

**THE BOOK OF REVELATION  
A COMMENTARY  
IN THE LIGHT OF THE TEMPLE**



**John and Gloria Ben-Daniel**

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by John and Gloria Ben-Daniel



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Jerusalem

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The design on the front cover represents Rev 11,4. It is an adaptation of the illustration on the back cover, which depicts the vision in Zechariah 4,2-3 painted by Joseph Asarfati in the year 1300 AD. The original is part of an illuminated manuscript of the Hebrew Bible from Cervera in Catalonia, Spain, which is presently kept at the National Library of Portugal in Lisbon. It is in the public domain and is accessible at <http://purl.pt/23405>.

“Blessed is the one who reads  
and those who hear the words of the prophecy  
and keep what is written in it, for the time is near” (Rev 1,3)

~

“Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy  
of this book” (Rev 21,7)



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## *Preface and Acknowledgments*

The Book of Revelation, or Apocalypse, brings us the ‘Revelation of Jesus Christ’, the ‘Word of God and Witness of Jesus’, the prophecy of what must happen soon, and it was all written by divine command. There are blessings for those who contemplate its words and penalties for those who alter its content. Though one of the most eminent and holy books in the New Testament, it has also been one of the least understood.

According to St. Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, even the faithful of the early Church kept away from this book: “*Some before us have set aside and rejected the book altogether, criticizing it chapter by chapter, and pronouncing it without sense or argument, and maintaining that the title is fraudulent. For they say that it is not the work of John, nor is it a revelation, because it is covered thickly and densely by a veil of obscurity*” (recorded by Eusebius in his *Historia Ecclesiae* VII, 25). In the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, Eusebius lists the Book of Revelation as one of the texts whose inclusion in the New Testament canon was disputed, even by himself (*Hist. Ecc.* III, 25.3-5). In the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, St. Jerome confessed that it “has as many mysteries as words” (*Letter 53, to Paulinus, para 9*).

Although it was widely accepted in the Roman Church, none of the Eastern Churches accepted it until the 7<sup>th</sup> century, more than 500 years after it was written. After nearly two millennia of exegetical effort on the Book of Revelation, especially over the last century, there is still no consensus among scholars about its general meaning. Their voluminous commentaries present a confusing variety of approaches and a multitude of different interpretations.

At the root of these differences are various shaky assumptions and generalizations about the temporal order of the Book’s visions and the historical context to which they refer. With little or no textual evidence in support, scholars differ widely on this issue: some say the visions refer to events in the past, either to the first century AD or to the whole span of Church history. Others see the visions referring mainly to future events, in a prophetic framework, while others say they are not linked to any particular context, past or future, because they symbolically describe metaphysical realities that are always present. Combinations of these points of view have also been put forward. Each of these different approaches has a name (*Preterist, Historicist, Futurist, Idealist* and *Mixed* respectively) and each spawns a radically different set of interpretations.

Faced with such discordance, one wonders if there is not something in the text itself that can indicate how the visions relate to each other and to the events they represent. The good news is that a single temporal framework can be identified in the text: a framework that does actually unite, organize and determine the temporal order of the visions described in the text, from beginning to end. It is expressed in the form of Jerusalem temple and liturgical imagery. As we are not familiar with this imagery, help is needed to identify and explain it. In addition to a few passages in the Old Testament (Lev ch.16 and Sir 50,5-21), two tractates from the Mishnah (*Tamid* and *Yoma*) are important. This led to the work written up in our book *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple* (Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003), in which we identified, running throughout the text, the liturgical elements that constitute a liturgy for the Day of Atonement in the heavenly Sanctuary. As all liturgies do, this liturgy follows a precise temporal sequence. It begins with the sacrifice of Christ the Lamb, ends with the reading of scrolls at the final judgment and, in order, includes the Lamb's reception and unsealing of the Scroll of Life, the time of prayer and offering of incense, the presentation and offering of the Lamb's followers, accompanied by the sounding of trumpets, the pouring of libations and the acclamation of praises signifying the culmination of the heavenly liturgy.

Since a large part of the text (Rev 8–22) concerns the concluding moments of this liturgy—called “the presentation of the offerings before the Lord”—we have good textual confirmation that this part of the text concerns the corresponding period of history, the part immediately preceding the Second Coming and the final judgment. Closer inspection permits us to further pinpoint this period to a final septennium, or week of years (seven years). On the one hand, therefore, a large section of text contains an end-time prophecy that asks to be understood as such. On the other hand, the entire liturgical sequence includes a period of at least one thousand years (Rev 20,4-6), so the corresponding text clearly represents a substantial historical era. Quite how long is uncertain, since the “one thousand years” is a poetic biblical formula for that period of time on earth which corresponds to one day in heaven, ‘a day that is already passing’ according to Psalm 90,4 (cf. 2Pet 3,8)—a day that we have already identified as a Day of Atonement. In summary, the liturgy for the Day of Atonement in heaven corresponds to a lengthy historical period on earth and imparts to the text a precise temporal framework. This can be inferred from the text itself and lays a secure foundation for further exegetical work.

So, these findings from our book *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple* ([link 1](#)) underlie the following verse by verse commentary of the Book of Revelation. There is therefore a special emphasis on identifying and explaining the temple and liturgical imagery in the text. This not only helps us fill many gaps in our understanding of the text, but also provides us with the correct temporal framework for interpreting the vision narrative. Taken together, these insights allow us to reach a greater understanding of the text as a whole and in its many parts.

On this point, we can mention significant contributions to certain features of the text, especially the Scroll of Life (Rev 5-8; 13,8; 17,8; 20,11-15) and the “little scroll” (Rev 10), the mission of the two witnesses (Rev 11,3-13), the signs in heaven (Rev 12; 15), the millennial kingdom (Rev 20) and the final judgment, especially its correspondence with the Jewish New Year tradition. In addition, particular effort has been invested in explaining the large amount of information in the text about the ‘Mystery of Iniquity’, which is to say, how the devil continues to operate in heaven and on earth (Rev 12–13; 17–18), despite being chained in the Abyss (Rev 20). The most difficult subjects in the commentary are linked to a series of articles written by the authors and accessible on our website ([www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org), click on ‘Key Themes’). These articles give the reader an opportunity to delve in depth into some of the grittier themes of the Book of Revelation. The reasoning and methodology behind our interpretation ‘in the light of the temple’ are fully explained in the article “Interpreting the Book of Revelation: The Textual Basis for a Single Approach” ([link 2](#)).

The relevant background subjects have been presented already in our publication *Saint John and the Book of Revelation: from Essenes to End-Times* (Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2019), also available at the authors’ website ([link 3](#)). The subjects are: Lakeside Galilee and the Essene Caves Hypothesis ([link 4](#)); The Author of the Book of Revelation ([link 5](#)); The Johannine Question Answered ([link 6](#)); The Historical Background to the Book of Revelation ([link 7](#)); The Composition and Structure of the Book of Revelation ([link 8](#)); Imagery in the Book of Revelation and its Dominant Theme ([link 9](#)); Myth, History and End-Time Prophecy in Revelation 12-22 ([link 10](#)); Summary of the Life of John the Apostle ([link 11](#)). Where appropriate, many of these chapters are referenced in the commentary through numbered links, which are then listed at the end of the book, in the ‘Index to Links’. The hypothesis in Chapter 1 ([link 4](#)) is further developed in “*The Essenes of Mount Arbel and Jerusalem: Origins, History and Influence*”, by J. Ben-Daniel (Mogilany, Krakow: Enigma Press, 2023).

The commentary brings together more than 30 years of study and reflection on the Book of Revelation. During this time, the world has changed in unprecedented ways, making the Book of Revelation even more important for the lives of the faithful. We are not alone in seeing the prophecy of the Book of Revelation approaching its fulfilment, as explained, verse by verse, in this commentary.

We would like to acknowledge our debt to many scholars in the field, but especially to the late Fr. Ugo Vanni, S.J., whose direction at an early stage in our work was inspiring and instructive. In the writing of the commentary itself, we wish to acknowledge, with gratitude and appreciation, the works of five scholars in particular: *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, by Colin J. Hemer (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989); *The Book of Revelation* by Robert H. Mounce (Revised Edition, Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1998); *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John* by Pierre Prigent (English trans. by Wendy Pradels, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001); *The Book of Revelation* by G.K. Beale (Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1999) and *The Word Biblical Commentary* by David Aune (in 3 vols; Dallas: Word Books, 1997 and Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998).

All thanks and praise are due to that invisible source of inspiration which constantly accompanies students of Scripture, but whose presence is especially felt at those precious moments of insight when the intellect has reached its limits. In the study of the Book of Revelation, this can be quite often. Working up close on the text has helped us to verify, and depend upon, the meticulous unity of John's Book of Revelation—a unity which, one quickly discovers, reaches outwards to embrace the entire Canon of Old and New Testaments, as well as several non-canonical writings of the intertestamental period. Studying this book at close range leaves one in no doubt about its worthiness to occupy the final place in the Canon, bringing the Biblical Revelation to its most blessed consummation and conclusion. It has also helped to confirm the impression that it is the most important document ever written by and for the people of God, for their faith in this Word will bring them safely through the most crucial moments in their history. To God be the Glory!

John and Gloria  
Old City, Jerusalem  
Advent, 2023

## Composition

This work has two parts: the sacred text (I) and the commentary (II). First is the text, in our English translation of the Greek New Testament of Nestle-Aland (*Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28<sup>th</sup> edition). The commentary follows and consists of a small-print repetition of the text with comments in the form of footnotes (525 in total), indicated by **numbers in bold type** at the appropriate place in the text. These numbers occur after a word, within or at the end of a sentence, and should not be confused with the verse numbers that stand before a word, at the start of a new sentence.

