground this evaluation in society or even in the human person, as important as that is, but squarely in the creative activity of God. This activity gives a special place in creation to human beings as those who bear the image of God.

These themes are sounded in the opening chapters of the Bible. The first creation account reports God's intent as expressed on the sixth day of the creative week: "Let us make man in our image" (Gen. 1:26). God's purpose comes to fruition in the creation of human beings—male and female—each of whom, as a result, is to share in the divine image. Genesis 1 and 2 indicate that the image of God is a multisided concept. It refers to the responsibility of acting as stewards over creation. It includes as well the relational nature of human beings: we are created to live together in community with one another and with God. As a result, human life is of value because God has entered into a covenant with humans, entrusting them with a special purpose, a specific role in the divine plan for creation.

Creation in God's image subsequently became an integral part of the Hebrew mind-set. It forms a basis for biblical injunctions concerning fair treatment of others. God's covenant with Noah after the flood, for example, includes a serious penalty for murder, based on an appeal to the creation of each person in the divine image (Gen. 9:6). So ingrained was this idea that James could matter-of-factly state to his original Hebrew-Christian readership, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness" (3:9). He appealed to human creation in the divine image as a basis for respecting other humans even in our speaking to and about each other.

Creation in God's image and the resulting value of human life is incomplete, however, without the future orientation given to it by the New Testament. For Paul, Jesus Christ is preeminently the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15).

Believers truly participate in the image in that they are being transformed into Christ's likeness (2 Cor. 3:18), a process directed toward the coming of God's kingdom at Christ's return (1 John 3:2). As a result, the value of human life is ultimately based on God's salvation purpose, which is directed toward the future completion of all God's activities. At that point God's purposes in the creation of humans will find its full realization.

On the basis of these considerations, the value of life can and should be seen as bestowed on all humans by God as God's gift. Because all persons are the objects of God's love in Christ and are all potential participants in God's kingdom, all human life is valuable. God calls all humans and human society to acknowledge the value God and God alone has placed in each human being.

PRIORITY OF LOVE (3:11–24)

John mentioned the importance of the demonstration of a proper attitude, love, as evidence of genuine faith. John presented love as the proof that we have passed from death into life. He located the chief

revelation of love in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. The chief manner in which we as believers demonstrate our love is by our kindness and mercy in ministry to others.

In verses 19–24 John indicated that our love brought with it an assurance of our standing with God. If we demonstrate this love, we are able to set our hearts at rest in God’s presence. The assurance that love brings will carry with it an experience of boldness before God and also an assurance of effectiveness in the practice of prayer.

FALSE TEACHING (4:1–6)

John expressed the importance of right belief as an evidence of genuine Christianity. John was speaking of people who claimed to be Christians but who spoke as deadly opponents of Christianity. He was also referring to church services much more informal than our own. In these early services visitors could stand and claim to speak by the Spirit of God. John wanted to provide direction to distinguish between the true and the false.

John directed his readers to test the words of those who claimed to speak for God because of the possibility of the presence of false prophets (v. 1). The test by which the utterances were to be judged was the acceptance of Jesus Christ as God’s incarnate Son. As his readers struggled with the presence of false teaching, John assured them that the victory ultimately belonged to them. He also indicated that the worldly message of the false prophets would attract an audience that was gullible in their acceptance of falsehood.

GOD’S LOVE (4:7–21)

In this section John again underscored the importance of a demonstration of love. He presented love as a disposition that originated in the divine nature.

John appealed for believers to love for two reasons. First, such love has its source and dynamic in God. Second, God is characterized by love. Both reasons blend together so that one runs into the other. The greatness of the divine love for us leaves us with an incentive to love one another. Our practice of love for one another provides evidence that God’s love for us has attained its goal.

In verses 13–16 the apostle discussed the relationship between love and the indwelling of God. He suggested that it is not enough merely to know that God is love. Believers must live daily in the sphere of divine love. In so doing they genuinely live in God’s presence and have God living in them.

In verses 17–21 John mentioned two evidences of the presence of a ripened fruit of love in a Christian’s life. First, such love provides confidence on the day of the coming judgment. Second, this love leads to a genuine concern for fellow Christians.

VICTORY OF FAITH (5:1–12)

John began this section by stating the chief confession of faith that should characterize Christians. Christians are those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Those who are genuine believers demonstrate it by their love for God and obedience to His commandments. The faith that provides strength for spiritual victory is the faith that Jesus is God’s incarnate Son.

In verse 6 John outlined more specifically who Jesus is as the Son of God. John’s opponents held that Jesus was a mere man to whom the divine Christ spirit came at baptism and from whom this spirit departed before crucifixion. John taught that Jesus was the divine Son of God at both baptism and crucifixion, throughout the entire course of His life.

In verses 7–12 John showed that our faith in Jesus Christ has a good foundation. The KJV text makes a reference to the Trinity in verse 7 that most modern translations omit. The best texts of verses 7–8 suggest that the Spirit, the water, and the blood all unite in their witness to Christ. The Spirit

presented His witness at Jesus' baptism and throughout the totality of Jesus' ministry. The terms "water" and "blood" are a reference, respectively, to Christ's baptism and death. John also referred to the witness of the Father and to the witness of personal experience. The truth to which all of the preceding witnesses testified was that eternal life is available only through God's Son, Jesus.

ETERNAL LIFE (5:13–21)

In 5:13 John indicated that he had written this epistle to lead believers to an assurance that they possessed eternal life. John suggested that assurance that we have been accepted with God provides an assurance toward receiving answers in prayer. He urged that Christians practice intercessory prayer, particularly for fellow believers caught in the trickery of sin. He concluded with the statement that Jesus' death had made possible holiness in the life of each Christian, the new birth, and a genuine knowledge of God.

Theological Significance. This letter speaks to contemporary Christians in a significant way. Today there are many people who profess to know God and have fellowship with Him but do not demonstrate such faith at all. John's tests concerning obedience, love, and belief provide warnings for the unfaithful as well assurance for genuine believers. To be sure that we know God, we must keep His commandment. If we lack love for others, it indicates we do not know the love of God in our hearts. Foundationally we must believe rightly about Jesus Christ. He is the Christ, the Son of God, who has come in the flesh. This important triad calls the contemporary church to a strong, balanced faith. We must grow stronger and stronger in all areas of our Christian life.

2 JOHN

The brevity and lack of a specific address for 2 John led to its neglect in the early church. Few early Christian leaders made reference to it, but some knew of the epistle. Eusebius placed it and 3 John among the disputed books of the New Testament, but after his time both writings were generally received with little dispute.

The writer described himself as "the elder," and many have seen this as an affectionate title for the aged apostle John. This epistle has a similarity of style and vocabulary with 1 John and with John's Gospel. The false teaching of 2 John 7 is similar to that of 1 John 4:1–3. Some have felt that an unknown "John the Elder" penned this writing, but this elder is a shadowy figure whose existence is uncertain. It is best to see John the apostle as the elder who wrote these words.

Date. The interval between the writing of 1 John and 2 John was not great. The false teaching John had mentioned in 1 John 4:1–3 was still a problem for the readers of 2 John. A date in the mid-90s seems most likely.

Recipients. John wrote to "the chosen lady and her children." This may be a reference to a personal friend of John. Some have pointed to the use of "lady" in verses 1, 5 and the description of her children in verses 1, 4 as evidence to take the term in reference to a person. Some have even named the woman as "Kyria" (the Greek word for "lady") or "Electa" (the Greek word for "chosen").

Another more likely interpretation is to see "lady" as a personification for a local church and its members. The Greek word for "church" is feminine in gender. This gender is normally used in speaking

of the church. Also a church would more likely have a reputation for truth than a single family (2 John 4).

Theme. John mentioned twin themes in writing 2 John. First, he urged his readers to practice love with one another (2 John 5). Second, he called them to practice truth in affirming the correct doctrine about Jesus (2 John 7–11).

Literary Form. This writing is more clearly in letter form than 1 John. John mentioned specific recipients and also included a final greeting. He wrote to a specific community with a doctrinal problem. The epistle contains no reference or allusion to the Old Testament.

- I. Greetings (vv. 1–3)
- II. Encouragement (vv. 4–6)
- III. Warning (vv. 7–11)
- IV. Conclusion (vv. 12–13)

Purpose and Theology. The false teachers whom John denounced denied the true humanity of Jesus Christ. Their specific error was likely Docetism, a denial of the reality of Jesus' human body. The false teachers traveled among the churches and took advantage of Christian hospitality. John expected his readers to offer hospitality to traveling Christians, but he urged his readers to refuse such hospitality to itinerant heretics (vv. 10–11).

John also urged his readers to practice love with one another. This love would lead them to walk in obedience to God's commands (vv. 5–6).

GREETING (vv. 1–3)

John described himself as an "elder." The term may refer either to an official title (see 1 Pet. 5:1), or it may describe John affectionately as an old man.

John designated his recipients as "the chosen lady and her children." Some have felt that her name was "Kyria" and others have chosen "Electa." If her name were "Electa," we would have to say that she also had a sister of the same name. If the recipient were an individual, she would likely be anonymous. The phrase is more likely a reference to some local church over which the elder had authority. The "children" were members of that church. John's statement of love and the command to love would be more suitable for a church than for a person. The command not to host false teachers is also more suitable for a local church than for a single home.

The feature that united John with his readers was their common love for the truth (vv. 1b–2). Grace indicated God's provision of salvation, and God's gift of mercy demonstrated the depth of human need of it. Peace is a description of the character of salvation.

ENCOURAGEMENT (vv. 4–6)

John had met some of the children of the lady, perhaps members of the church, in his travel. Their conduct had impressed him. The meeting led to a single request: Love one another. That request led John to consider the link between love and obedience. If we love God, we will obey Him. Our love for Him expresses itself in our obedience.

WARNING (vv. 7–11)

John warned against deceivers who led others astray. The doctrine they stressed involved a denial of the incarnation. Christians affirmed the genuine humanity of Jesus when they said, "Christ has come in the

flesh.” Jesus did not become Christ at the baptism or cease to be Christ before His death. He was Christ come in the flesh.

John warned his readers against losing their reward for faithful service by falling into doctrinal error (v. 8). He affirmed that one who erred at this important point did not have God.

John included an additional warning in verses 10–11. He warned against providing any sort of official welcome for those who erred in their doctrine of Christ. John was not promoting intolerance, nor was he violating his earlier appeal to “love one another.” He was warning against extending any form of support for those who erred at the point of the genuine humanity of Christ. We should not apply John’s words to cause us to separate from those whose opinions we happen to dislike.