In the sacred text, words in square parentheses indicate clarifications and are explained in the comment for that verse (e.g., 8,13; 9,11; 10,1; 19,16). The translation from Greek has been kept as literal as possible, but in some places extra words have been added in order to make sense in English and these have been put in *italics*. Similarly, in order to indicate the structural units of the text, according to our interpretation 'in the light of the temple' (cf. [link 2](#)), the following section titles have been inserted:

| <b>Section</b> | <b>Section Title</b>   |
|----------------|--|
| 1,1-8          | <i>Prologue</i>  |
| 1,9-20         | <i>Vision of the Angel of the Risen Christ</i>   |
| 2,1-3,22       | <i>The Seven Messages to the Churches</i>  |
| 4,1-6,17       | <i>Baseline Prophetic Narrative</i><br><i>—the Throne, the Lamb's Scroll and Opening of its first Six Seals</i>    |
| 7,1-17         | <b>First Interruption:</b> <i>Preparation and Purification of the Faithful</i>                                     |
| 8,1-9,21       | <i>Baseline Prophetic Narrative resumed</i><br><i>—the Seventh Seal and the Sounding of the first Six Trumpets</i> |
| 10,1-11,14     | <b>Second Interruption:</b> <i>Prophetic Commission and Mission</i>  |
| 11,15-19       | <i>Baseline Prophetic Narrative resumed—the Seventh Trumpet</i>  |
| 12,1-15,4      | <b>Third Interruption:</b> <i>Seven Prophetic Visions</i>  |
| 15,5-16,21     | <i>Baseline Prophetic Narrative resumed—the Seven Bowl-Plagues</i>   |
| 17,1-19,5      | <b>Fourth Interruption:</b> <i>Babylon and the Mystery of Iniquity</i>   |
| 19,6-10        | <i>Preparations for the Marriage of the Lamb</i>   |
| 19,11-18       | <i>The Manifestation of the Lord of lords and King of kings</i>  |
| 19,19-21       | <i>The Battle of the Great Day of God the Almighty</i>   |
| 20,1-10        | <i>The Story and Destiny of Satan—the Millennial Reign of Christ</i>   |
| 20,11-15       | <i>The Final Judgment</i>  |
| 21,1-8         | <i>The New Creation</i>  |
| 21,9-22,5      | <i>The New Jerusalem—Wife of the Lamb</i>  |
| 22,6-21        | <i>Epilogue</i>  |

## Abbreviations and Quotations

Standard abbreviations are used for the books and versions of the Bible and Apocrypha. LXX refers to the Septuagint version in Greek, *Tg.* refers to the Aramaic translation or Targum, *Theod.* to the Greek translation by Theodotion, MT to the Masoretic Text, TR to the *Textus Receptus*, OT is short for Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, NT for New Testament, and Q for *Quelle* (the postulated common source for Mt and Lk). Except for the Book of Revelation, which is our own translation from the Greek of the Critical text (*Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28<sup>th</sup> rev. ed., Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2012), biblical quotations are taken from *The New American Bible* (1970) with Revised New Testament (1986), Iowa Falls, Iowa: World Bible Publishers.

Abbreviations for the extrabiblical literature of the Second Temple period also follow the usual forms: DSS for the Dead Sea Scrolls, with individual manuscripts abbreviated according to the standard convention (e.g., 1QM, 11QT, 1QS, 1QH8, 11QMelch, etc.); *Test.* is short for Testament (*Test. Levi*, *Test. Moses*, *Test. Judah*, etc.); *Jub.* for *Jubilees*, *Apoc.* for Apocalypse (*Apoc. Abraham*, *Apoc. Elijah*, etc.), *1En* and *2En* for *1Enoch* and *2Enoch* respectively, *Par. Jer.* for *Paralipomena of Jeremiah*, *Ps. Sol.* for the *Psalms of Solomon*, and *Sib. Or.* for the *Sibylline Oracles*.

For references to Jewish Religious texts, *m.* stands for the Mishnah, *p.T.* for the Palestinian Talmud, *b.T.* for the Babylonian Talmud and *Midr. Rab.* for *Midrash Rabbah*. The others are not abbreviated. The writings of Flavius Josephus are represented by *J.W.* for *The Jewish War* and *Ant.* for *The Antiquities of the Jews*. Reference is also made to *The Code* of Maimonides, otherwise called the *Mishneh Torah* of Rambam (Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon).

For Classical and early Christian literature (Church Fathers), the *Natural History* (*Naturalis Historia*) of Pliny the Elder is abbreviated as *Nat. Hist.* The *Didache* is not shortened, the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch are represented by shortened forms of the recipient communities: *Magn.* to Magnesians, *Phil.* to Philadelphians (from *Early Christian Writings*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth, London: Penguin Classics, 1981, when quoted). *Dial.* refers to the *Dialogue with Trypho* of Justin Martyr, *Mart. Polycarp* to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, *Vis. Hermas* to the *Vision of Hermas*, *Adv. Haer.* to the work entitled *Adversus Haereses* (*Against Heresies*) by St. Irenaeus of Lyon, and *Hist. Ecc.* to the *Historia Ecclesiae* of Eusebius of Caesarea (from *The History of the Church*, trans. G.A. Williamson, London: Penguin Classics,

1989 when quoted). Later Christian works include *City of God* by St. Augustine (from *City of God* by Saint Augustine, trans. Henry Bettenson, London: Penguin Classics, 2003, when quoted), as well as *Interior Castle* for *El Castillo Interior* and *Life* for *Libro De La Vida* by St. Teresa of Avila (from *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, edited and translated by E. Allison Peers, London/New York: Sheed and Ward, 1946, when quoted).

Modern works include the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* abbreviated as *Enc. Jud.* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1971), *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* as *TDOT*, and *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Geza Vermes, 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, London: Penguin Classics, 2011, when quoted) as *Complete DSS in English*. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994) is abbreviated to *CCC*, and the Documents of the Second Vatican Council are simply *Conc. Vat. II*.

The general abbreviations used are as follows: BC refers to the centuries before Christ's birth (BCE) and AD for the centuries after that event (CE); 'n.' before a number refers the reader to the footnote in this commentary indicated by the number, and this becomes 'nn.' in the plural; 'c.' before a date is short for 'circa' and means 'approximately'; 'et par.' refers to the parallel versions of a passage in the synoptic Gospels, 'lit.' means literally; and 'esp.' is short for 'especially'.





# The Revelation of John

## *Prologue*

I

<sup>1</sup>The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show his servants what must soon take place, and *which* he made known by sending his angel to his servant John, <sup>2</sup>who bears witness to the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ, of all that he saw. <sup>3</sup>Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

<sup>4</sup>John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace and peace to you from the One who is and who was and who is to come, and from the Seven Spirits who are before his throne, <sup>5</sup>and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins with his blood, <sup>6</sup>and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and might for ever and ever. Amen.

<sup>7</sup>Behold, he comes with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn over him. Yes, amen.

<sup>8</sup>I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, the One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

## *Vision of the Angel of the Risen Christ*

<sup>9</sup>I John, your brother and companion in the hardship and kingdom and endurance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus. <sup>10</sup>I came to be in spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet <sup>11</sup>saying: Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.

## *The Book of Revelation*

<sup>12</sup>And I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, <sup>13</sup>and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, dressed in a long tunic and bound around the breast with a golden band; <sup>14</sup>his head and hair were white as white wool, as snow, and his eyes like a blazing fire, <sup>15</sup>and his feet like bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice like the sound of many waters; <sup>16</sup>and in his right hand he had seven stars and coming out of his mouth was a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining at full strength.

<sup>17</sup>And when I saw him I fell at his feet as though dead, and he placed his right hand on me saying: Do not be afraid, I am the First and the Last, <sup>18</sup>and the Living One—I was put to death and behold, I am alive for ever and ever, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. <sup>19</sup>Therefore write what you saw, and what is now, and what is to take place after these things. <sup>20</sup>As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw on my right and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are seven churches.

### *The Seven Messages to the Churches*

#### II

<sup>1</sup>To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: This says the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

<sup>2</sup>I know your deeds, your labour and endurance, and that you cannot endure wicked men, and have put to the test those calling themselves apostles and are not, and have found them false. <sup>3</sup>Yet endurance you have, and you have endured for the sake of my name and have not weakened. <sup>4</sup>But I have *this* against you, that you have lost the love you had at first. <sup>5</sup>Therefore remember how far you have fallen and repent, and do the works you did at first; and if not, I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. <sup>6</sup>But this you have, that you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

<sup>7</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes – I will let him eat from the Tree of Life, which is in the paradise of God.

<sup>8</sup>And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: This says the First and the Last, the one who was put to death and returned to life.

<sup>9</sup>I know your affliction and poverty – but you are rich – and the blasphemy of those saying they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. <sup>10</sup>Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is going to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and you will have hardship for ten days. Be faithful up to death and I will give you the crown of life.

<sup>11</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes will certainly not be hurt by the second death.

<sup>12</sup>And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: This says the one who has the sharp two-edged sword.

<sup>13</sup>I know where you live – where the throne of Satan is – yet you hold to my name and did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death amongst you, where Satan dwells. <sup>14</sup>But I have a few things against you, because you have there some that hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to throw a stumbling-block before the sons of Israel, to eat idol-sacrifices and to fornicate. <sup>15</sup>So you too, in the same way, have some that hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. <sup>16</sup>Therefore repent, and if not I am coming to you soon and will fight them with the sword of my mouth.

<sup>17</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who overcomes I will give from the hidden manna, and I will give him a little white stone, and on the stone a new name is written which no one knows except the one who receives it.

<sup>18</sup>And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: This says the Son of God, whose eyes are like a blazing fire and his feet like bronze.

<sup>19</sup>I know your deeds, and your love, faithfulness, service and endurance, also that your last deeds are better than the first. <sup>20</sup>But I have *this* against you, that you tolerate Jezebel, the woman who calls herself a prophetess and teaches and deceives my servants to fornicate and to eat idol-sacrifices. <sup>21</sup>And I gave her time to repent and she does not want to repent from her fornication. <sup>22</sup>Behold, I am throwing her onto a bed and those committing adultery with her into great distress, unless they repent from her practices; <sup>23</sup>also I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and will give to each one of you according to your deeds. <sup>24</sup>But I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, all who do not keep this teaching, who do not know the deep things of Satan as they say: I am not putting any other burden on you; <sup>25</sup>only hold to what you have until I come.

<sup>26</sup>And the one who overcomes and attends to my work until the end—I will give him authority over the nations <sup>27</sup>just as I also received from my Father, and he will shepherd them with a rod of iron, to break *them* into pieces like pots of clay; <sup>28</sup>and I will give him the Dawn Star. <sup>29</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

### III

<sup>1</sup>And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: This says the one who has the Seven Spirits of God and the seven stars.

I know your deeds; that you have a name for being alive and yet you are dead. <sup>2</sup>Be awake and restore those that remain and were about to die, for I have not found your deeds perfect in the sight of my God. <sup>3</sup>Therefore remember how you received and heard; be observant and repent. For if you are not awake, I will come like a thief and you will never know at what hour I will come upon you. <sup>4</sup>But you have a few names in Sardis who have not defiled their clothes, and they shall walk with me in white, because they are worthy.

<sup>5</sup>The one who overcomes will dress himself like this in white clothes, and never will I scrub his name from the Scroll of Life, and I will

declare his name before my Father and before his angels. <sup>6</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

<sup>7</sup>And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: This says the Holy One, the True One, who holds the key of David, who opens and no one will close, and closes and no one opens.

<sup>8</sup>I know your deeds; since you have little strength—even you have kept my order and not denied my name—look, I have set before you an open door which no one can close. <sup>9</sup>Behold, I will hand over some of the synagogue of Satan—those saying they are Jews and are not for they lie—behold, I will make them come and worship at your feet and they shall know that I love you. <sup>10</sup>Since you have kept my order to endure, also I will keep you from the hour of the trial that is to come upon the whole world, to test the inhabitants of the earth. <sup>11</sup>I am coming soon, hold to what you have so that no one may take your crown.

<sup>12</sup>The one who overcomes—I will make him a pillar in the Sanctuary of my God, and never will he go out again, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the City of my God, of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from my God, and my own new name. <sup>13</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

<sup>14</sup>And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: This says the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of the creation of God.