CONCLUSION (vv. 12–13)

Although John had much he desired to communicate to his readers, he did not want to use another sheet of papyrus for writing. He preferred to speak face to face so that he could not be misunderstood. He anticipated a time of future visitation so that they might experience a future completion of joy.

John’s concluding word in verse 13 sounds more like a message of greeting from members of one church to the recipients to whom he wrote.

3 JOHN

There is little evidence for the use of 3 John before the third century. The brevity and lack of a specific address for the letter would have contributed to its neglect. Eusebius classified the letter among the disputed writings of the New Testament, but the church came to accept it as a product of the apostle John.

The use of the term “elder” in common with 2 John makes it likely that both writings came from the same writer. Both letters also make reference to the practice of walking in the truth (2 John 4; 3 John 3). These similar practices plus the opinion of early Christian leaders make the acceptance of apostolic authorship the wisest choice.

Date. The similarities just mentioned make it likely that both 2 John and 3 John were written near the same time. It is possible that the writer referred to 2 John in his description of writing to the church in 3 John 9. No clear scriptural evidence exists, however, of the order of writing the two letters. A date in the mid-90’s seems most likely.

Recipients. John named the recipient of 3 John (v. 1), but we have no idea of the specific location to which he wrote. Church tradition has placed John at Ephesus during the latter years of his life. It seems reasonable that this is a letter to some churches in Asia for which John had pastoral responsibilities. It is not certain from 3 John that both Gaius and Diotrephes belonged to the same church, but both men probably lived close together.

Theme. This letter presents a contrast between the truth and service demonstrated by Gaius and the arrogance shown by Diotrephes. John emphasized that “truth” was a type of behavior that agreed with the doctrine Christians professed (3 John 8). The autocratic behavior of Diotrephes violated this behavior. John wanted to bring his domineering practices to an end.

Literary Form. This writing has the form of a typical letter. Both the author and recipient are identified. A conclusion with a collection of Christian greetings appears at the end. The misbehavior of Diotrephes provided a specific occasion for the writing of the letter.

- I. Greeting (v. 1)
- II. Gaius's Hospitality (vv. 2–8)
- III. Diotrephes (vv. 9–11)
- IV. A Future Visit (vv. 12–14)

Purpose and Theology. John wrote both to commend and rebuke. He commended Gaius for his unselfish behavior and Christian hospitality. He rebuked the domineering Diotrephes for his dictatorial practices. He also praised Demetrius (v. 12), who probably carried the letter. The length of the letter allows little opportunity for theological expression.

GREETING (v. 1)

John's use of the term "elder" duplicates that of 2 John. It is impossible to determine whether Gaius was the same as others mentioned by that name in the New Testament (see Acts 19:29; 20:4). It was one of the most common names in the Roman Empire.

GAIUS'S HOSPITALITY (vv. 2–8)

John acknowledged that the spiritual growth of Gaius was progressing well and wished that his physical health might be in the same condition. Some traveling missionaries ("brothers"), probably sent out by John, had commended Gaius for his loyalty to the truth of the gospel and his demonstration of love. John regarded Gaius as his spiritual child and indicated that a report of his spiritual growth filled him with joy.

John was fearful that the aggressive opposition of Diotrephes might lead Gaius to refrain from showing hospitality to traveling believers. He urged Gaius to continue what he had been doing.

Since we cannot know whether Gaius and Diotrephes attended the same church, we are uncertain of the nature of John's warning about Diotrephes. If both men were in the same church, John may have commended Gaius for not buckling under to Diotrephes. If they were in nearby churches, John could have warned Gaius about the high-handed actions of Diotrephes.

DIOTREPHEs (vv. 9–11)

John denounced Diotrephes for his pride, his wicked words, and his inhospitable treatment of traveling Christian missionaries. The motives for Diotrephes' actions do not seem to have been theological but personal and moral. Diotrephes was dominated by personal ambition.

John may have feared that Gaius would follow carelessly the bad example of Diotrephes. This led him to warn Gaius to choose his examples carefully. Gaius was to follow those who practiced good, not evil.

A FUTURE VISIT (vv. 12–14)

John commended Demetrius to the care of Gaius. He complimented Demetrius with the statement that "everyone" spoke well of him.

John's heart was full of thoughts and ideas to convey to his readers, but he withheld them in anticipation of a future visit. He had much more to say than he could include on a single sheet of the writing material known as papyrus.

JUDE

The author identified himself as “a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James.” In presenting himself as a brother of the Lord’s half-brother (Jas. 1:1), he modestly neglected to mention his own relationship to Jesus (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). Some have identified Jude as “Judas son of James” (Luke 6:16), but the author did not claim apostleship. He was initially an unbeliever (John 7:3–5), but he here displayed a vigorous faith.

The frequent use of the book in the early church, especially references by Tertullian and Origen, made it less controversial than 2 Peter. Some found its reference to apocryphal books a cause for questioning its genuineness.

Date. Suggestions for dating this letter vary widely. Little evidence is available for making a conclusive decision.

Some claim that the reference to “the salvation we share” (v. 3) implied a time in which Christians had agreed upon a body of widely accepted doctrine. This would be later than the likely lifetime of Jude. The reference to this common faith need mean no more than the common beliefs held by all Christians.

Others have suggested that the wickedness of the false teachers described in verses 5–13 represented a Gnostic viewpoint that appeared only during the second century. Jude’s description would fit any heresy in which immorality was prominent. It is possible to link Jude’s references clearly with a specific sect.

Recipients. No address for the readers appears in Jude. The readers might have been Jews or Gentiles who lived anywhere. Jude had a concrete situation in mind, but it is impossible to locate it precisely. The statements of verses 17–18 have led some to suggest that the readers knew apostles within the region of Palestine. This is a possible but unproven hypothesis.

Theme. Jude began with the intention of discussing the theme of “salvation.” Awareness of the infiltration of false teachers led Jude to emphasize two features. First, he warned against and condemned false teachers who were heavily influencing his area. Second, he urged his readers to greater firmness and commitment.

Literary Form. Despite the lack of a specific address, Jude’s letter is directed to a specific situation. It is more impersonal than John’s epistles. Jude was fond of mentioning items in triads (v. 2: “mercy, peace, and love”; v. 11: Cain, Balaam, and Korah). The majestic doxology provides a moving conclusion to Jude’s words (vv. 24–25).

- I. Greetings (vv. 1–2)
- II. Occasion for Writing (vv. 3–4)
- III. Be Alert (vv. 5–16)
- IV. Resist (vv. 17–23)
- V. Doxology (vv. 24–25)

Purpose and Theology. Jude intended to produce a message about the common salvation he shared with his readers (v. 3). His awareness of the appearance of heresy led him to change his emphasis to a denunciation of the heresy surrounding him. Jude gave direction for halting the advance of heresy among his readers in verses 17–23.

The epistle contains little theological content because the purpose was largely practical. One controversial feature of the book is the references to the apocryphal books of 1 Enoch (v. 14) and the Assumption of Moses (v. 9). Some have seen these references as a liability to accepting the authority of Jude, but Paul quoted a heathen poet in Acts 17:28. He also referred to a noncanonical writing in 2 Timothy 3:8. Jude appears to have viewed his references to the Apocrypha as authoritative, and he apparently accepted the historicity of the incident in the Assumption of Moses. He used his references more as an illustration to substantiate his points.

GREETINGS (vv. 1–2)

Jude identified himself as a follower of Jesus Christ and “a brother of James.” Jude was listed among the brothers of Jesus (Mark 6:3). His brother James is the probable author of the epistle of James. Jude gave no geographical designation to his readers, but he presented them as those who were “called,” “loved by God,” and “kept by Jesus Christ.” Jude wished his readers an experience of mercy that would allow them to know the benefits of peace and love.

OCCASION FOR WRITING (vv. 3–4)

Jude had prepared to write a letter on the theme of “salvation” when he learned of the entrance of false teachers. He urged his readers to contend for the faith by living godly, obedient lives. He described the false teachers as “godless men,” who stood condemned before God because of their denial of Jesus’ lordship.

BE ALERT (vv. 5–16)

Jude pictured the heretics as deserving to receive God’s judgments just as the unbelieving Jews, the sinning angels, and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had merited judgment.

He showed that the false teachers were arrogantly defying God by their perverse moral behavior. They disdained angelic creatures whom they failed to understand. Jude commended the example of the angel Michael, who did not deal with the devil’s protests on his own authority. Jude used this story from the apocryphal Assumption of Moses to demonstrate a proper attitude toward the supernatural.

In verses 10–13 he used historical examples from the Old Testament to characterize the false teachers as materialistic and immoral. They were as greedy as Balaam and as rebellious as Korah.

In verses 14–15 Jude cited a statement from 1 Enoch to prove the reality of divine judgment upon the ungodly. Jude was not necessarily viewing 1 Enoch as inspired, but he was referring to a book his readers would know and respect.

RESIST (vv. 17–23)

Jude reminded his readers that the apostles had warned against the divisiveness and spiritual emptiness of the coming false teachers. The recipients were to build themselves up with prayer and obedience. They also were to offer help to wandering believers who need both an experience of divine mercy and the wisdom to avoid corruption.

DOXOLOGY (vv. 24–25)

Jude’s mind focused on the power of almighty God who alone could provide the strength needed for full obedience. In verse 24 he praised God for His sustaining power toward believers. In verse 25 he ascribed “glory, majesty, power and authority” to God because of the work of Jesus Christ.

Theological Significance. Jude's warnings regarding false teachers need to be sounded again in today's churches. The people of God must contend for the faith that has been entrusted to them. Jude reminds us of the seriousness of the Christian faith and Christian teaching. False teachers who oppose the truth must be prepared to face the judgment of God. True believers must faithfully maintain the truth and keep themselves in the love of God. The exhortations to watch, pray, convince the doubters, and lead others into the way of salvation must be heard and obeyed.

THE REVELATION

ROBERT B. SLOAN

The Book of Revelation is a work of intensity. Forged in the flames of the author's personal tribulation, it employs the language of biblical allusion and apocalyptic symbolism to express the heights and depths of the author's visionary experience. The result is a work of scriptural and prophetic magnitude.

To encourage Christian faithfulness, Revelation points to the glorious world to come (a world of "no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain," 21:4; compare 7:16) at the reappearing of the crucified and risen Jesus. This now-enthroned Lord will return to conclude world history (and the tribulations of the readers) with the destruction of God's enemies, the final salvation of His own people, and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth.