<sup>15</sup>I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I would rather you were cold or hot. <sup>16</sup>So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I am about to vomit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup>For you say: “I am rich and have plenty and there is nothing I need”, and you do not know that you are the wretched one, pitiable and poor and blind and naked. <sup>18</sup>I advise you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich, and white clothes so that you may dress yourself and not expose the shame of your nakedness, and ointment to anoint your eyes so that you may see. <sup>19</sup>All those whom I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. <sup>20</sup>Behold, I stand at the door and

knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come to him and eat with him and he with me.

<sup>21</sup>The one who overcomes—I will let him sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat with my Father on his throne. <sup>22</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

*Baseline Prophetic Narrative*

*– the Throne, the Lamb's Scroll and the Opening of its first Six Seals*

IV

<sup>1</sup>After this I looked and behold, an open door in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, was saying: Come up here and I will show you what must take place after these things.

<sup>2</sup>At once I came to be in spirit and behold, there was a throne set in heaven, and One seated on the throne, <sup>3</sup>and the One who is seated appears like jasper stone and carnelian, and around the throne is a halo looking like emerald. <sup>4</sup>Also around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and sitting on the thrones twenty-four elders clothed in white clothes, with golden crowns on their heads. <sup>5</sup>And out of the throne come lightnings and noises and thunders, and before the throne seven flames of fire are burning which are the Seven Spirits of God, <sup>6</sup>and before the throne *it is* like a glassy sea similar to crystal. And in the midst of the throne and around the throne are four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind: <sup>7</sup>and the first living creature is like a lion, and the second living creature like an ox, and the third living creature has a face like that of a human being, and the fourth living creature is like a flying eagle. <sup>8</sup>And the four living creatures—each one of them has six wings—are full of eyes all round and within, and take no rest day or night saying:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,  
the One who was and who is and who is to come.

<sup>9</sup>And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to the One seated on the throne, to the One living for ever and ever, <sup>10</sup>the twenty-four elders fall down before the One seated on the throne, and

worship the One living for ever and ever, and they place their crowns before the throne saying:

<sup>11</sup>Worthy are you, our Lord and God,  
to receive the glory and the honour and the power,  
because you created all things,  
and by your will they came into being, and were created.

V

<sup>1</sup>And I saw on the right of the One seated on the throne a scroll with writing on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals. <sup>2</sup>And I saw a mighty angel calling with a loud voice: Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals? <sup>3</sup>And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look at it. <sup>4</sup>And much I wept because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look at it. <sup>5</sup>And one of the elders says to me: Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so that he may open the scroll and its seven seals.

<sup>6</sup>And I saw in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures, in the midst of the elders, a Lamb standing, like one that had been slain; he had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the Seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. <sup>7</sup>And he came and took from the right of the One seated on the throne. <sup>8</sup>And when he took the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb—each one having a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. <sup>9</sup>And they sing a new song saying:

Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
because you were slain  
and with your blood you bought people for God  
from every tribe and tongue and race and nation,  
<sup>10</sup>and made them a kingdom and priests for our God  
and they shall reign on the earth.

<sup>11</sup>And I saw and I heard the sound of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was

myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, <sup>12</sup>and they were saying with a loud voice:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain  
to receive the power and riches  
and wisdom and strength  
and honour and glory and praise.

<sup>13</sup>And every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and everything in them, I heard saying:

To the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb  
be the praise and the honour  
and the glory and the might for ever and ever.

<sup>14</sup>And the four living creatures said: Amen. And the elders fell down and worshipped.

## VI

<sup>1</sup>And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying, as with a voice of thunder: Come! <sup>2</sup>And I looked and behold, a white horse, and the one sitting on it had a bow and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and so to overcome.

<sup>3</sup>And when he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying: Come! <sup>4</sup>And out came another horse, fiery-red, and the one sitting on it was permitted to take peace from the earth so they slay one another, and a great sword was given to him.

<sup>5</sup>And when he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying: Come! And I looked and behold, a black horse, and the one sitting on it had a yoke in his hand. <sup>6</sup>And I heard *what was* like a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying: A litre of wheat for a day's wage, and three litres of barley for a day's wage, and with the oil and the wine do not be unjust.

<sup>7</sup>And when he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying: Come! <sup>8</sup>And I looked and behold, a pale green horse and the one sitting on it; his name is Death and Hades followed him, and authority was given to them over a quarter of the



earth to kill with the sword, with famine and with pestilence, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

<sup>9</sup>And when he opened the fifth seal, I saw below the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God and because of the Witness which they held. <sup>10</sup>And they cried out with a loud voice saying: How much longer, Holy and True Master, until you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth? <sup>11</sup>And a white robe was given to each one of them, and they were told to rest for a short time more, until also their fellow-servants and their brothers had been consecrated, those about to be killed just as themselves.

<sup>12</sup>And I saw when he opened the sixth seal, and a great earthquake occurred and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood, <sup>13</sup>and the stars of heaven fell to the earth as a fig-tree drops its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind, <sup>14</sup>and the heaven departed as a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place. <sup>15</sup>And the rulers of the earth and the great men and the military officers and the rich men and the strong men and every slave and free-man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, <sup>16</sup>and they say to the mountains and to the rocks: Fall on us and hide us from the face of the One seated on the throne and from the anger of the Lamb, <sup>17</sup>for the great day of their anger has come, and who can survive?

*First Interruption (7,1-17): The Preparation and Purification of the Faithful*  
VII

<sup>1</sup>After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth so that no wind should blow over the earth or over the sea, or against any tree. <sup>2</sup>And I saw another angel coming up from the rising of the sun, holding a seal of the living God, and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels who were permitted to harm the earth and the sea, <sup>3</sup>saying: Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we seal the servants of our God on their foreheads. <sup>4</sup>And I heard the number of those who were sealed: a

hundred and forty-four thousand were sealed from all the tribes of the sons of Israel;

<sup>5</sup>from the tribe of Judah twelve thousand were sealed,  
from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,  
<sup>6</sup>from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,  
<sup>7</sup>from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,  
<sup>8</sup>from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand were sealed.

<sup>9</sup>After this I looked and behold, a vast multitude which no one was able to number, from all nations and tribes and races and tongues, clothed in white robes and with palms in their hands, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, <sup>10</sup>and they cry out with a great sound saying:

Salvation is from our God, the One seated on the throne,  
and from the Lamb!

<sup>11</sup>And all the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell down before the throne on their faces and worshipped God <sup>12</sup>saying:

Amen, the praise and the glory  
and the wisdom and the thanks  
and the honour and the power and the strength  
be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.

<sup>13</sup>And one of the elders responded, saying to me: These clothed in white robes, who are they and where did they come from? <sup>14</sup>And I said to him: My Lord, you know. And he said to me: These are the ones coming from the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and bleached them in the blood of the Lamb. <sup>15</sup>Therefore they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night in his Sanctuary, and the One

seated on the throne will spread his tent over them. <sup>16</sup>They shall hunger no longer, nor shall they thirst any more, neither shall the sun strike them, nor any burning heat, <sup>17</sup>because the Lamb at the centre of the throne will shepherd them and lead them on to fountains of Waters of Life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

*Baseline Prophetic Narrative resumed*

*– the Seventh Seal and the Sounding of the first Six Trumpets*

VIII

<sup>1</sup>And when he opened the seventh seal, there was a silence in heaven for about half-an-hour. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. <sup>3</sup>And another angel came and stood on the altar; he had a golden censer and much incense was given to him to offer, on the golden altar before the throne, with the prayers of all the saints. <sup>4</sup>And the smoke of the incense went up with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God. <sup>5</sup>And the angel took the censer and filled it from the fire of the altar and threw it to the earth, and there were thunders and noises and lightnings and an earthquake.

<sup>6</sup>And the seven angels with the seven trumpets prepared themselves to blow. <sup>7</sup>The first one blew, and there was hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was thrown to the earth; and a third of the earth was burnt up and a third of the trees were burnt up and every green herb was burnt up.

<sup>8</sup>And the second angel blew, and *something* like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea; and a third of the sea became blood, <sup>9</sup>and a third of the creatures in the sea that have souls died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

<sup>10</sup>And the third angel blew, and a great star fell out of heaven burning as a torch and it fell on to a third of the rivers and on to the springs of water. <sup>11</sup>And the name of the star is called Wormwood, and a third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the waters because they were made bitter.

<sup>12</sup>And the fourth angel blew, and a third of the sun was struck and a third of the moon and a third of the stars, so that the third part of them was darkened and the day did not give a third of its brightness, and likewise the night.

<sup>13</sup>And I saw and I heard an eagle [angel] flying in mid-heaven, saying with a loud voice: Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth from the remaining trumpet-blasts of the three angels about to blow!

## IX

<sup>1</sup>And the fifth angel blew, and I saw a star which had fallen from heaven to the earth, and the key of the shaft of the Abyss was given to him. <sup>2</sup>And he opened the shaft of the Abyss and smoke went up from the shaft, like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened by the smoke of the shaft. <sup>3</sup>And out of the smoke came locusts to the earth, and power was given to them as the scorpions of the earth have power. <sup>4</sup>And they were told not to harm the grass of the earth or anything green, or any tree, only the people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup>And it was given to them not so that they should kill them, but so that they will be tormented for five months; and their torment is like the torment of a scorpion whenever it stings a man. <sup>6</sup>And in those days people will seek death and by no means will they find it, and they will long to die and death flees from them.

<sup>7</sup>And the objects like locusts were similar to horses prepared for war, and on their heads *were things* like crowns similar to gold, and their faces were like faces of men, <sup>8</sup>and they had hair like women's hair, and their teeth were like a lion's; <sup>9</sup>and they had armour like armour of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the sound of many chariots of horses running into battle. <sup>10</sup>And they have tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails is their power to harm people for five months. <sup>11</sup>They have a king over them, the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek the name he has is Apollyon. [In English: Destroyer].

<sup>12</sup>The first Woe passed; behold, two Woes are still to come after this.

<sup>13</sup>And the sixth angel blew, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God <sup>14</sup>saying to the sixth angel, the one with the trumpet: Release the four angels tied up at the great River Euphrates. <sup>15</sup>And the four angels were released, those prepared for the hour and day and month and year in order to kill a third of mankind. <sup>16</sup>And the number of troops of mounted men was two myriads of myriads; I heard the number of them. <sup>17</sup>And like this I saw the horses in the vision and those sitting on them—having armour the colour of fire, hyacinth and sulphur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and out of their mouths come fire and smoke and sulphur. <sup>18</sup>By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and the smoke and the sulphur coming out of their mouths. <sup>19</sup>For the power of the horses is in their mouth and in their tails, for their tails, which have heads, are like snakes and with them they cause harm.

<sup>20</sup>And the rest of mankind, those who were not killed by these plagues, did not even repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk, <sup>21</sup>and they did not repent of their murders, or of their sorceries, or of their sexual immorality, or of their thefts.

*Second Interruption (10,1-11,14): Prophetic Commission and Mission*

X

<sup>1</sup>And I saw another mighty angel, coming down from heaven, clothed with a cloud and with the rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun and his feet [legs] like pillars of fire, <sup>2</sup>and in his hand he had a little scroll that had been opened. And he put his right foot on the sea and the left on the land, <sup>3</sup>and cried out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. And when he cried out, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. <sup>4</sup>And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write and I heard a voice from heaven saying: Seal what the seven thunders spoke and do not write it.

<sup>5</sup>And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven <sup>6</sup>and swore by the One living for ever

and ever, who created heaven and the things in it, and the earth and the things in it, and the sea and the things in it, that there shall be no more time, <sup>7</sup>but in the days of the sound of the seventh angel, by the time he is going to blow, also will have been fulfilled the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets. <sup>8</sup>And the voice which I heard from heaven was again speaking to me and saying: Go, take the open scroll which is in the hand of the angel standing on the sea and on the land. <sup>9</sup>And I went towards the angel telling him to give me the little scroll. And he says to me: Take and devour it; and it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey. <sup>10</sup>And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and devoured it, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey, and when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. <sup>11</sup>And they say to me: You must prophesy again about many races and nations and tongues and rulers.

## XI

<sup>1</sup>And a cane similar to a rod was given to me *while* saying: Get up and measure the Sanctuary of God and the altar and those who are worshipping in it. <sup>2</sup>And reject the court which is outside the Sanctuary and do not measure it, because it was given to the nations, and they will trample the Holy City for forty-two months. <sup>3</sup>And I will give to my two witnesses and they will prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days dressed in sackcloth. <sup>4</sup>These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the Lord of the earth. <sup>5</sup>And if anyone wishes to harm them, fire comes out of their mouth and consumes their enemies; and if anyone should wish to harm them, he is bound to be killed in this way. <sup>6</sup>These have the authority to shut the sky, so that no rain may fall during the days of their prophecy, and they have authority over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they wish.

<sup>7</sup>And whenever they finish their witnessing, the beast that is coming up out of the Abyss will make war against them and overcome them and kill them. <sup>8</sup>And their corpses *lie* on the street of the great city which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where indeed their Lord

was crucified. <sup>9</sup>And *people* from *many* races and tribes and tongues and nations look at their corpses for three days and a half, and they do not allow their corpses to be placed in a tomb. <sup>10</sup>And the inhabitants of the earth rejoice over them and are glad, and they send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented the inhabitants of the earth.

<sup>11</sup>And after the three days and a half, the Spirit of life from God entered into them and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell on those watching them. <sup>12</sup>And they heard a great voice from heaven saying to them: Come up here. And they went up to heaven in the cloud, and their enemies watched them. <sup>13</sup>And in that hour a great earthquake occurred, and a tenth of the city fell and seven thousand names of men were killed in the earthquake, and the rest became terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

*Baseline Prophetic Narrative resumed – the Seventh Trumpet*

<sup>14</sup>The second Woe passed; behold, the third Woe is coming quickly. <sup>15</sup>And the seventh angel blew, and there were loud voices in heaven saying:

The kingdom of the world has become our Lord's  
and his Christ's,  
and he shall reign for ever and ever.

<sup>16</sup>And the twenty-four elders, sitting on their thrones before God, fell down on their faces and worshipped God <sup>17</sup>saying:

We thank you Lord God Almighty,  
the One who is and who was,  
because you have taken up your great power  
and have come to reign.

<sup>18</sup>And the nations were angry and your anger has come,  
also the time for the dead to be judged,  
and to give the reward to your servants the prophets  
and to the saints  
and to them that fear your name,  
to the small and to the great,  
and to destroy those who are destroying the earth.

<sup>19</sup>And the Sanctuary of God in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen in his Sanctuary, and there were lightnings and noises and thunders, an earthquake and a great hail.

*The Third Interruption (12,1–15,4): Seven Prophetic Visions*

XII

<sup>1</sup>And a great sign was seen in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun and the moon beneath her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars, <sup>2</sup>and she is pregnant and cries out with the pains of labour and the distress of giving birth. <sup>3</sup>And another sign was seen in heaven and behold, a great fiery-red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and with seven diadems on his heads, <sup>4</sup>and his tail drags a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth so that he might devour her child whenever she gives birth. <sup>5</sup>And she gave birth to a son, a male, who is to shepherd all the nations with a rod of iron. And her child was caught up to God and to his throne. <sup>6</sup>And the woman fled into the desert, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there they might nourish her for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

<sup>7</sup>And a war took place in heaven—Michael and his angels fighting with the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought <sup>8</sup>and did not prevail, and no longer was any place to be found for them in heaven. <sup>9</sup>And the great dragon was thrown, the ancient serpent called the devil and Satan; the one deceiving the whole world was thrown to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. <sup>10</sup>And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying:

Now is come the salvation  
and the power and the kingdom of our God  
and the authority of his Christ,  
because the accuser of our brothers was thrown,  
the one accusing them before our God day and night.

<sup>11</sup>And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb  
and because of the word of their witness,  
and they loved not their life up to death.



<sup>12</sup>Therefore be glad heavens  
and those who are dwelling there.  
Woe to the earth and the sea,  
because the devil has come down to you with great passion  
knowing that his time is short.

<sup>13</sup>And when the dragon saw that he was thrown to the earth, he pursued the woman who gave birth to the male. <sup>14</sup>And the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman to fly to the desert, to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half-a-time away from the face of the serpent. <sup>15</sup>And out of his mouth the serpent threw water like a river after the woman, to cause her to be taken by the current. <sup>16</sup>And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river which the dragon threw out of his mouth. <sup>17</sup>And the dragon was furious with the woman, and went away to make war against the rest of her seed, those who keep the Commandments of God and have the Witness of Jesus. <sup>18</sup>And he stood on the sand of the sea.

### XIII

<sup>1</sup>And I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads and with ten diadems on his horns and blasphemous titles on his heads. <sup>2</sup>And the beast that I saw was like a leopard and his feet were like a bear's, and his mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave to him his power and his throne and great authority; <sup>3</sup>and one of his heads was like one that had been slain to death, and his fatal wound had been cured. And all the earth followed the beast with wonder, <sup>4</sup>and they worshipped the dragon because he had given the authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast saying: Who is like the beast, and who can make war against him?

<sup>5</sup>And he was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and authority was given to him to exercise for forty-two months. <sup>6</sup>And he opened his mouth in blasphemies against God, to blaspheme his name and his dwelling—those who are dwelling in heaven. <sup>7</sup>And he was allowed to make war against the saints and to overcome them, and he was given authority over every tribe and race

and tongue and nation. <sup>8</sup>And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship him, everyone whose name is not written in the Scroll of Life from the foundation of the world, of the Lamb that was slain.

<sup>9</sup>If anyone has an ear let him hear. <sup>10</sup>If anyone is for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be killed by a sword, by a sword he is to be killed. Here is the endurance and the faith of the saints.

<sup>11</sup>And I saw another beast coming up out of the land, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke as a dragon. <sup>12</sup>And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in front of him, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, the one whose fatal wound had been cured. <sup>13</sup>And he performs great signs, such that he even makes fire come down from heaven on to the earth in the sight of men; <sup>14</sup>and he deceives the inhabitants of the earth by the signs which he was allowed to perform in front of the beast, telling the inhabitants of the earth to make an image to the beast that has the wound of the sword and lived.

<sup>15</sup>And he was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak, and cause to be killed everyone who would not worship the image of the beast. <sup>16</sup>And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free-men and the servants, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, <sup>17</sup>so that no one can buy or sell except the one who has the mark – the name of the beast or the number of his name.

<sup>18</sup>Here is the wisdom. Let the one with intelligence calculate the number of the beast, for it is a number of a man, and his number is six hundred and sixty-six.

#### XIV

<sup>1</sup>And I looked and behold, the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand having his name and the name of his Father written on their foreheads.

<sup>2</sup>And I heard a sound from heaven like the sound of many waters, and like the sound of loud thunder, and the sound which I heard was like harpists playing their harps. <sup>3</sup>And they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders, and no

one was able to learn the song except the hundred and forty-four thousand, those that were bought from the earth. <sup>4</sup>These are the ones who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he may go. These were bought from among men, first-fruits to God and to the Lamb, <sup>5</sup>and no lie was found in their mouth – they are immaculate.

<sup>6</sup>And I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven with an eternal gospel to announce to the inhabitants of the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and race, <sup>7</sup>saying with a loud voice: Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship the One who made heaven and earth and sea and springs of water.

<sup>8</sup>And another angel, a second, followed saying: She fell, *down* fell Babylon the great, who caused all the nations to drink from the wine of the passion of her fornicating.

<sup>9</sup>And another angel, a third, followed them saying with a loud voice: If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, <sup>10</sup>also he shall drink the wine of the passion of God mixed undiluted in the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented by fire and sulphur in front of holy angels and in front of the Lamb. <sup>11</sup>And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever, and they have no rest day or night, those who worship the beast and his image and whoever receives the mark of his name.

<sup>12</sup>Here is the endurance of the saints, those who keep the Commandments of God and faith in Jesus. <sup>13</sup>And I heard a voice from heaven saying: Write; blessed are the dead, they that die in the Lord from now. Yes, says the Spirit, so that they may rest from their labours, but their deeds go with them.

<sup>14</sup>And I looked and behold, a white cloud and sitting on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. <sup>15</sup>And another angel came out of the Sanctuary crying out with a loud voice to the one sitting on the cloud: Swing your sickle and reap, because the hour has come to reap, for the harvest of the earth is dry. <sup>16</sup>And the one sitting on the cloud threw his sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped.

<sup>17</sup>And another angel came out of the Sanctuary in heaven, also having a sharp sickle. <sup>18</sup>And another angel came out from the altar, the one who is in charge of the fire, and spoke with a loud voice to the one with the sharp sickle, saying: Swing your sharp sickle and cut the bunches of the vine of the earth, because its grapes have ripened. <sup>19</sup>And the angel cast his sickle to the earth and cut down the fruit of the vine of the earth, and threw *it* into the great winepress of the passion of God. <sup>20</sup>And the winepress was trodden outside the City, and blood came out of the winepress up to the bridles of the horses, for one thousand six hundred stadia.

XV

<sup>1</sup>And I saw another sign in heaven, great and wonderful: seven angels with seven plagues – the last, because with them the passion of God was finished.

<sup>2</sup>And I saw *what was* like a glassy sea mixed with fire and those who overcame the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the glassy sea holding harps of God. <sup>3</sup>And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb saying:

Great and wonderful are your deeds, Lord God Almighty;

just and true are your ways, King of the nations;

<sup>4</sup>Who will not fear and glorify your name, Lord?

*It is because you* alone are holy,

that all the nations will come and worship before you,

for your acts of judgment were made manifest.

*Baseline Prophetic Narrative resumed – the Seven Bowl-Plagues*

<sup>5</sup>And after this I looked, and the Sanctuary of the Tent of Witness in heaven was opened, <sup>6</sup>and out of the Sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, dressed in clean bright linen and bound around the breast with golden belts. <sup>7</sup>And one of the four living creatures had given to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the passion of God, the One living for ever and ever. <sup>8</sup>And the Sanctuary was filled with the smoke of the glory of God and of his power, and no one was able to

enter the Sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

XVI

<sup>1</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the Sanctuary saying to the seven angels: Go and pour out the seven bowls of the passion of God on the earth.