The intensity of the prophet's experience is matched only by the richness of the apocalyptic symbolism he employs to warn his readers of the impending disasters and temptations that will require their steadfast allegiance to the risen Lord. To be sure, the Lord will come in power and majesty, but not before His enemies have exercised a terrible (albeit limited by the divine mercy) attack upon those who "hold to the testimony of Jesus" (6:9; 12:17; 20:4).

The author's situation was one of suffering. He was a "fellow-partaker in the tribulation" that is "in Jesus," who because of his testimony to Jesus was now exiled to the island of Patmos (1:9). The situation of the recipients, that is, "the seven churches that are in Asia" (1:4), seems not yet so dire. To be sure, a faithful Christian in Pergamum had suffered death (2:13), and the church in Smyrna was warned of a time of impending persecution (2:10). But the persecutions described in Revelation, though a very real and threatening prospect for the churches of the Roman province of Asia, are still largely anticipated at the time of John's writing.

John's readers might have felt secure, but John knew such security would be short-lived. He called them to faith in the coming Christ and loyal obedience to Him during the time of persecution and tribulation to come. "To him who overcomes I will give the right to sit with me on my throne.... He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (3:21-22).

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

The Greek word *apokalypsis* ("apocalypse"), found in Revelation 1:1, provides the title for the final and climactic book of the Bible. In modern literary study Revelation, Daniel, several other biblical books (to a lesser degree), and a wide range of extrabiblical Jewish writings have been characterized as examples of biblically related apocalyptic literature. Similarities in thought and form have also been noted with certain Persian apocalyptic writings and elsewhere.

The Age of Apocalyptic Literature, It is almost universally agreed that the first full-blown example of biblical apocalyptic is the Book of Daniel. Other limited Old Testament inclusions of apocalyptic may be seen in Ezekiel and Zechariah. Certain scholars place Daniel during the Maccabean period of Jewish history, specifically about 165 B.C. But there is no compelling evidence against dating it in its stated sixth-century B.C. setting along with Ezekiel or viewing Zechariah as having a fifth-century B.C. point of origin.

Differences in the literary characteristics and thought patterns between earlier biblical apocalyptic and that of the intertestamental period must be viewed as a further, and only partly related literary, development. That conclusion becomes even clearer when we realize that Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah all contain numerous characteristics of biblical prophecy as well as apocalyptic. They could be categorized as “prophetic-apocalyptic,” perhaps more as a hybrid of the two types of literature than as a transitional form, especially considering that the New Testament Apocalypse (Revelation) also describes itself as prophecy (see Rev. 1:3; 22:18–19).

There is a sense in which the period between the early second century B.C. and the later second century A.D. represented the “flowering” of apocalyptic in Jewish circles. That is true even if only because so many apocalyptic books or portions, mostly extrabiblical, were written during that time. A number of such works have been traced to separatist groups like the Qumran community, famous for most of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

It is also accurate to refer to the latter part of that period as the high point and climax of biblical apocalyptic. The emergence of the Book of Revelation as well as Christ’s Olivet discourse, often referred to as a “little apocalypse,” represent the end of canonical apocalyptic literature. Jewish apocalyptic of a somewhat different style continued on in earnest for another century or so before beginning to give way to more formal mainstream Judaism.

Overall it seems fair to say that apocalyptic flourished during periods of foreign domination, starting with the Babylonian exile. The Maccabean era and the persecution of the church under the Roman Empire during the latter first century A.D. were similar historical contexts. After the second Jewish revolt against Rome in A.D. 135, apocalyptic began to decline and eventually ceased after the fourth century A.D.

Characteristics and Theology of Apocalyptic. There are several literary characteristics common to apocalyptic, as well as a relatively consistent pattern of theological thought. That does not mean that there may not be significant differences between various apocalyptic books. But the strikingly similar characteristics and theology marks them as legitimate examples of the apocalyptic form.

One agreed-upon characteristic is that all apocalyptic works claim to have been written by significant biblical characters. Books like Daniel and Revelation almost certainly were written by historical figures, as supported by strong internal and external evidence. However, most other apocalypses only assert that they were authored by important Old Testament (and some New Testament) figures (for example, Enoch, Ezra, Solomon) to gain a hearing, a feature called pseudonymity. Thus the actual writers of the bulk of apocalyptic works are unknown. Apocalyptic writing is also known by its use of visions and symbolism. The revelations, dreams, and visions were often narrated or interpreted by an angelic figure. Sometimes the writer is even caught up into the heavenly realm. The striking symbolism of Daniel’s visions is found to accurately portray the sweep of history in advance by its interpretive sections and later fulfillments. But such symbolism was taken to bizarre extremes by much of later apocalyptic. Also many of the pseudonymous apocalypses are little more than history that has been recast to appear to be futuristic prophecy, with the actual uncertainty about what was still future masked by vague symbolism.

In addition, apocalyptic focused side by side on the movement of world history, especially as it related to the Jewish people and coming of the Messiah. Apocalyptic writers were not just predicting the future but fitting its development into a theological framework, frequently with a climax of messianic intervention on behalf of God’s people. For example, Daniel 7 builds upon the earlier vision in Daniel 2.

But it clarifies the wider progression of beastlike world empires (7:3–8) by showing that the messianic figure. “The Son of Man,” will gain everlasting victory through God’s power (7:9–14), delivering and vindicating “the saints,” God’s people (7:21, 25–28).

The above consistent literary characteristics are paralleled by a broader theological pattern. Several interlocking theological emphases show up again and again in these writings, making vivid use of the literary style of apocalyptic. Again biblical and extrabiblical apocalypses are comparable at a number of points but also quite different at others.

Studies of apocalyptic often note that it is “dualistic” (God versus Satan) and “deterministic” (history is determined in advance in moving toward God’s ultimate victory). These outlooks have been used to compare biblically related apocalyptic to other types, such as the Persian form. However, the much more specific emphasis on what could be called spiritual warfare at its highest level and the loving but just sovereignty of God over history marks Jewish and Christian apocalyptic as truly distinctive. For example, the unseen angelic conflict in Daniel 10 leads into the movement that climaxes in the resurrection and divine judgment in Daniel 11–12. Also the climactic stratagems of the devil, his ongoing war against God, are ended by the appearing of Christ in Revelation 19:11–20:3.

Two other related theological perspectives can be called “eschatological realism” and an “Imminent expectation” (possible near occurrence) of the final events. Some scholars describe the conclusion that the end times will be a time of “great tribulation” (Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21; Rev. 7:14), suffering, and catastrophic events as pessimism. However, because that is the straightforward conclusion of what the apocalyptic works set forth, and because there is an inarguable, optimistic conclusion (God’s victory), it is better to view this overall pattern in terms of biblical realism.

With many of the extra-biblical apocalypses, this combination of anticipated suffering and possible near-term divine intervention combined to produce an ethically passive attitude. It apparently seemed to such apocalypticists that there was nothing that could be done except to hang on until the Lord intervened. However, biblical apocalyptic is marked by numerous challenges to godly living in light of the possible soon arrival of the climactic events of history (Dan. 12:2–3; Rev. 1:3; 21:7–8).

REVELATION

According to early Christian traditions, the Gospel of John, the three epistles of John, and Revelation were all written by the apostle John. Revelation is the only one of these books that actually claims to be written by someone named John.

The author does not claim to be the *apostle* John. Given the authority and prestige of the Twelve, no other first-century Christian leader was associated closely enough with the churches of Asia Minor to have spoken so authoritatively and to have referred to himself simply as John unless he were, in fact, the apostle. There are certainly differences of style and language between the Fourth Gospel and Revelation—as well as some remarkable similarities of thought and terminology. Regardless of the problems related to the authorship of the Fourth Gospel, however, it is not implausible to assume that the John of Revelation was, in fact, John the apostle, the son of Zebedee.

Date. Scholars have traditionally suggested two possible dates for the writing of Revelation. Suggested dates are based upon the repeated references to persecution (1:9; 2:2, 10, 13; 3:9–10; 6:10–11; 7:14–17; 11:7; 12:13–13:17; 14:12–13; 19:2; 21:4). It is well-known that the Roman emperor Nero (A.D. 54–68) persecuted Christians, and many think that a persecution took place under Domitian (A.D. 81–96) as well.

From the middle of the second century A.D., Christian authors usually referred to Domitian's reign as the time of John's writing, but there is no historical consensus supporting a persecution of Christians under Domitian, while hard evidence does exist for a persecution under Nero. In this century most New Testament scholars have opted for the later date under Domitian (about A.D. 95), though there has been a resurgence of opinion arguing for a setting just following the reign of Nero (about A.D. 68). The reference in 17:10 to "seven kings," of whom "five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come," fits well with this later dating. Nero was fifth in the line of Roman emperors beginning with Augustus (then Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero). The evil Nero, who persecuted Christians, died of a mortal wound (13:3, 14; 17:11). His name yields the number 666 when put into Hebrew from Greek (13:18), thus for John it would stand as the ultimate exemplar and prototype of the coming antichrist.

Whichever date is chosen, however, the setting must be clearly related to a time of persecution for the author and an anticipated expansion of persecution for the original audience.

Literary Forms. Revelation has traditionally been called an "apocalypse." Although the kind of literature was not known in the first century, what modern scholars now call "apocalyptic literature" certainly existed. In any case, John called himself a "prophet" and his work a "prophecy" (1:3; 22:10, 19). But he also gave it some of the features of a letter, or epistle, including an epistolary "greeting," an epistolary "conclusion" (22:21), and the overall tone of a Christian letter of "instruction," designed to be read aloud in worship (1:3, 11; 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

Within Revelation we find other forms of literature as well, especially hymns. Perhaps more so than any other book in the New Testament, the Book of Revelation may be called a book of Christian worship. Vision, symbol, prophecy, sermon, exhortation, Scripture citation, narrative, prayer, and dialogue are all frequently interspersed with heavenly (and sometimes earthly) choruses of praise and adoration. The Father is worshiped in hymnic praise for His creative power and sovereign purposes (4:8–11). The Lamb (Christ) is worshiped at His enthronement for His faithfulness unto death, a sacrifice of great redeeming power for the redemption of His people (5:8–14). Or, again, the Lord God, the Almighty, is worshiped for His triumph over evil through Christ (11:15–18). Heaven rejoices at both the expulsion of Satan upon the enthronement of Christ (12:10–12) and at the judgment of the great harlot upon the coming of Christ (19:1–7). The saints also rejoice with a "new song" of salvation (14:1–5) and at their redemption from the beast (15:2–4). Then, as now, God is worthy of all worship and devotion, for He has mercifully accomplished salvation for all who approach Him through Christ.