<sup>2</sup>And the first went away and poured out his bowl on the earth; and a foul and malignant ulcer developed on the people that have the mark of the beast and those who worship his image.

<sup>3</sup>And the second poured out his bowl on the sea; and the sea became like the blood of a dead man, and every living soul in the sea died.

<sup>4</sup>And the third poured out his bowl on the rivers and the springs of water and they became blood. <sup>5</sup>And I heard the angel of the waters saying:

*So just are you, O Holy One,  
the One who is and who was,  
in how you have judged these things,  
<sup>6</sup>because they shed blood of saints and of prophets,  
and blood you have given them to drink;  
they deserve it.*

<sup>7</sup>And I heard the altar saying:

*Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.*

<sup>8</sup>And the fourth poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. <sup>9</sup>And the people were scorched with a great heat and they blasphemed the name of God, the One who has power over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory.

<sup>10</sup>And the fifth poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast; and his kingdom was darkened, and they bit their tongues from the pain, <sup>11</sup>and they blasphemed the God of heaven for their pains and for their sores, and they did not repent of their deeds.

<sup>12</sup>And the sixth poured out his bowl on the great River Euphrates; and its water dried up to prepare the way for the rulers from

the East. <sup>13</sup>And from the mouth of the dragon and from the mouth of the beast and from the mouth of the false prophet, I saw three unclean spirits like frogs; <sup>14</sup>for they are spirits of demons performing signs, which go out to the rulers of the whole world to assemble them to the war of the great day of Almighty God.

<sup>15</sup>Behold, I am coming like a thief; blessed is he that is awake and keeping his clothes, so that he does not walk naked and they see his shame.

<sup>16</sup>And they assembled them in the place called, in Hebrew, Harmagedon.

<sup>17</sup>And the seventh poured out his bowl on the air; and a loud voice came out of the Sanctuary, from the throne, saying: It is done. <sup>18</sup>And there were lightnings and noises and thunders and a great earthquake occurred, such as never had happened since man was on the earth, such an earthquake—so great. <sup>19</sup>And the great city came to be in three parts and the cities of the nations fell. And Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup with the wine of the passion of his anger. <sup>20</sup>And every island fled and mountains were not found. <sup>21</sup>And a great hail, as a talent in weight, comes down from heaven on the people and the people blasphemed God from the plague of hail, because this plague is exceedingly great.

*The Fourth Interruption (17,1–19,5): Babylon and the Mystery of Iniquity*  
XVII

<sup>1</sup>And one of the seven angels that had the seven bowls came and spoke to me saying: Come, I will show you the condemnation of the great prostitute sitting on many waters, <sup>2</sup>the one with whom the rulers of the earth fornicating, and from the wine of her fornication the inhabitants of the earth became drunk.

<sup>3</sup>And he carried me away in spirit into a desert. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that had seven heads and ten horns and was full of blasphemous titles. <sup>4</sup>And the woman was clothed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls; in her hand she was holding a golden cup full of abominations and the

filth of her fornication, <sup>5</sup>and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: Babylon the great, the mother of the prostitutes and abominations of the earth.

<sup>6</sup>And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. And seeing her I was struck with great wonder. <sup>7</sup>And the angel said to me: Why do you wonder? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that is supporting her. <sup>8</sup>The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the Abyss and goes to destruction; and the inhabitants of the earth will wonder—everyone whose name is not written in the Scroll of Life from the foundation of the world—when they see the beast, because he was, and is not, and will have come.

<sup>9</sup>Here is the intelligence with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits, and are seven rulers: <sup>10</sup>five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and whenever he comes he must remain for *just* a short time. <sup>11</sup>And the beast which was and is not, even he is an eighth, is also of the seven, and goes to destruction. <sup>12</sup>And the ten horns which you saw are ten rulers who have not yet come to power, but receive authority to rule for one hour with the beast. <sup>13</sup>These are of one mind, and they give their power and authority to the beast. <sup>14</sup>These will make war against the Lamb and the Lamb will overcome them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.

<sup>15</sup>And he says to me: The waters which you saw, where the prostitute sits, are races and crowds and nations and tongues. <sup>16</sup>And the ten horns that you saw and the beast, these will hate the prostitute and will leave her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh, and will consume her with fire; <sup>17</sup>for God put *it* into their hearts to serve his purpose and to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast until the words of God shall be fulfilled. <sup>18</sup>And the woman whom you saw is the great city, she that has a kingdom over the rulers of the earth.

XVIII

<sup>1</sup>After this I saw another angel, coming down from heaven with great authority, and the earth was enlightened by his glory. <sup>2</sup>And he cried out with a strong voice saying: She fell, *down* fell Babylon the great, and became a home for demons and a refuge for every unclean spirit, and a hiding-place for every unclean and detested bird, <sup>3</sup>because all the nations drank from the wine of the passion of her fornicating, and the rulers of the earth fornicated with her, and the merchants of the earth became rich on the strength of her lust for luxury.

<sup>4</sup>And I heard another voice from heaven saying: Come out of her my people, so that you do not take part in her sins and so that you do not receive from her plagues, <sup>5</sup>because her sins have piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her wicked deeds. <sup>6</sup>Pay her as indeed she paid out, and give her double in proportion to her deeds; mix her double in the cup in which she mixed; <sup>7</sup>as much as she glorified herself and lived in luxury, by that much give her torment and sorrow. Since she says to herself: "As queen I sit and am not a widow, and sorrow I certainly do not see", <sup>8</sup>so in one day will come her plagues—pestilence and sorrow and famine—and with fire she will be consumed, for strong is the Lord God, the One condemning her.

<sup>9</sup>And the rulers of the earth, those who fornicated with her and lived in luxury, will weep and mourn for her when they see the smoke of her burning, <sup>10</sup>standing from a distance through fear of her torment, saying: Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon the strong city, for in one hour your punishment came.

<sup>11</sup>And the merchants of the earth weep and sorrow for her, because no one buys their cargo any more: <sup>12</sup>cargo of gold and silver and precious stones and pearls and fine linen and purple and silk and scarlet, and every *kind of* scented wood and every object of ivory and every object of very costly wood and of brass and of iron and of marble, <sup>13</sup>and cinnamon and spice and perfumes and ointment and frankincense and wine and oil and fine flour and corn, and cattle and sheep, and horses and carts, and bodies and souls of men.



<sup>14</sup>And the ripe fruit of the lust of your soul went away from you; yes, all the rich and shiny things vanished from you – and never again shall they find them.

<sup>15</sup>The merchants of these things, those who became rich from her, will stand from a distance through fear of her torment, weeping and sorrowing, <sup>16</sup>saying: Woe, woe, the great city, she that was clothed with fine linen and purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, <sup>17</sup>for in one hour such great wealth was made desolate.

And every ship's master and all the passengers and sailors, and all who work on the sea, stood from a distance <sup>18</sup>and seeing the smoke of her burning they cried out, saying: Who is like the great city? <sup>19</sup>And they threw dust on their heads and weeping and sorrowing they cried out, saying: Woe, woe, the great city, from whose wealth all those with ships on the sea became rich, for in one hour she was made desolate.

<sup>20</sup>Be glad over her, heaven,  
and the saints and apostles and prophets,  
for God has given judgment for you against her.

<sup>21</sup>And one strong angel picked up a stone like a great millstone, and threw it into the sea saying: Like this, with fury, Babylon the great city shall be thrown, and never again be found. <sup>22</sup>And the sound of harpists and musicians and flutists and trumpeters will never be heard in you again. And all the craftsman of every craft will never be found in you again. And the sound of a mill will never be heard in you again. <sup>23</sup>And the light of a lamp will never shine in you again. And the voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again; for your merchants were the great ones of the earth, because all the nations were deceived by your charms; <sup>24</sup>and in her was found blood of prophets and of saints and of all those who have been slain on the earth.

## XIX

<sup>1</sup>After this I heard *what was* like the great sound of a vast multitude in heaven saying:

Hallelujah!

The salvation and the glory and the power of our God!

<sup>2</sup>How true and just are his judgments,  
because he has condemned the great prostitute,  
who corrupted the earth with her fornication,  
and he has avenged the blood of his servants on her.

<sup>3</sup>And secondly they said:

Hallelujah! And her smoke goes up for ever and ever.

<sup>4</sup>And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshipped God, the One seated on the throne, saying:

Amen, hallelujah!

<sup>5</sup>And a voice came out from the throne, saying:

Praise our God all his servants  
and you that fear him, the small and the great.

*Preparations for the Marriage of the Lamb*

<sup>6</sup>And I heard *what was* like the sound of a vast multitude, and like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunders, saying:

Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God, the Almighty, has come to reign.

<sup>7</sup>Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come  
and his Wife has prepared herself,

<sup>8</sup>and fine linen, bright and clean, was given to her to wear,  
because the fine linen is the righteous work of the saints.

<sup>9</sup>And he says to me:

Write; blessed are they that are invited  
to the wedding banquet of the Lamb.

And he says to me:

These words of God are true.

<sup>10</sup>And I fell down at his feet to worship him. And he says to me: No! I am a fellow-servant of yours and of your brothers who have the Witness of Jesus; worship God. For the Witness of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy.

*The Manifestation of the Lord of lords and King of kings*

<sup>11</sup>And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse; and the One sitting on it is called Faithful and True and with justice he judges and makes war. <sup>12</sup>His eyes are like a blazing fire, and on his head are many diadems and he has a name written which no one knows except himself; <sup>13</sup>he is clothed with a cloak dipped in blood, and his name has been called the Word of God.

<sup>14</sup>And on white horses the armies of heaven followed him, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. <sup>15</sup>And out of his mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it he may strike the nations, and he will shepherd them with a rod of iron; and he treads the winepress for the wine of the passion of the anger of Almighty God, <sup>16</sup>and on the cloak and on his thigh [standard] a title is written: King of kings and Lord of lords.

*The Battle of the Great Day of God the Almighty*

<sup>17</sup>And I saw one angel standing in the sun and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds flying in mid-heaven: Come, assemble for the great banquet of God, <sup>18</sup>to eat the flesh of rulers and the flesh of military officers and the flesh of strong men, and the flesh of horses and of their riders, and the flesh of all people, both free-men and servants, both small and great.

<sup>19</sup>And I saw the beast and the rulers of the earth and their armies assembled to make war against the One sitting on the horse and against his army. <sup>20</sup>And the beast was captured and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in front of him, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image; the two were thrown alive into the lake of fire burning with sulphur. <sup>21</sup>And the rest were killed by the sword that comes out of the mouth of the One sitting on the horse, and all the birds were filled with their flesh.

*The Story and Destiny of Satan – the Millennial Reign of Christ*

XX

<sup>1</sup>And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the Abyss and a great chain in his hand. <sup>2</sup>And he seized the dragon, the ancient serpent who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years <sup>3</sup>and threw him into the Abyss, and shut and sealed *it* over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any more until the thousand years are finished. After this he must be let loose for a short time. <sup>4</sup>And I saw thrones and they sat on them, and power to judge was given to them, and *I saw* the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the Witness of Jesus and because of the Word of God; also *were there* those who did not worship the beast or his image and did not receive the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. <sup>5</sup>The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. <sup>6</sup>Blessed and holy is he that takes part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with him for a thousand years.

<sup>7</sup>And whenever the thousand years are finished, Satan will be let loose from his prison <sup>8</sup>and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth, the Gog and Magog, whose number is as the sand of the sea, to assemble them to the war. <sup>9</sup>And they went up over the breadth of the land and surrounded the Camp of the Saints and the Beloved City, and fire came down from heaven and consumed them. <sup>10</sup>And the devil, the one deceiving them, was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, where also are the beast and the false prophet, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

*The Final Judgment*

<sup>11</sup>And I saw a great white throne and the One seated on it from whose face the earth and heaven fled, and no place was found for them. <sup>12</sup>And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. And another scroll was opened, that

which is of Life. And the dead were judged according to their deeds, from what had been written in the scrolls.

<sup>13</sup>And the sea gave up the dead in it, and Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and they were judged, everyone according to his deeds. <sup>14</sup>And Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. <sup>15</sup>And if anyone was not found written in the Scroll of Life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

### *The New Creation*

#### XXI

<sup>1</sup>And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea is no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

<sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying:

Behold, the dwelling of God is with mankind;

and he will dwell with them,

and they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them,

<sup>4</sup>and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes,

and *there* will be no more death;

neither sorrow, nor crying, nor pain will *there* be any more,

because the former things have passed away.

<sup>5</sup>And the One seated on the throne said: Behold, I am making all things new. And he says: Write, because these words are faithful and true.

<sup>6</sup>And he said to me: It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the one who thirsts I will give freely from the fountain of the Water of Life. <sup>7</sup>The one who overcomes will inherit

these things, and to him I will be God and to me he shall be a son. <sup>8</sup>But for the cowardly and faithless and depraved and murderers and sexually immoral and sorcerers and idolaters and all the liars, their

share is in the lake burning with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.

*The New Jerusalem – the Wife of the Lamb*

<sup>9</sup>And one of the seven angels that had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke to me, saying: Come, I will show you the Bride, the Wife of the Lamb.

<sup>10</sup>And he carried me away in spirit on to a great and high mountain, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, <sup>11</sup>having the glory of God – her radiance like a most precious stone, crystal-clear like jasper stone. <sup>12</sup>She has a great and high wall with twelve gates, and over the gates twelve angels and names engraved which are of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. <sup>13</sup>On the east *there* are three gates and on the north three gates, and on the south three gates and on the west three gates. <sup>14</sup>And the wall of the City has twelve foundations and on them twelve names – of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

<sup>15</sup>And the one speaking to me had a measure, a golden reed, to measure the City and her gates and her wall. <sup>16</sup>And the City lies square, and her length the same as her breadth. And he measured the City with the reed at twelve thousand stadia, her length and breadth and height are equal. <sup>17</sup>And he measured her wall at a hundred and forty-four cubits by man's measure, which is an angel's.

<sup>18</sup>And her wall is encrusted with jasper; and the City is pure gold like clean glass. <sup>19</sup>The foundations of the wall of the City are adorned with every precious stone: the first foundation jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, <sup>20</sup>the fifth sardonyx, the sixth cornelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprasus, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst; <sup>21</sup>and the twelve gates are twelve pearls; each one of the gates was of one pearl a piece. And the street of the City is pure gold like clear glass.

<sup>22</sup>And I did not see a Sanctuary in her, because the Lord God Almighty is her Sanctuary and the Lamb. <sup>23</sup>And the City has no need for the sun or the moon to shine upon her, for the glory of God gives her light, and her lamp is the Lamb. <sup>24</sup>And by her light the nations will walk, and the rulers of the earth bring their glory into her; <sup>25</sup>and her gates shall

never be closed by day, and *there* will be no night there; <sup>26</sup>and they will bring the glory and the honour of the nations into her. <sup>27</sup>And by no means shall anything impure enter her, nor anyone doing what is shameful and false, only those written in the Scroll of Life of the Lamb.

## XXII

<sup>1</sup>And he showed me a river of the Water of Life, bright as crystal, coming out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. <sup>2</sup>Between her street and the river, on both sides, are Trees of Life producing twelve fruits – throughout each month they give their fruit – and the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations.

<sup>3</sup>And no more will *there* be any curse. And the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in her, and his servants will worship him <sup>4</sup>and they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup>And *there* will be no more night, and they will have no need of the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, because the Lord God will give them light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

## *Epilogue*

<sup>6</sup>And he said to me: These words are faithful and true, and the Lord, God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. <sup>7</sup>And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is he that keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.

<sup>8</sup>And I, John, am the one that is hearing and seeing these things. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel showing me these things. <sup>9</sup>And he says to me: No! I am a fellow-servant of yours and of your brothers the prophets and those who keep the words of this book; worship God. <sup>10</sup>And he says to me: Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. <sup>11</sup>Let the wicked person carry on doing what is wrong and let the filthy person carry on being filthy. And let the righteous person carry on doing what is right and let the holy person carry on being holy.

<sup>12</sup>Behold, I am coming soon and my reward is with me, to pay each one according to how is his work. <sup>13</sup>I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

<sup>14</sup>Blessed are they that wash their robes so that they may have the right to the Tree of Life and may enter by the gates into the City. <sup>15</sup>Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the sexually immoral and the murderers and the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices lying.

<sup>16</sup>I, Jesus, sent my angel to witness these things to you in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the bright Dawn Star.

<sup>17</sup>And the Spirit and the Bride say: Come. May the one who hears also say: Come. And let the one who thirsts come, and the one who wants – let him take the Water of Life freely.

<sup>18</sup>I witness to everyone hearing the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, <sup>19</sup>and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the Tree of Life and in the Holy City described in this book.

<sup>20</sup>Says he that witnesses these things: Yes, I am coming soon. Amen, come Lord Jesus.

<sup>21</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all.



## **The Revelation of John<sup>1</sup>**

### *Prologue* <sup>2</sup>

I <sup>1</sup>The Revelation of Jesus Christ,<sup>3</sup> which God gave to him to show his servants what must soon take place, and *which* he made known<sup>4</sup> by

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<sup>1</sup> Also translated as 'The Apocalypse of John'. This is the oldest title of the book, but is not an original part of it.

<sup>2</sup> The Prologue consists of basic introductory material on the origin, transmission, purpose and nature of the text, some of which is reaffirmed in the Epilogue (Rev 22,6-21). This is followed by the typical opening address of an ancient letter (see n.10).

<sup>3</sup> 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ' is the real title of the book, according to the Torah (Pentateuch) tradition of using the first word or words as the title. As the title suggests, this book comes with the full authority of Jesus Christ. 'Revelation' derives from the Greek word Ἀποκάλυψις (apocalypse) meaning 'uncovering', and implies the book contains the disclosure of hidden truths and realities. Modern scholarship has applied the word 'apocalypse' to the genre of ancient Jewish writings of similar style and content, mostly composed between 200 BC and 200 AD. However, John's 'Apocalypse', or 'Revelation', is unique in many respects, but especially in its focus on the victorious redemption already accomplished by Jesus Christ, and its future and eternal consequences. It should be noted that 'the Revelation' here does not refer, as in other parts of the NT (1Cor 1,7; 2Thess 1,7; 1Pet 1,7.13), to the revelation of Jesus Christ from heaven at his Second Coming (the object of the genitive), although that event is a significant component of it. Instead 'the Revelation' is the divine foreknowledge and instruction that follow in the text, given to Jesus Christ for onward transmission to the servants of God on earth (the subject of the genitive).

<sup>4</sup> 'Made known' is the translation of the Greek verb σημαίνω, which also carries the more specific sense of 'signify' and refers to the communication of meaning by signs and symbols. It implies that a challenging task of interpretation lies ahead.

sending his angel to his servant John,<sup>5</sup> who bears witness to the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ,<sup>6</sup> of all that he saw.

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<sup>5</sup> The Revelation originates with God and is given to Jesus Christ, before being transmitted through his angel to his servant John, and then to all God's servants, with the purpose of showing them "what must take place soon" (cf. Rev 4,1; 22,6). Though often denied, the main purpose of this Revelation is the disclosure of future events. The affirmation that these events *must* happen—that they are both certain and necessary—implies that they follow a predetermined divine plan for human history. This plan, or 'mystery', is also found in some intertestamental writings, especially those which relate their origin to the 'heavenly tablets', or Scroll of Destiny, revealed through a chosen human being at the appropriate time (cf. *1En* 81:1-3; 47:3; 106:19, 107:1; *Jub.* 32:20-22; n. 6). The fact that the events will happen *soon* links them with the impending Second Coming, or *Parousia*, of Christ (cf. Rev 1,7; 3,11; 22,7.12.20). Christ communicates his revelation of "what must take place soon" through his angel, the angel of the Lord, who will be described in the introductory vision (1,9-20). By means of this angel, the risen Christ speaks as if in person, through 'the Spirit' (cf. 2,7.11.17.29; 3,6.13.22; 14,13; 22,17). The Spirit's mediation in this way fulfils the role of the promised Spirit of Truth, or *Paraclete*, in declaring the "things that are coming" (Jn 16,12-15). Although we refer to the author simply as John, as in the text, we understand that he is indeed St. John the Apostle, Evangelist, Elder and beloved disciple (see n. 9).

<sup>6</sup> The Revelation is described here as 'the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ', an expression that confirms its origin with God and places it firmly in the Scriptural tradition. It matches the expression "Torah and Witness" (*Torah weTe'udah*: תורה ותעודה), which is found originally in Isaiah (Is 8,16.19-20), and later in the book of *Jubilees* (ch.1), where it refers to the contents of the heavenly tablets (i.e., the 'Scroll of Destiny' containing the pre-existent divine plan for all of history), dictated to Moses on Mt. Sinai and recorded in the rest of that book (ch. 2 onwards). So, the use of the expression 'Word of God and Witness of Jesus Christ' to describe the Book of Revelation recalls the book of *Jubilees* and implies it is also a revelation of the pre-existent divine plan for all of history, given not to Moses in this case, but to Jesus Christ and then to John. Considered in this light, the 'Witness of Jesus Christ' refers to the witness given by Jesus to heavenly and future realities (subject of the genitive), and not to the witness given by the Revelation to Jesus himself (object of the genitive). Those who faithfully hold 'the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ' suffer persecution (Rev 1,9; 12,17) and even martyrdom (6,9; 20,4).

<sup>3</sup>Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and keep what is written in it,<sup>7</sup> for the time is near.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Revelation is here described as prophecy, and therefore as a continuation of the ancient prophetic tradition. Indeed, its identification with the divine plan of history (cf. n. 6 above) implies it is the climax and fulfilment of all prophecy ([link 12](#)). There is a divine blessing attached to reading it in an assembly, since hearers are included, and also for those who 'keep' its words (1,3; 22,7). The Greek word (τηρέω) for 'keep' evokes the Hebrew verbs שומר and נוצר, which both signified the act of guarding, preserving, or observing God's instruction (Torah), covenant or commandments. In English it is perhaps better rendered as 'take to heart'. This is the first of seven beatitudes in the text (cf. 14,13; 16,15; 19,9; 20,6; 22,7.14), and is very similar to Lk 11,28.