- I. Introduction (1:1–8)
- II. John's Vision (1:9–20)
- III. The Seven Churches (2:1–3:22)
- IV. God's Sovereignty (4:1–5:14)
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Theology. The Book of Revelation is often treated as if it constituted a world of its own within the canon of the New Testament. Certainly its status as apocalyptic literature, with its exceedingly strange symbolic images, its angelic guides, visionary experience, and cosmic as well as earthly catastrophes, justifies the commonly held perception of it as “strange” and “unusual.” But the extraordinary images, symbols, and experiences reflected in Revelation should not mislead us into isolating the book from the world of New Testament theology.

The Book of Revelation, in spite of its unusual language and symbolic traditions, has the basic apostolic theology at its core. The rest of the New Testament speaks profoundly about the same crucified, risen, and exalted Jesus who is variously portrayed in the Book of Revelation. Some of these portraits include: the strangely dressed, apocalyptic Son of man of chapter 1; the Lord of the churches of chapters 2–3; the Lamb/Lion of Judah of chapter 5; the Lord of judgment who pours out woes upon the earth by way of the seals, trumpets, and cups of chapters 6–19; the Child who is to rule the nations and who is exalted to the right hand of God of chapter 12; the Lamb and Son of man of chapter 14; the Word of God, who is the King of kings and Lord of lords who comes to do battle riding a white horse and having a robe dipped in blood of chapter 19; and the One who reigns upon the throne of God and is likewise the heavenly temple of chapters 20–22.

The focus of Revelation clearly falls upon the future coming of Christ. His coming will defeat the powers of Satan, those evil forces that oppress the people of God. The One who will come is none other than the same crucified and risen Jesus. The churches and those within them who have devoted themselves to the lordship of Jesus Christ are exhorted to remain faithful in the hour of affliction to Christ the crucified and risen Lord. Such exhortations to perseverance are widespread in the New Testament. (See Matt. 10:22; John 15; Acts 14:22.) They represent still a central need and obligation of authentic Christian living.

The Book of Revelation thus reflects the basic, apostolic theology that may be attested throughout the New Testament. This “apostolic theology” may be summarized as follows:

1. The events accomplished by God, particularly as they pertain to the person of Jesus Christ, have all been done in fulfillment of Scripture (Matt. 1:22–23).
2. God has powerfully acted for our salvation, especially through the death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:23–32).
3. This same Jesus is now the exalted Lord. Having ascended to the right hand of God and taken His place on God’s throne, He now executes the purposes of God as the Living Lord of the cosmos (Acts 2:32–36).
4. All who believe and confess the person of Jesus Christ will experience the salvation of God (Acts 2:38).
5. God’s Spirit has been poured out on all those who name the name of Christ (Acts 2:38; Rom. 5:5; 8:9).
6. Commitment to God through Christ means participation in a fellowship of worship and instruction (Acts 2:41–42; Rom. 9:24–26).
7. This same Jesus will come again to rescue those who have confessed Him in faithfulness (see Mark 13:24–27).

INTRODUCTION (1:1–8)

Written to “the seven churches” of the Roman province of Asia, John’s work is a “revelation” of “what must soon take place.” Given to John by Jesus Christ, it is a message committed by God to the Lord to show to His “servants.” John wrote his prophecy in the form of a letter, beginning with a greeting of grace and peace from each person of the triune God. The theme of John’s work is clear: the Lord God, the Almighty One Himself, has guaranteed the final vindication of the crucified Jesus before all the earth. The victory of Christ is assured. His people will rejoice in their final deliverance, but those who have rejected Him will mourn His coming, for it will mean judgment for them.

JOHN’S VISION (1:9–20)

While in exile on the island of Patmos, John saw the risen Lord. It happened as he was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day. Suddenly he heard behind him a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet. The voice declared that John should write down what he would see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. John turned to see the source of the great voice. Interestingly enough, before mentioning Christ, he said he saw first of all “seven golden lampstands.” We read later on that the seven golden lampstands are “the seven churches.”

Thus the significance of John’s visions, a message to the seven churches, should not be overlooked. Indeed, not merely in chapters 2–3 do we find the seven letters in which the churches are addressed but in the entire Book of Revelation (1:3; 22:10, 16–19). There is certainly no textual evidence that the letters, either individually or as a collection, circulated apart from the rest of John’s literary work. It is a serious mistake to think that certain portions of Revelation were not important for, or relevant to, the original audiences. The whole of the Revelation is relevant to the churches (then and now), for they are fellow partakers with John in “suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.” Each church must heed not only its own letter, but all of the letters, and indeed the entire Revelation (22:18–19), since it warns of coming judgment and pronounces a blessing on all those who persevere in the hour of affliction and die in faithfulness to the Lord (14:13). John’s authoritative book is not a literary mystery for those struggling to live in a difficult time of persecution and suffering. John’s book is an exhortation to the churches to remain faithful to Jesus Christ, to persevere in the hour of trouble

knowing that Christ, who is the Lord of the churches, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands (1:13; 2:1), will return to rescue and vindicate His people.

HYMNS AND CREEDS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament is a virtual hymnbook setting forth the praise songs and creeds of the early church. The major problem A.D. for modern scholars has to do with the criteria one might use in pinpointing a hymn in the biblical text. Contemporary scholars have set forth certain stylistic and contextual criteria.

Criteria for Hymns. Under stylistic characteristics we find a definite use of the verb *to be* in the second and third persons: *you are* and *he is*. The verses are carefully constructed with numerous parallelisms and relative clauses affirming praise to God. The vocabulary of the hymns also includes words not found elsewhere in the New Testament. The hymns also tend to make use of the term “all.”

Certain contextual criteria include the use of introductory formulas such as verbs of saying (*lego*). The content of the hymns involves Christological elements and assertions of God’s saving deeds or pleas for God to render help. Many of these hymns end with the phrase “forever and ever.”

The Philippian Hymn. One of the best known of the New Testament hymns is found in Philippians 2:6–11. This hymn is written in the third-person style, and the praise of the believing community remains in the background. No Christological title is used except that of Lord Jesus Christ in verse 11.

One encounters a brief outline of the basic Christological facts: He humbles Himself, takes on the form of a servant, becomes a human being, humbles Himself, dies, is elevated and given a name above every other name. In the Greek text one can sing this hymn to the modern church tune “Man of Sorrows.”

Some scholars divide this hymn into six stanzas with three lines in each. Others in contrast see three stanzas. The first speaks of the preexistence (vv. 6–7a), the second the incarnation (vv. 7b–8), and the third the exaltation (vv. 9–11). Many scholars conclude that Paul took over a hymn as a unit from the early church and made use of it in his Philippian letter.

***Revelation Hymns.* The Book of Revelation is also filled with hymns. The twenty-four elders serve as a choir that sings many hymns of praise to God. In chapters 4–5 alone we find five hymns. The four living creatures begin the music by singing softly, “Holy, holy, holy” in 4:8. There follows three hymns that all start with the phrase “worthy.”**

In 4:11 the twenty-four elders join the living creatures in praising God as the creating God. In 5:9–10 they sing a hymn of praise to Christ as a lamb appears on stage. The choir grows to thousands of angels, and they join in singing 5:12, another worthy hymn. Finally everyone in the universe comes together to sing 5:13, a hymn of praise to God and the Lamb.

1 Timothy Hymn. The early church often used these hymns for teaching and training new members. In 1 Timothy 3:16 we find a hymn that contains the early Christological teaching of the church. From such hymns the church developed its early creeds:

Who was made manifest in the flesh;
who was made righteous in the Spirit;
who was seen by the angels;
who was preached in the world;
who was taken into glory;
(this can be sung in Greek to the tune of “Rock of Ages”).

Thus in a simple hymn the church could teach some of the most important aspects of its faith in Christ. The passages reflect hymns of the faith that were used for training and teaching.

Singing Greek Hymns. The music dimension of the New Testament needs to be rediscovered. The tunes used two thousand years ago remain unknown. Yet one can set them to modern church tunes and rediscover some of the thrill of singing words used by the early Christians.

Having seen the seven golden lamp-stands, John then saw in the middle of the lampstands a glorious human figure. He saw none other than the heavenly Son of man Himself, clothed in a robe reaching to His feet, having a golden girdle worn high around His breast (in contrast to the workman who wore his belt in a lower position around the waist, so he could tuck his robe about it while at work). Like the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:9–10, this glorious figure had hair “like white wool, as white as snow” (Rev. 1:14). His eyes, which were penetratingly powerful to judge and discern, were like a flame of fire. His feet, alluding probably to Daniel 10:6, were like burnished bronze. His voice, which John had already likened to the sound of a trumpet, was also like the sound of a mighty waterfall, similar to the description in Ezekiel 43:2 of the voice of God.

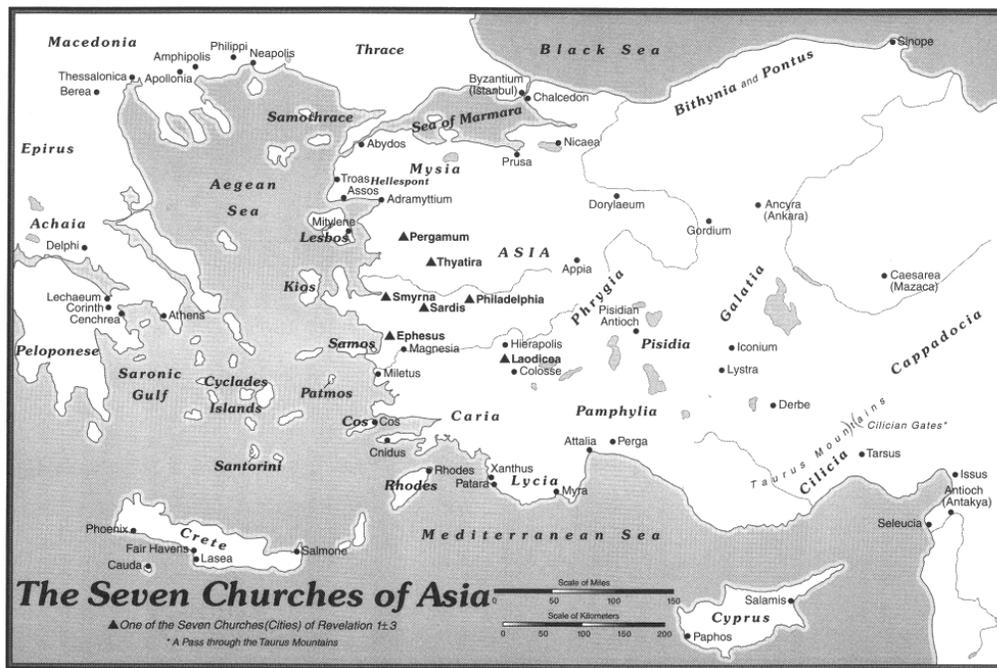
In His right hand He held seven stars, which are the angels of the seven churches. Proceeding from the mouth of the Glorious One was a sharp two-edged sword with which He would smite the nations (19:15), but which also stood as a reminder even to the churches that He is the Lord of judgment (2:12). Overwhelmed with this vision of the glorious Son of man, John fell down as a dead man. But the Glorious One laid His right hand upon John and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One.” This description is virtually synonymous with the title of Alpha and Omega given to the Lord God in 1:8. It combines the sacred name revealed at the burning bush of Exodus 3:14 with the description of the Lord, the King of Israel, beside whom there is no other God, given in Isaiah 44:6.