<sup>8</sup> The reason invoked for reading this text is that 'the time is near' (cf. Rev 22.10). This resonates with the stated purpose of the Revelation, which is to show his servants what must happen 'soon' (1,1; 22,6). In turn, this involves the *Parousia* of Christ, because this will also happen 'soon' (cf. 1,7; 3,11; 22,7.12.20). Although the Greek for 'soon' (both ἐν τάχει and ταχύ) can also mean 'quickly', 'soon' is to be preferred precisely because 'the time is near' ('quickly' only conveys a sense of rapidity, but not imminence). The use of the same distinctive word for 'time' (καιρός) in 11,18 shows that it refers primarily to the final judgment, when the dead will be raised (cf. 20,11-15), the destroyers of the earth condemned and the servants of God rewarded by the realization of the New Jerusalem (cf. Rev 21-22). So, when the author announces that 'the time is near', there should be no doubt that he is referring to the realization of all the events prophesied in his book, right up to the end. However, since more than 1900 years have passed since he wrote these words, the reader is left wondering whether he was correct in putting so much emphasis on the imminence of the end-time and the fulfilment of the events he prophesied. There are two reasons to explain this: the first is that one of the events he prophesied was the thousand-year period of Christ's reign with his saints (20,4-6), and according to Psalm 90,4 "a thousand years in your sight [Lord] are like a day". So, from a divine point of view, a thousand years is only a short period of time. Speaking from the divine point of view, then, the author is justified in saying that the 'end is near', even though it may take a thousand years, or more, from a human point of view. This response is supported by the almost identical use of Psalm 90,4 at 2Pet 3,8-9, in a passage that was specifically written to explain the delay in the coming of the final judgment and the complete fulfilment of God's promises. The second reason for

<sup>4</sup>John to the seven churches that are in Asia:<sup>9</sup> Grace and peace to you from the One who is and who was and who is to come, and from the

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John's emphasis on the imminence of the end will be explained later in this commentary (see n. 397; see also [link 13](#)).

<sup>9</sup> After announcing a blessing to all who read, hear and keep the prophetic words he was given to write, the author John turns to seven particular churches in Asia Minor. But who was John? In the text, we learn that he witnessed the Revelation in the form of mystical visions and auditions (Rev 1,2; 22,8) and was instructed to write in a book all that he saw and heard (1,11.19). The result was a book of prophecy (1,3; 22,7), which was sent initially to seven churches in Asia in the form of an open letter (1,4.11; Rev 2-3). John refers to himself as a servant of God (1,1), as a brother and co-sharer in the kingdom and trials of Jesus (1,9), and as a brother of the prophets and witnesses of Jesus (19,10; 22,6). From the diction, style and content of his text, we can infer he was a Galilean Jew called Yohanna in Aramaic or Yochanan in Hebrew. So, John would have heard the auditions and first described the visions in his own language, Aramaic, before translating his account into Greek at a later stage. Because of local persecution at the time, his identity is not fully disclosed, and remains 'semi-anonymous' throughout the text. This did not affect its reception, as he was evidently well known in the churches. Based on widespread 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century sources from Asia Minor and elsewhere (Justin Martyr, Papias [according to Andreas of Caesarea], Irenaeus, the Apocryphon of John, the Acts of John, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Hegesippus, Tertullian, Origen, Victorinus and the Muratorian Canon, not to mention *Historia Ecclesiae* by Eusebius of Caesarea: III,18.1; III,20.11; III,23.1-6; IV,18.8; V,8.4-7; VI,25.9-10), Early Church tradition has identified John as the Apostle John, the beloved disciple and author of the Gospel and Letters of John, who migrated to Ephesus before the first Jewish Revolt and lived there until his death in the first years of Trajan's reign (98 AD). Arguments against this tradition have multiplied down the centuries, but boil down to three tenuous and refutable objections ([link 14](#)). The most influential of these was proposed by Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria (c. 250 AD), who rejected the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation, because its literary quality was too poor to have been written by an apostle, and quite unlike that of the Fourth Gospel and First Letter (cf. Eusebius, *Hist. Ecc.* VII, 25). As a result of this objection, the Book of Revelation did not appear in the NT Canon of any of the Eastern Churches until at least 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. For similar reasons to those of Bishop Dionysius, modern scholars attribute Revelation to a group of John's

Seven Spirits who are before his throne,<sup>5</sup> and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth.<sup>10</sup> To him who loves us and freed us from our sins with his blood,<sup>6</sup> and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and might for ever and ever. Amen.<sup>11</sup>

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disciples, whom they call the 'Johannine school'. However, the inelegant style of Revelation does not refute apostolic authorship, as Aramaic was the mother tongue of the apostle and the text is largely his own translation into Greek, his third language (cf. Rev 22,18-19; see n. 522). As a prophetic text, John may have wanted to preserve the shape of the semitic original, in order to facilitate translation back into the original language. In contrast, the Gospel was written by an amanuensis whose mother tongue was Greek (cf. Jn 21,24). Other internal evidence for the apostolic authorship of both writings will be presented later (see n. 240). For discussion of the authorship of Revelation, see [link 5](#), and of the Johannine Corpus, see [link 6](#).

<sup>10</sup> This part of the Prologue has the typical form of the 'prescript' to an ancient letter (sender, addressee, greeting) and closely resembles that of Paul's letter to the Galatians (Gal 1,1-5). The Trinitarian greeting strongly endorses the divine origin of the writing that follows, and relates especially to the vision in Rev 4-5. "The One who is and who was and who is to come" is a paraphrase of God's name in Ex 3,14 and recurs several times in the text (Rev 1,8; 4,8; 11,17; 16,5), along with other ancient titles. The threefold nature of the divine name occurs only in the Palestinian Targum (*Tg. Neofiti*) on Dt 32,39: "See that I am now what I am, and have been, and I am he who shall be", suggesting a common Aramaic tradition. "The Seven Spirits before the throne" may be identified with the Holy Spirit, since seven is the number of completeness or totality in the biblical tradition. The descriptions of Jesus Christ correspond to the three stages of his ministry: while on earth he bore 'faithful witness' to God. As 'the first to resurrect from the dead', he established his Church, and with his Ascension to heaven he became 'the ruler of the kings of the earth' (cf. Ps 89,28).

<sup>11</sup> A doxology to Christ follows the greeting, as in the letter to the Galatians (in other Pauline letters, a blessing or thanksgiving appears in this position). The wording of the doxology is important because it is the only verse in the text that unequivocally identifies Jesus' death as an expiatory sacrifice and associates his blood with the atonement of sins. Very significantly, this act of love is then stated as the means by which he "made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (Rev 5,9-10; 20,6; 1Pet 2,9; cf. Ex 19,6). The mention of the inaugurated presence of Christ's

<sup>7</sup>Behold, he comes with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn over him.<sup>12</sup> Yes, amen.

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kingdom here, and again in 1,9, makes it impossible to maintain the millennialist (chiliast) position that claims this kingdom will begin in the future, after the Second Coming (see n. 448).

<sup>12</sup> This has been called the 'motto' of the book (by W. Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, 1906), as it epitomizes the intention of the whole prophecy: Christ's Second Coming. By echoing the sense of imminence in Rev 1,1,3, this proclamation confirms that the 'Second Coming' is the event that 'must soon take place' and whose 'time is near'. The verse is a new reading of two OT prophecies, which had already been fused in Christian tradition (cf. Mt 24,30): the one who is coming 'on the clouds' (Dn 7,13-14), to rule with divine glory and power, is the same as the one who was 'pierced' (Zech 12,10; cf. Jn 19,37) and killed as an atoning sacrifice (Rev 1,6; cf. Is 52-53). But this time his coming will be evident to the whole world ('every eye shall see him') and will cause 'all the tribes of the earth' to weep and wail. There has been much discussion about whether their grief represents contrition and leads to salvation, or whether it is due to self-pity and ends in judgment. The original context (Zech 12-14) describes the eschatological battle for Jerusalem: in response to the invasion of their land and the siege of their city by foreign armies, the House of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will mourn for someone they pierced. This provides an opportunity for sincere repentance and purification from sin (Zech 13), but nevertheless the city is taken, the houses plundered and half the population exiled (Zech 14,1-2.13-14). Then the Lord comes to fight for the remnant, defeat their enemies and bring victory and everlasting peace to Jerusalem (Zech 14,2-21). With the difference that the Lord who is coming is the same as the one who was 'pierced' for the purification and gathering of God's people (Rev 1,6), and that these people are now in all the world, the battle context is similar in Revelation: the Lord comes to fight on behalf of his people, defeat their enemies and bring eternal salvation in the New Jerusalem. Therefore, many of those who mourn 'over him' or 'because of him' (ἐπ' αὐτόν) will be Christ's enemies facing his wrathful judgment (cf. 6,16). The identity of 'those who pierced him' is also problematic: in Zechariah's prophecy, these are the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the House of David (the Jews), to whom a new means for purification is offered. Likewise in Revelation, the Jews are intended. Some scholars identify 'those who pierced him' with all those who continue to metaphorically 'pierce' and crucify Christ with their

<sup>8</sup>I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, the One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.<sup>13</sup>

*Vision of the Angel of the Risen Christ* <sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup>I John, your brother and companion in the hardship and kingdom and endurance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus.<sup>15</sup>

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sins, but this proposal makes no sense, for it would include every person without exception and would not constitute a special group as indicated in the text. Furthermore, the verb is in the past tense, implying that the 'piercing' was a past event and not a present or ongoing one (see also n. 339).

<sup>13</sup> These last words of the prologue confer divine endorsement and authority on all that has been written. The title 'Alpha and Omega' (also at 21,6) expresses God's complete control over all time and space, from one end to the other, and corresponds to the 'First and the Last' (cf. Is 41,4; 44,6; 48,2) and the 'Beginning and the End' (Rev 21,6). All these titles are shared by Christ (1,17; 22,13). God's absolute sovereignty over the cosmos is again stressed by the title 'the Almighty' (ὁ παντοκράτωρ). In Revelation, the only titles reserved for God are 'the Almighty' (1,8, 4,8; 6,17; 15,3; 16,7.14; 19,6.15; 21,22) and 'the One who is and who was' (1,8; 4,8; 11,17; 16,5). It is interesting to note that just as God is 'the One who is to come', so also Christ is coming (1,7; 3,11; 22,7.12.20). As the revelation unfolds, it will become clear that God and Christ are coming together (cf. 11,15; 22,1).

<sup>14</sup> The Revelation starts here with a vision that forms the background for the messages to the seven churches in Rev 2-3, which in turn provide introductory material for the main part of the book (Rev 4,1-22,6).