This Living One, this One who possesses the absolute life of God, was Himself once dead but now is alive forever more (Rev. 1:18). This is, of course, none other than the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. Though “born of a woman, born under law” (Gal. 4:4) and Himself thus susceptible and vulnerable to death, this Jesus, having endured the pangs of death, has now been raised to absolute life and can never die again (Rom. 6:9; Heb. 7:16–25).

Every feature in John’s description of the Risen One suggests the presence of power and majesty. The Living One then instructed John to write an account of the things he both had seen and would see, that is, an account of “what will take place later.”

THE SEVEN CHURCHES (2:1–3:22)

The letters to the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea have a fairly consistent format. First, after designating the recipients, the risen Lord as Sender introduces and describes Himself using a portion of the visionary description of the glorious Son of man found in 1:9–20. There follows an “I know” section of either commendation or criticism. Next appears typically some form of exhortation. To those who received criticism, the usual exhortation was to repent. However, to the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia, for whom the Lord had only praise, the exhortation was one of assurance (2:10; 3:10–11). Each letter concludes, though the order may vary, with both an exhortation to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches” and a promise of reward to the “overcomer,” that is, the one who conquers by persevering in the cause of Christ.



The church at Ephesus (2:1–7) was told to return to its first love or else its lamp stand would be removed out of its place, a judgment implying the death of the church, though not the individual loss of final salvation. The church at Smyrna was tenderly encouraged to be faithful unto death, while the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira were sternly warned to beware of false teaching and the immoral deeds that so often accompany erroneous theology.

The church at Sardis was told to wake up and complete its works of obedience. The church at Philadelphia was promised, in the face of persecution by the local synagogue, that faith in Jesus would assure access into the eternal kingdom. Christ alone has the key of David and has opened the heavenly door that no one else can shut. And the church at Laodicea was told to turn from its self-deception and repent of its lukewarmness.

These warnings and encouragements were sent to seven real churches. No doubt the fact that “seven” are referred to has some symbolic significance and may well mean that the seven churches represented many Christian communities in Asia Minor. However representative the seven churches may have been, they were nonetheless seven very real churches to whom John was known and for whom he was instructed by the Risen Lord to write these words of warning and hope.

Some commentators refer to the seven churches as seven epochs of world history, but there is not the slightest hint in the text that the seven churches are to be understood in such a way. In fact, it is only a very forced and erroneous reading of church history that can make the letters to the seven churches appear as prophecies regarding seven epochs of world history.

Again, there is absolutely no hint in the text that John intended for us to understand these seven letters in that way. Instead, it is abundantly clear that the letters were written to real congregations, engaged in the very real struggles of faith and perseverance in the midst of impending, and sometimes actual, persecution. God’s word to one situation clearly had relevance for other situations in the first century. It is therefore not surprising that we, too, may read these letters, and indeed the entirety of the Revelation, and hear the voice of God in them. Thus, we read Revelation in the same general way that we would read Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. That is, after doing our best to understand the historical situation of and the inspired message to the intended, first-century audience, we then seek, as a people who continue to stand under the authority of God’s Word, to apply the ancient message to our lives and situations today.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY (4:1–5:14)

Chapters 4–5 represent the pivot point of the book. They tie the risen Lord's opening exhortations to the churches (chaps. 2–3) to the judgments and final triumph of the Lamb (chaps. 6–22). Seen in this way the exhortations to the churches are in fact warnings of both the coming afflictions and God's ultimate triumph, the latter of which may serve as a spur of hope to enable the recipients of the prophecy to endure the former. These chapters also provide the historical and theological basis of the risen Lord's authority over both the church and the world by depicting His enthronement and empowering to carry out the judging and saving purposes of God.

MILLENNIAL PERSPECTIVES ON REVELATION

POINT OF INTERPRETATION	AMILLENNIAL	HISTORICAL PREMILLENNIAL	DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIAL	POSTMILLENNIAL
Description of View	Viewpoint that the present age of Christ's rules in the church is the millennium; holds to one resurrection and judgment marking the end of history as we know it and the beginning of life eternal	Viewpoint that Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years following His second coming; saints will be resurrected at the beginning of the millennium, nonbelievers at the end, followed by Judgment	Viewpoint that after the battle of Armageddon, Christ will rule through the Jews for a literal thousand years accompanied by two resurrections and at least three judgments	Viewpoint that Christ will return after a long period of expansion and spiritual prosperity for the church, brought about by the preaching of the gospel; the Spirit's blessing; and the church's work toward righteousness, justice, and peace. The period is not a literal thousand years but extended time of spiritual prosperity.
Book of Revelation	Current history written in code to confound enemies and encourage Asian Christians; message applies to all Christians	Immediate application to Asian Christians; applies to all Christians throughout the ages, but the visions also apply to a great future event	"Unveiling" of theme of Christ among churches in present dispensation, also as Judge and King dispensation to come	Written to encourage Christians of all ages, but the visions also apply to a great future event.
Seven candlesticks (1:13)	Churches Columns 1, 2		Churches, plus end-time application	Churches
Churches addressed (chaps. 2–3)	Specific historical situations, truths apply to churches throughout the ages; do not represent periods of church history. Columns 1, 2		Specific historical situations and to all churches throughout the ages; shows progress of churches' spiritual state until end of church age	Specific historical situations, truths apply to churches throughout the ages; do not necessarily represent periods of church history

Twenty-four elders (4:4, 10; 5:8, 14)	Twelve patriarchs (tribes) and twelve apostles; together symbolize all the redeemed	Company of angels who help execute God's rule (or elders represent twenty-four priestly and Levitical orders). I Chronicles chapter 15, 16:4-6, 37-43, David rearranged the Levitical priesthood into 24 orders	The rewarded church; also represents twelve patriarchs and twelve apostles	Symbolizes all the redeemed
Sealed book (5:1-9)	Scroll of history; shows God carrying out His redemptive purpose in history	Contains prophecy of end events of Chapters 7-22	Title deed to the world	Portrays God carrying out His redemptive purpose in history
144,000 (7:4-8)	Redeemed on earth who will be protected against God's wrath	Church on threshold of great tribulation	Jewish converts of tribulation period who witness to Gentiles (same as 14:1)	Redeemed people of God
Great tribulation (first reference in 7:14)	Persecution faced by Asian Christians of John's time; symbolic of tribulation that occurs throughout history	Period at end time of unexplained trouble, before Christ's return; church will go through it; begins with seventh seal (18:1), which includes trumpets 1-6 (8:2-14:20)	Period at end time of unexplained trouble referred to in 7:14 and described in chapters 11-18; lasts time and a half years, the latter half of seven-year period between rapture and millennium	Symbolic of tribulation that occurs throughout history
Forty-two months (11:2); 1,260 days (11:3)	Indefinite duration of pagan desolation	A symbolic number representing period of evil with reference to last days of age	Half of seven-year tribulation period	A symbolic number representing an indefinite time and evil influence
Woman (12:1-6)	True people of God under old and new covenants (true Israel)		Indicates Israel, not church; key is	True people of God under old and new covenants

Columns 1, 2

comparison with
Gen 37:9. 12 stars

Great red dragon (12:3)

All views identify as Satan

Manchild (12:4-5)	Christ at His birth, life events, and crucifixion, whom Satan sought to kill	Christ, whose work Satan seeks to destroy	Christ but also the church (head and body); caught up on throne indicates rapture of church	Christ at His birth, life events, and crucifixion, whom Satan sought to destroy
1,260 days (12:6)	Indefinite time	Symbolic number representing period of evil with special reference to last days of age	First half of great tribulation - after church is raptured	Indefinite time
Sea beast (13:1)	Emperor Domitian, personification of Roman Empire (same as in chap. 17)	Antichrist, here shown as embodiment of the four beasts in Dan 7	A new Rome, satanic federation of nations that come out of old Roman Empire	Roman Empire
Seven heads (13:1)	Roman emperors	Great power, shows kinship with dragon	Seven stages of Roman Empire; sixth was imperial Rome (John's day); last with be federation of nations	Roman Emperors
Ten horns (13:1)	Symbolize power	Kings, represent limited crowns (ten) against Christ's many	Ten powers that will combine to make the federation of nations of new Rome	Symbol of power
666 (13:18)	Imperfection, evil; personified as Domitian	Symbolic of evil, short of 777; if a personage meant, he is unknown but will be known at the proper time	Not known but will be known when time comes	Symbol of evil
144,000 on Mount Zion (14:1)	Total body of redeemed in heaven Columns 1, 2		Redeemed Jews gathered in earthly Jerusalem during millennial kingdom	Redeemed people of God
River of blood (14:20)	Symbol of infinite punishment for the	Means God's radical judgment	Scene of wrath and carnage that	Symbol of judgment on the wicked

	wicked	crushes evil thoroughly	will occur in Palestine	
Babylon (woman—17:5)	Historical Rome	Capital city of future Antichrist	Apostate church of the future	Symbol of evil
Seven mountains (17:9)	Pagan Rome, which was built on seven hills	Indicate power, so here means a succession of empires, last of which is end-time Babylon	Rome, revived at end time	Pagan Rome
Seven heads (17:7) and seven kings (17:10)	Roman emperors from Augustus to Titus, excluding three brief rules	Five past godless kingdoms; sixth was Rome; seventh would arise in end time	Five distinct forms of Roman government prior to John; sixth was imperial Rome; seventh will be revived Roman Empire	Roman emperors
Ten horns (17:7) and ten kings (17:12)	Vassal kings who ruled with Rome's permission	Symbolic of earthly powers they will be subservient to Antichrist	Ten kingdoms arising in future out of revived Roman Empire	Symbolic of earthly powers
Bride, wife (19:7)	Total of all the redeemed Columns 1, 2	The church. Does not include Old Testament saints or tribulation saints		Total of all the redeemed
Marriage supper (19:9)	Climax of the age; symbolizes complete union of Christ with His people	Union of Christ with His people at His Coming	Union of Christ with His church accompanied by Old Testament saints and tribulation saints	Union of Christ with His people
One on white horse (19:11–16)	Vision of Christ's victory over pagan Rome; return of Christ occurs in connection with events of 20:7–10	Second coming of Christ Columns 2, 3		Vision of Christ's victory
Battle of Armageddon (19:19–21; see 16:16)	Not literally at end of time but symbolizes power of God's word overcoming evil; principle applies to all ages	Literal event of some kind at end time but not literal battle with military weapons; occurs at Christ's return at beginning of	Literal bloody battle at Armageddon (valley of Megiddo) at end of great tribulation between kings of	Symbolizes power of God's word overcoming evil forces

		millennium	the East and federation of nations of new Rome; they are all defeated by blast from Christ's mouth and then millennium begins	
Great supper (19:17)	Stands in contrast to marriage supper Columns 1, 2	Concludes series of judgments and opens way for kingdom to be established		Stands in contrast to marriage supper
Binding of Satan (20:2)	Symbolic of Christ's resurrection victory over Satan	Curbing of Satan's power during the millennium Columns 2, 3		Symbolic of Christ's victory over Satan
Millennium (20:2-6)	Symbolic reference to period from Christ's first coming to His second	A historical event, though length of one thousand years may be symbolic, after Armageddon during which Christ rules with His people	A literal thousand-year period after the church age during which Christ rules with His people but especially through the Jews	A lengthy period of expansion and spiritual prosperity brought about by the preaching of the gospel
Those on thrones (20:4)	Martyrs in heaven; their presence with God is a judgment on those who killed them	Saints and martyrs who rule with Christ in the millennium	The redeemed ruling with Christ, appearing and disappearing on earth at will to oversee life on earth	Saints and martyrs who rule with Christ
First resurrection (20:5-6)	The spiritual presence with Christ of the redeemed that occurs after physical death	Resurrection of saints at beginning of millennium when Christ returns	Includes three groups: (1) those raptured with church (4:1); (2) Jewish tribulation saints during tribulation (11:11); (3) other Jewish believers at beginning of millennium (20:6)	The spiritual presence of the redeemed with Christ
Second Death (20:6)	Spiritual death, eternal separation from God			
New heavens and earth (21:1)	A new order; redeemed earth			

New Jerusalem God dwelling with His saints in the new age after all other end-time events
(21:2–5)

Chapter 4 asserts the sovereign authority of the Creator God. Surrounded by the adoring and powerful four creatures and twenty-four elders, the Lord God the Almighty is holy, sovereign, and worthy of all worship. For He has created all things, and all things exist because of His gracious, sovereign will. John's vision of God upon His throne is reminiscent of Daniel 7 and Ezekiel 1, each of which is calculated to impress the reader with the God of might and glory.

Chapter 5 depicts the delegation of the divine authority to the risen Lord by introducing a sequence of events again reminiscent of Daniel 7. In Daniel 7 the people of God were oppressed by four terrible beasts, symbolic of evil empires and kings. Similarly, Revelation is written to people who either were, or soon would be, experiencing persecution from powers of evil. In Daniel 7 the heavenly thrones of judgment are established, the books of judgment are opened, and authority to carry out God's judgment, and thus to rescue the people of God from the evil nations, is committed to a human figure. This human figure, a glorious "son of man," mysteriously appears before the throne of God in the clouds of heaven.

Similarly, in Revelation 5 we see both a book of judgment (in this instance one with seven seals held in the right hand of God) and a glorious, redemptive agent of God. But now, instead of an unidentified human figure, we learn that the exalted agent of God is none other than the crucified Jesus, the Lamb and Lion of God. This Jesus, because of His conquering obedience to the will of God, is now (being) enthroned and therefore is worthy to take the book and break the seals.

The events portrayed here are highly symbolic but are not for that reason to be regarded as sheer myth. For the scene readily suggests an otherwise well-known and important historical and theological moment within biblical history, namely, the ascension and enthronement of Jesus. Besides explaining the visible absence of Jesus and/or the end of the resurrection appearances, the ascension of Jesus is His enthronement as heavenly Lord (see Acts 2:33–36; Eph. 1:20–2:22; Col. 1:18), His empowering now to execute the judgments of God. He is worthy to take the book, *for He was slain*. His redemptive death, that is, His obedience to the will of God, has revealed Him as qualified for the role of heavenly Lord. He has "triumphed," a word which for John referred to Jesus' triumphal suffering and subsequent enthronement (see 3:21) and may therefore now as the heavenly Lord assume the role of divine Agent and Executor. All power in heaven and on earth has been given to Him (Matt. 28:18). He may take the book and break the seven seals of judgment and thereby execute the purposes of the sovereign, Creator God. At His enthronement the heavens rejoice (5:8–14; 12:5–12), for He truly is worthy, and the people of God now have their reigning Savior.

THE SEVEN SEALS (6:1–8:5)

The breaking of the first four seals brings forth four horsemen of different colors. These riders, paralleling the chaos predicted in Mark 13, represent God's judgments through the upheavals of war and its devastating social consequences: violence, famine, pestilence, and death. The fifth seal is the plea of martyred saints for divine justice upon their oppressors. For now they are told, they must wait, for the number of the martyred of God's people is not yet complete.

A careful look at the sixth seal is important for understanding the literary structure and episodic sequence of Revelation. When broken, the sixth seal brings forth the typical signs of the end: a great earthquake, the blackening of the sun, the reddening ("blood red") of the moon, and the falling of the stars of heaven (Matt. 24:29–31; Mark 13:24–27). Though Revelation is but a few chapters old, we are brought to the end of world history. The sky is split apart like a scroll; mountains and islands are moved. And the mighty as well as the lowly of the earth realize that the great day of God's (and the Lamb's) wrath has come, and nothing can save them.

The earthquake is a consistent sign in Revelation for the destruction that immediately precedes the end (see 8:5; 11:13, 19; 16:18–19) of history and the appearance of the Lord. The repeated references to the earthquake at strategic spots in Revelation do not mean that history itself repeatedly comes to an end but that John employed the well-known literary technique of “recapitulation” (see Gen. 1–2), that is, the retelling of the same story from a different “angle” so as to focus upon other dimensions of and characters in the same story.

Thus, in Revelation we are repeatedly brought to the end of history and the time of Christ’s return. But John withheld his final (and fullest) description of this world’s end until the end of his document (19:1–22:5). In the meantime he used the literary technique (among others) of retelling to prepare his readers for both the traumas and hopes of human history. He wanted to prepare his readers for the fact of judgment coming at the hands of the enthroned Lamb of God (6:1–17), for both His protection of His people (7:1–17; 11:1) and their responsibility to bear witness to the earth regarding Him (10:1–11:13), for the redemptive purposes of judgment (8:6–9:21), for the coming persecution (11:7; 12:1–13:18), and for the finality of God’s judgments (15:1–18:24). There was much for John to explain regarding the suffering of the saints and the apparent triumph of evil, facts that seem to deny the Christian confession that Christ has been raised and enthroned as Lord. Does He protect His people? Will He truly come again? Why must we suffer, and “how long, Sovereign Lord,” must we wait? The merciful but mysterious ways of God with humankind require, for the sake of completeness, the retelling of the story of human history from several points of reference, replete with the certainties of both judgment and salvation through Christ.

The description of the judgments initiated by the breaking of the first six seals would no doubt tend to overwhelm John’s audience, but final wrath is not the lot of the people of God (see Rom. 8:35, 39; 1 Thess. 5:9). Therefore, John interrupted the sequence of judgments leading to the seventh seal to remind us that the people of God need not despair, for “the servants of our God” (7:3) have the promise of heaven.

Chapter 7 is actually two visions, with the second both interpreting and concluding the first. The sealing of the 144,000 employs starkly Jewish symbols to describe those who know God through Jesus Christ. Clearly John was referring to Christians as the 144,000. For 7:3 refers to the “servants” of God, a term consistently used throughout Revelation to refer either to Christians in general or the Christian prophet, but never to the non-Christian Jew (or Gentile). Language employed in the Old Testament to refer to the Jews is characteristically used in the New Testament to refer to those who know God through Jesus Christ (for example, 2 Cor. 6:16–18; Gal. 3:29). Those who are in Christ are the beneficiaries of the promises made to Israel (Rom. 4:13–17; Gal. 3:8–9, 15–29).

The number 144,000 is an intensification ($12 \times 12 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$) of the original number twelve (itself an obvious allusion to the twelve tribes). This indicates that the 144,000 comprise the full number of God’s people, God’s people now being all (Jew or Gentile) who are followers of Jesus. (Note 12:1–17; the woman who has a crown of *twelve* stars and brings forth Christ is *Israel*. Her true offspring is first Jesus—the fulfillment of Israel’s history—and His followers, that is, Jews and Gentiles “who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus,” v. 17.)

In the second vision the 144,000 have become “a great multitude, which no one could count.” Who are they? Using his favorite descriptions of heaven (see 21:3–4, 23; 22:1–5), John said that they are those who have “come out of the great tribulation,” now to experience the joys of heaven and relief from the tribulations they have endured. Compare 7:14–17 with 21:1–6; 22:1–5. The numberless multitude of 7:9 is not a reference to non-Christian Jews (or Gentiles); it refers rather to all who have trusted Christ. It is the Lamb’s bride, the holy city, the new Jerusalem (21:2). To have “come out of the great tribulation” does *not* mean that they exited the earth *before* the hour of tribulation. To the contrary, they did indeed experience the tribulations of this evil age; but now in heaven they enjoy the presence of God, where they will hunger *no more* nor thirst *any more*. No longer subject to death (21:4), they will drink of the water of life, will no more experience the oppressive heat of the sun, and will have every

tear wiped from their eyes. As the true Israel of God, Christians (“the servants of our God”) have the seal of God. Having refused the mark of the beast (13:16–17), they hold to the testimony of Jesus in spite of persecution and therefore have the promise of final heavenly deliverance from this evil age of great tribulation.

Revelation 8:1–5 describes the seventh seal and again the traditional signs of the end, including “peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.” These signs represent the very end of human history and the coming of the Lord, but the prophet was not yet ready to describe the Lord’s return. He still had too much to say (based on what he saw) about the nature of judgment, the mission of the church, and the persecutions of the beast to bring his prophecy to an end. Therefore, before describing fully the end, John had to start over. Using the symbolic vehicle of the seven trumpets, he declared that the judgments of God also have a redemptive purpose because they are signs, partial expressions, of the coming final judgment.

THE SEVEN TRUMPETS (8:6–11:19)

The seven seals were divided between the four horsemen and the remaining three seals, with a narrative break between the sixth and seventh seals to remind the people of God of the Lord’s promise of final protection and their hope of eternal glory. A similar pattern occurs with the seven trumpets.

The first four trumpets describe partial judgments (“a third”) upon the earth’s vegetation, the oceans, fresh waters, and the heavenly lights. The last three trumpets are grouped together and are also described as three “woes” upon the earth, emphasizing God’s judgment upon humankind. The fifth trumpet (and first woe) releases hellish locusts who will sting those not having the seal of God. The sixth trumpet (and second woe) brings forth a mighty army of infernal horsemen who kill a third of humankind. But all these judgments have no redemptive effect, for the rest of humankind who are not killed by these plagues refuse to repent of their immoralities. The warnings have fallen on deaf ears.

Just as the interlude between the sixth and seventh seals assured the recipients of Revelation that the people of God are safe from the eternally destructive effects of God’s wrath, so also between the sixth and seventh trumpets we are reminded of God’s protective hand on His people. But in the trumpet interlude we also learn that God’s protection during these days of tribulation does not mean isolation, for the people of God must bear a prophetic witness to the world.

In 10:1–11 John’s call (after the pattern of Ezek. 2:1–3:11) is reaffirmed. He is told to eat a bittersweet book and “prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.” The note of protection and witness is again struck in 11:1–13, where the measuring of the temple of God alludes to God’s protective hand upon His people during the hour of turmoil. These persecutions will last for forty-two months, but His people, the “holy city,” will be neither destroyed nor silenced. For the “two witnesses” will bear witness during this time, also called “1,260 days,” to the mercy and judgment of God. Note well: the “42 months” and the “1,260 days” refer to the same time period seen from different perspectives, for the days of witness are also days of opposition (11:2–7; 12:6, 13–17). Negative references to persecution and the activity of Satan and the beasts are consistently called “42 months” (11:2; 13:5), whereas positive references to the sustaining hand of God or the prophetic testimony of His two witnesses are called “time, times and half a time” (12:14), or “1,260 days” (11:3; 12:6).

It seems unlikely that the “two witnesses” (“two” suggests a confirmed, legal testimony) are two individual persons, for they are also called “two lamp-stands,” terminology already interpreted in 1:20 to mean the church. Also we must note that the “1,260 days” of the woman’s flight and protection from Satan in 12:6 is as well a reference to the protection of God’s people, though under a different image or symbol. Note, too, that in 13:5–7 the same beast from the abyss, who here in 11:7 attacks the two witnesses and overcomes them, is said in 13:7 to “make war against the saints” and “to conquer them.”

Though engaged in great spiritual warfare, the church, like Moses and Elijah of old, must faithfully maintain a courageous and prophetic witness to the world, a witness even unto death. Although the earth

rejoices that the testimony of the church is in the end apparently snuffed out, the temporary triumph of evil (“three and a half days”) will turn to heavenly vindication as the two witnesses (the people of God) are raised from the dead. Though John was not yet ready to describe more fully the resurrection of Christ’s followers and the bliss of heaven, we have in the resurrection of the two witnesses the depiction of the church’s great hope: the resurrection of all those who hold to the testimony of Jesus (compare 11:7–11 with 13:15; 20:4–6).

The seventh trumpet (and third woe) again introduces the earthquake, lightning, and thunder. The end of history has come, the time for the dead to be judged and the saints to be rewarded. Clearly the very end has come, for the heavenly chorus now treats the coming of the reign of God (and Christ), as well as the day of judgment, as *past events*. The chorus sings, “The kingdom of the world *has become* the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.”

John has again brought us to the point of our Lord’s return and, indeed, has begun to describe the rejoicing that will accompany His return (19:1–10). But he is not yet ready to describe the actual coming of the King of kings and Lord of lords. There is (sadly) more to relate regarding “the beast that comes up from the Abyss” to make war with the two witnesses, the people of God. It is that awful forty-two months, the period of persecution (and protection/witness), that John must now unfold.

THE DRAGON’S PERSECUTION (12:1–13:18)

Chapter 12 is crucial for understanding John’s view of the sequence of history. The number three and a half was associated by Christians and Jews with times of evil and judgment (see Luke 4:25). John variously referred to the three and a half years as either “42 months” (11:2; 13:5) or “1,260 days” (11:3; 12:6) or “a time, times and half a time.” For John it was the period of time when the powers of evil will do their oppressive works. But during this time, God will protect His people while they both bear witness to their faith (11:3) and simultaneously suffer at the hands of these evil powers (11:2, 7; 12:13–17; 13:5–7).

All commentators agree that this terrible period of tribulation will be brought to an end with the coming of the Lord. The critical question, however, is when the three-and-a-half-year period of persecution and witness *begins*. Though some scholars have relegated the three and a half years to some as-yet-unbegun moment in the future, chapter 12 unmistakably pinpoints its beginning with the ascension and enthronement of Christ. When the woman’s (Israel’s) offspring is “caught up to God *and to His throne*,” there is war in heaven, and the dragon is cast down to the earth.

Heaven rejoices because it has been rescued from Satan, but the earth must now mourn because the devil has been cast down to earth, and his anger is great. He knows that he has been defeated by the enthronement of Christ and that he has but a short time. The woman, who (as Israel) brought forth the Christ and also other offspring (those who hold to the testimony of Jesus), now receives the brunt of the frustrated dragon’s wrath. As the enraged dragon now seeks to vent his wrath upon the woman, she is nonetheless nourished and protected for “1,260 days,” that is, for a “time, times and half a time.”

John’s altogether brief description of the life of Christ (only His birth and enthronement are here specifically referred to) should not mislead the reader into thinking that it is the *infant* child who is “caught up to God and to His throne.” This passage does not have for its main purpose the telling of the life of Christ, for John knew his readers to be familiar with the decisive events in Christ’s history. Rather, the passage seeks to show the *continuity of persecution* as inaugurated by Satan against the woman (Israel) and her child (Christ) and continued against the woman and the rest of her offspring (Christians).

It is, of course, the crucified and risen Lord who is enthroned and whose accession to the throne brings the defeat of the powers of darkness (see Eph. 1:19–23; 1 Pet. 3:22; see Rom. 1:4; Col. 1:15–20; 1 Tim. 3:16). The account of the dragon’s defeat in, and expulsion from, heaven clearly commences with, and is caused by, the *enthronement* of the woman’s offspring. Likewise, *note well* that the story of

12:6, where the woman flees to the wilderness and is protected by God for “1,260 days,” has two unmistakable plot “links” in the developing story line of chapter 12. First, the woman’s flight and the “1,260 days” of protection in 12:6 clearly commence with the enthronement of 12:5. But in 12:14–17 it is the *persecution of the dragon*, who has now been cast down from heaven to earth, that motivates the woman’s flight to the wilderness. Thus what we have in 12:14–17 is the resumption and amplification of the woman’s story which was begun in 12:6.

Note the parallel references in 12:6 and 12:14 to the “desert,” nourishment, and “time, times and half a time,” or its equivalent, “1,260 days.” This dual plot connection—where two events are seen in connection with the woman’s flight—between the *enthronement* of the woman’s offspring (Christ) and the *dragon’s pursuit* of the woman is neither odd nor surprising. It is the enthronement that (virtually simultaneously) produces the war in heaven, which results in the dragon’s expulsion and which then immediately causes the now-enraged dragon to persecute the woman and “the rest of her offspring.” It is not only clear that the “1,260 days” of 12:6 is the equivalent of the “time, times and half a time” of 12:14 but that the one particular period of persecution/protection in question commences both with the enthronement of Christ and the subsequent—and, for all practical purposes, simultaneous—expulsion of the dragon from heaven.

The dragon then brings forth two henchmen (chap. 13) to help him in his pursuit of those who believe in Jesus. Satan is thus embodied in a political ruler, the beast from the sea (13:1), who will speak blasphemies for “forty-two months” and “make war against the saints,” while the second beast (or “false prophet,” 19:20), who comes up from the earth, seeks to deceive the earth so that its inhabitants worship the first beast.

Thus, in chapters 12–13 each of the various ways of referring to the three and a half years is a reference to a single period of time that began with the enthronement of Christ and will conclude with His return. The time period is not a literal three and a half years but the *entire time between the ascension and the return of Christ*, which will permit the dragon to execute his evil work upon the earth (see Gal. 1:4; Eph. 2:2). Almost two thousand years have elapsed since our Lord ascended to the right hand of God, but the evil period known as the three and a half years continues. Satan still rages, but his time is short, and his evil will cease at the return of Christ.

A SUMMARY (14:1–20)

After the depressing news of the ongoing persecutions of God’s people by the unholy trinity, John’s readers need another word of encouragement and warning. Chapter 14 therefore employs seven “voices” to relate again the warnings and promises of heaven. First is another vision of the 144,000. The 144,000, as before, are the full number of the people of God. It is certainly a reference to Christians, for they “were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb.”

Using the common biblical imagery of sexual immorality as a reference to idolatry, John called these followers of the Lamb “blameless.” That is, they did not “defile themselves” with the beast. They are the men and women who have been faithful in their worship of the one true God through Jesus Christ and have not been seduced by the Satanic deceptions of the first beast and his ally, the false prophet. They will be rescued and taken to heaven’s throne, where with one voice they will sing a new song of salvation.

Another voice is heard, that of an angel announcing the eternal gospel and warning the earth of coming judgment. The remaining “voices” (or oracles) follow in rapid succession. The fall of “Babylon the Great” an Old Testament symbol for a nation opposed to the people of God, is announced. Then the people of God are warned not to follow the beast, and those who follow him are warned of the coming torments of their separation from God. After that a blessing is pronounced on those who remain faithful. Finally, two voices call for harvest. One calls upon the Son of man to reap the earth as a giant wheat

harvest, while the last voice likens the reaping of the earth to a grape harvest, for the coming of the Lord will mean the treading of the winepress of the fierce wrath of God the Almighty.

THE SEVEN CUPS (15:1–16:21)

Just as the seven seals and the seven trumpets depict different aspects of God's judgments through Christ, so now another dimension of His judgment must be revealed. The seven cups of wrath are similar to the seven trumpets and the seven seals, but they also are different; for there comes a time when the wrath of God is no longer partial or temporary but complete and everlasting. The outpouring of the seven cups of wrath means that God's judgment is also final and irrevocable. The partial judgment ("one-third") of the trumpets suggests that God uses the sufferings and evils of this life as a warning to draw humankind toward repentance and faith. But such tribulations also foreshadow the final hour of judgment, when God's wrath is finished and there is delay no longer.

The seven cups of wrath represent the judgments of the Lamb on the earth, especially on those who have received the mark of the beast. Between the sixth and seventh seals and the sixth and seventh trumpets we were told of God's protection of, and mission for, the people of God. But with the seven cups there is no break between the sixth and seventh outpourings of judgment. Now only wrath is left; there is no more delay. Babylon the Great, the symbol for all who have vaunted themselves against the Most High God, will fall. With the pouring out of the seventh cup of wrath, there is again the great earthquake accompanied by "flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder," for the end has come.

The notion of God's wrath is not always a welcome subject to the Bible reader, but its reality as a clear-cut teaching of both Old and New Testaments is inescapable. The reality of evil, the reality of human freedom, the righteousness of God, and the longing of God to have creatures, who though distinct from Him as real creatures nonetheless freely relate to Him in trust and love, make inevitable the notion and reality of God's wrath. A righteous God responds to those who persist in their evil refusal to acknowledge their rightful Lord.

God longs to see His rebellious children lay down their arms and come home to Him. God has mercifully acted by all possible means—even to the extent of taking to Himself, through His Only Begotten Son, the very penalty that He has prescribed for sin—to bring His wayward children home. Wrath brings grief even to the heart of God, but God will not coerce our love of Him. He has given His children their freedom, and He will not destroy their humanity by removing that freedom, even when His children stubbornly persist in using that freedom in rebellion against Him. Incredibly enough, in spite of the overwhelming mercies of God revealed through Jesus Christ, there will be those who refuse His mercies. In such cases the faithful God of creation and redemption will faithfully respond in keeping with His own nature and word by giving His rebellious sons and daughters what they have stubbornly insisted upon, namely, everlasting separation from Him. Surely, as God's wrath, this is the height of torment and misery—to be separated from the One who is the true source of life, to be cut off from one's merciful Creator and thus to experience everlastingly the eternal death that comes from the rejection of Him who is the source of everlasting life. But we must neither deny nor even lament the wisdom of God for His past or future assertions of wrath. Our God evidently loves righteousness, justice, and mercy to such an extent that He will not brook our cowardly tolerance of evil. We may not lightly dismiss the fact that heaven is neither silent nor embarrassed when evil is punished. Heaven rejoices at the justice and judgment of God (19:1–6).

THE FALL OF BABYLON (17:1–18:24)

Chapter 17 retells the sixth cup, the fall of Babylon the Great, and chapter 18 gives a moving lament for the great city. She has not fulfilled God's purposes for her. All of her mighty works, industry, craftsmanship, political power, and artistic skill are brought to nothing, for she has played the harlot and worshiped the beast rather than devoting her skills and energies to God and to the Lamb.

REVELATION OF THE LAMB (19:1–22:5)

Heaven now begins to rejoice because Babylon the Great has fallen and it is time for the appearing of the Lamb's bride. The great marriage supper of salvation is ready to commence. Although he has withheld a description of the coming of the Lord on at least three earlier occasions, John is now prepared to describe the glories of the Lord's appearance.

All of heaven rejoices over the righteous judgment of God upon evil. The Lamb's bride, the people of God, has made herself ready by her faithfulness to her Lord through the hour of suffering. Therefore "it was given her" (salvation is always a gift of God) to clothe herself in fine linen, for "the wedding of the Lamb" has come.

Heaven is opened, and the One whose coming has been faithfully petitioned from ages past, the Word of God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, appears to battle the enemies of God in a conflict whose outcome is not in doubt. When the Lamb comes with His heavenly armies, the first beast and the second beast are thrown into the lake of fire from which there is no return. The dragon, who is the serpent of old, the devil and Satan, is cast into a hellish abyss that is shut and sealed for a thousand years. Since the powers of evil reigned for "three and a half years" (the period of time between the ascension and return of our Lord), Christ will reign for a "thousand years." The dead in Christ are raised to govern with Him, and God's rightful rule over the earth is vindicated.

This thousand-year reign is called the millennium. The term *millennium* is derived from the Latin (*mille*, one thousand, *annum*, year) and means *a period of one thousand years*. The biblical words for *thousand* are *elep* in Hebrew and *chilioi* in Greek. In multiple Old Testament instances the term is used in counting, even as it is in the New Testament (see Gen. 24:60; Luke 14:31). Occasionally the term is used to mean a large number without specific units being intended (see Mic. 5:2; 6:7; Rev. 5:11). The particular references used to establish a doctrine of a thousand years associated with Christ's final coming are found in Revelation 20:2–7.

The biblical materials do not present a systematic eschatology in which all of the diverse references about the end times are brought into one teaching. Therefore in Christian history differing strands of interpretation have emerged. Christian interpreters seeking a coherent systematic doctrine of the last things relate the apocalyptic elements of Old Testament prophecy (especially the Book of Daniel); the apocalyptic elements in the New Testament (especially Matt. 24–25; Mark 13; 2 Peter; Jude; and the Book of Revelation); Paul's writings about the final coming (especially 1 Thess. 4:13–18 and 2 Thess. 2:1–11—the man of lawlessness); Paul's views about the relationship of Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 9–11); and the references to antichrist(s) in 1 John.

Our concern with millennial issues, that is, whether the return of Christ is before the millennium (premillennialism) or after the millennium (as in either postmillennialism or amillennialism), is a concern whose significance is greatly exaggerated with respect to the interpretation of the Book of Revelation. What ultimately mattered for John is that the followers of Christ, those who have suffered the afflictions and persecutions of this present evil age, will one day be rescued and vindicated by the appearance of Christ, whose coming will destroy the powers of evil. It is abundantly clear in the New Testament that the shape and promise of the future hope should exert an influence upon our present behavior and moral devotion to Christ (see Rom. 8:18–25). Indeed, the very point of Revelation is to encourage Christian perseverance in the present in light of the coming triumph of God through Jesus Christ.

The interpretation of the relationship of the thousand-year kingdom to the return of Christ given in the commentary above could be called a form of premillennialism. Each of the views has something to commend it. Postmillennialism is wrong in its placement of the return of Christ at the conclusion of the thousand-year kingdom. Yet postmillennialism has accurately captured a significant motif in biblical prophecy in both the Old and New Testament. That is, we must live and preach in hope. We must preach the gospel not in the expectation that no one will believe, but we must proclaim the gospel to the ends of

the earth, believing that God will somehow use our witness to His glorious salvation through the person of Jesus Christ to bring about a mighty triumph for the kingdom of God. Though we certainly cannot bring the kingdom of God on earth through human means, the preaching of the gospel does indeed offer hope for the transformation of life.

Amillennialism is to be commended for its emphasis upon the current reign of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Book of Revelation makes abundantly clear (see the exposition above of chaps. 5 and 12) that Christ indeed has overcome and as such has been raised and exalted to the right hand of God. He is currently Lord of the churches. He is indeed currently Lord of the cosmos. He is the one into whose hands all power in heaven and on earth has been given. He has been raised far above all rule and authority and power and every name that is named (Eph. 1:19–21).

Still, only premillennialism can properly explain the episodic sequence of Revelation 19–20.

At the conclusion of the “thousand years,” the dragon is to be released. He is permitted another brief time of deception, but his time is short-lived. Following this final episode of deception at the conclusion of the thousand years, the dragon is recaptured and this time cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, “where the beast and the false prophet are also.” The fate given to the beast and the false prophet at the return of Christ is also finally meted out to the dragon at the close of the reign of Christ. Then the final judgment takes place, at which all not included in the Book of Life are thrown into the lake of fire.

Chapter 21 is often thought to refer to the period following the thousand-year reign, but it is more probably a retelling of the return of Christ from the viewpoint of the bride. Here we have clear-cut clues about the fact of a literary “retelling.” Just as chapter 17 was a recapitulation of the seventh cup and the fall of the harlot, Babylon the Great (compare the language of 17:1–3, which clearly introduces a “retelling” with the language of 18:9–10), so chapter 21 recapitulates the glorification of the bride of the Lamb. Now the story is told with the focus upon the bride. To be the bride is to be the holy city, the New Jerusalem, to live in the presence of God and the Lamb, and to experience protection, joy, and the everlasting, life-giving light of God. The tree of life grows there, and there the river of the water of life flows. There will no longer be any night; there will no longer be any curse, for the throne of God and of the Lamb is there. And there His bond-servants will serve Him and reign with Him forever and ever.

CONCLUSION (22:6–21)

John concluded his prophecy by declaring the utter faithfulness of his words. Those who heed his prophecy will receive the blessings of God. Those who ignore the warnings will be left outside the gates of God’s presence. Solemnly and hopefully praying for the Lord to come, John closed his book. The churches must have ears to hear what the Spirit has said. Under the threat of an everlasting curse, the hearers are warned to protect John’s sacred text: neither to add to nor to take away from the words of his prophecy. The people of God must, by His grace, persevere in the hour of tribulation, knowing that their enthroned Lord will soon return in triumph.

Theological Significance. It is extremely helpful to remember what the very first verse of the book says about this book. It is a revelation that God gives to His church, a revelation of Jesus Christ. The greatest purpose of the book is to show us Jesus Christ. A suffering church does not need a detailed forecast of future events. It needs a vision of the exalted Christ to encourage the weary and persecuted believers. We see Jesus Christ standing in the midst of the churches. We see Him portrayed as the Lamb of God who died for the sins of the world. We see Him as one who rules and reigns. He is the one who takes His church to be with Him in the new heavens and the new earth, where we will worship Him forever and ever. Amen.