<sup>15</sup> This explains how, and when, John came to receive the Revelation. The traditional interpretation (cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Quis Dives* 42) is that he had been exiled (*Relegatio ad insulam*) on the rocky Aegean Island of Patmos, 65 miles south of Ephesus, as a punishment from the Roman Authorities for preaching about Jesus (c. 95 AD). As an alternative to the death penalty, exile was an option only for the noblest members of society (*honestiores*), confirming that the author's high status was recognized even by the Roman Authorities. Since the expression 'Word of God and Witness of Jesus' is previously used to refer to the Revelation that was granted to John (Rev 1,1-2), this verse could also mean that he had been taken to Patmos in order to receive it. Quite probably both ways of reading this verse are intended. Though basing himself on the visionary and auditory



<sup>10</sup>I came to be in spirit<sup>16</sup> on the Lord's day,<sup>17</sup> and heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet<sup>18</sup> <sup>11</sup>saying:

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revelations he experienced on Patmos, John writes in the past tense (ἐγενόμην), indicating he is no longer there and implying he translated and edited his text (see n. 9) after his return to the mainland, following the assassination of Emperor Domitian in 96 AD and the accession of Nerva.

<sup>16</sup> 'In spirit', sometimes translated 'in the Spirit', is a biblical expression that refers to the various grades of mystical experience leading up to ecstasy, spiritual betrothal and consummate divine union, while often conferring the gift of divine revelation and prophecy (cf. Ez 2,2; 3,12.14.24; 8,3; 9,24; 11,1; 43,5; Acts 11,5; 22,17; 2Cor 12,2-3). Occurring here and again at Rev 4,2; 17,3 and 21,10, the expression appears to be the literary marker for a new revelation (see [link 8](#)). Although there is no mention of a multilevel heaven in the Book of Revelation, the visions recorded by John fit into a scheme of three different levels, recalling St. Paul's ascent to the highest of three heavens (2Cor 12,2-3), which in turn takes origin from Jewish tradition (cf. *Test. Levi* 2:7-10; 3:1-4). The vision that follows in the text, of the spiritual reality of things on earth, would correspond to the first heaven (1,9-20; 17,3; 21,10); the vision of angels in mid-heaven (8,13; 14,6.8.9) and of certain signs in heaven (12,1.3) would correspond to an intermediate, or second, heaven, and his vision of God's throne and the Sanctuary in heaven would correspond to the third heaven (4,2 and in many other parts of the text). As the revelation progresses, there is a gradual loss of separation between these different levels, until they all merge into one with 'the new heaven and the new earth'.

<sup>17</sup> This is the earliest occurrence of the term κυριακή ἡμέρα (lit. the day pertaining to the Lord). It is not to be confused with the Day of the Lord's anger (cf. Rev 6,17; 16,14), because by the second century it was widely understood to refer to the day of the week on which the Christian communities assembled to honour and worship the Lord, i.e., Sunday. Writing to the church in Magnesia in 105 AD, Ignatius of Antioch refers to this as a custom that distinguished Christians from Jews: "They have given up keeping the Sabbath, and now order their lives by the Lord's Day instead" (*Magn.* 9,1).

<sup>18</sup> Trumpets were associated with theophany (Ex 19,16; Heb 12,19) and communal worship (Nm 10,10). Both aspects are relevant here: the risen Christ is about to reveal himself to John in a vision that has prominent liturgical features. In this context, it is significant that, in the Jerusalem temple, with the start of the daily service at dawn, trumpets were sounded when the great gate of the Sanctuary was opened, the first sacrifice was



Write<sup>19</sup> in a book<sup>20</sup> what you see and send it to the seven churches,<sup>21</sup> to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.<sup>22</sup>

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slain, and the priest entered the Sanctuary to service the seven-branched lampstand, or *menorah* (*Enc. Jud.*, 1971, vol 15, col 975). The vision that follows in Rev 1,12-16 will take up this imagery in a striking way.

<sup>19</sup> This is the first of many commands to write (Rev 1,11.19; 2,1.8.12.18; 3.1.7.14; 14,13; 19,9; 21,5) and, as it was directed to the author personally, not to a secretary, there should be no doubt that he was ‘grapho-literate’. It should be noted that this is the only NT Scripture that was written in response to a command from the Lord (for the OT, see Ex 34,27-28; Dt 31,19.21; Is 30,8). Since the author is asked to write ‘what he sees’ (present tense), the reference is to the vision of Rev 1,12-16, which appears to him when he turns to see who is speaking. By way of confirmation, the command is repeated in the past tense when vision is over (Rev 1,19a).

<sup>20</sup> The Greek word βιβλίον (used interchangeably with βιβλος in Revelation) can mean a ‘scroll’ or a ‘book’. In fact, scrolls made of papyrus or parchment were the dominant form of media in the first century, when Revelation was written. As the book-form, or ‘codex’, made its first appearance at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, most probably in Ephesus (see n. 21), we give ‘book’ as the translation where John is asked to write. We use ‘scroll’ for the other occurrences, all linked to visionary experiences, because that is the image that John would have seen.

<sup>21</sup> The second command ‘send it to the seven churches’ raises the question of how the speaker expected this to be done: the open letter format suggests that he knew John had access to a scribal manuscript copying centre in Ephesus, where the master copy would be dictated to seven trained scribes, checked for errors and then distributed to all seven churches at once. This scribal centre can now be identified with the ‘Johannine school’ (see n. 9). There are good reasons to believe the papyrus codex format was invented by this scribal centre, at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century (for the evidence, see [link 5](#)).

<sup>22</sup> The seven churches were situated roughly on a circle (diameter about 100 miles), within the Roman Province of Asia—the west-central part of Asia Minor. There were many more than seven churches in Asia at the time this was written, and it is probable that these churches were chosen because they were well known to the author, and the author to them. They would therefore have been the most receptive to this Revelation. These are not seven separate letters intended for seven churches, but rather seven messages sent altogether as an open, circular letter to all seven churches,

<sup>12</sup>And I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me,<sup>23</sup> and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands,<sup>24</sup> <sup>13</sup>and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, dressed in a long tunic and bound around the breast with a golden band; <sup>14</sup>his head and hair were white as white wool, as snow, and his eyes like a blazing fire, <sup>15</sup>and his feet like bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice like the sound of many waters;<sup>25</sup>

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for eventual transmission to all the churches in the world. Since seven is the biblical number representing fullness and totality, seven churches would readily be understood to represent the whole Church (cf. Ez 25–32, where Ezekiel chooses seven neighbouring populations to represent all the gentiles). This is implied by the universal character of the subsequent messages (Rev 2–3) and confirmed by the Muratorian fragment on the Canon (c. 180 AD), which states that the message to each church was indeed understood to be a message for all the Church.

**23** This is not the only place in the Bible where a voice is the object of the verb to see (cf. Ex 20,18; Dn 7,11 LXX), though here the part (the voice) is understood to represent the whole (the speaker).

**24** An allusion to Zechariah's vision of the lampstand with seven lamps representing God's presence among the community of Israel (Zech 4,1-14). In turn, it evokes the seven-branched lampstand of pure gold (the *menorah*) that burnt continually 'before the Lord' in the sacred tabernacle and then in the Sanctuary of the Jerusalem temple (Ex 25,31-40; Nm 8,1-4; Lev 21,1-4; 1Kgs 7,49).

**25** 'One like a son of man' (כבר אנוש) describes the human figure who comes on the clouds to receive universal and everlasting 'dominion, glory and kingship' from the 'Ancient of Days', i.e., from God, in the vision of Dn 7,9-14 (c. 165 BC). At the end of 1<sup>st</sup> cent. BC, the Parables of Enoch attributes divine status and an imminent messianic role to this heavenly figure, now called 'this/that son of man' (1En 46:1-6; 48:2; 60:10; 62:5,7,9; 62:14; 63:11; 69:26,27,29; 70:1), paving the way for Jesus, in the Gospels, to identify himself with 'that son of man', by adopting 'Son of Man' as his preferred messianic title. Comparing John's vision with Dn 7,9-14, the 'son of man' figure is identified not only with Christ, but also with the Ancient of Days (Dn 7,9), by (1) the appearance of his hair, and (2) having a voice like that of the Almighty (Ez 1,24; 43,2). In the rest of John's vision, however, he resembles the angel in Dn 10,5-6. So, as an angel representing the unity of God and Christ, the 'one like a son of man' in this vision can be identified as the revealing angel in Rev 1,1, who is sent both by Jesus (Rev 22,16) and by the Lord God (22,6). This divine figure recalls those

<sup>16</sup>and in his right hand he had seven stars<sup>26</sup> and coming out of his mouth was a sharp two-edged sword,<sup>27</sup> and his face was like the sun shining at

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occasions in the OT, where the appearance of the 'angel of the Lord' is indistinguishable from the manifestation of God himself (e.g., Gn 16,7-13; Gn 18; 22,15-18; Ex 14,19-31; Jdg 2,1-4) and is simply the visible form through which God communicates directly. Similarly, in Revelation, the 'one like a son of man' is the visible form through which the risen Christ reveals himself in order to speak directly to John. Of note in this vision is the long robe and high girding, since they indicate the clothing of a priest on duty. The high girding identifies his vestment with that of the angels wearing ordinary linen (λίνον) as they exit the Sanctuary in Rev 15,6, and implies that the long robe of the 'one like a son of man' is also made of ordinary linen. For the significance of this, see n. 26 below.

<sup>26</sup> The seven stars give a cosmic dimension to the imagery in this vision, and to the authority of the one who holds them in his right hand. In context, they represent the lights or flames of the seven separate lampstands. The right hand of the 'one like a son of man' is interposed between the lampstands and their lights, in the position of a lamp—the object that symbolizes the role of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21,23). This right hand not only unites the lampstands to their lights, the stars, but also unites the seven lampstands to each other. So, whereas the seven-branched lampstand, or *menorah*, of the Jerusalem temple was united in a single base, the seven separate lampstands are now united through the right hand of the 'one like a son of man'. Taking this difference into account, the 'one like a son of man' attending to seven lampstands vividly evokes the priestly task of servicing the *menorah* at the start of the daily service in the Jerusalem temple (cf. Lev 24,2-3; *m.Tamid* 3:6,9). More precisely, the elevated status of the one represented by this figure, and his robe of ordinary linen, identify him with the high priest during the daily service on the Day of Atonement, since only on this day did the high priest wear a vestment of ordinary linen and perform all the duties himself, including the servicing of the lampstands (cf. *m.Yoma* 3:1-5).

<sup>27</sup> The sword issuing from his mouth is a symbol for the spoken word. Its sharpness indicates the power and effectiveness of his speech. In the context of Revelation, the sword clearly represents words of judgment (cf. Rev 2,12.16; 19,15.21). This particular attribute identifies the 'one like a son of man' in this vision with the rider of the white horse in 19,11-21, who is modelled on the messianic profile in Isaiah (cf. Is 11,4; 49,2) and whose name is 'the Word of God' (19,13; cf. Heb 4,12). They both represent the Messiah, but each represents a different aspect of his mission: the 'one like

full strength.<sup>28</sup> <sup>17</sup>And when I saw him I fell at his feet as though dead, and he placed his right hand on me saying: Do not be afraid,<sup>29</sup> I am the First and the Last,<sup>30</sup> <sup>18</sup>and the Living One—I was put to death and behold, I am alive for ever and ever,<sup>31</sup> and I have the keys of Death and Hades.<sup>32</sup>

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a son of man' in this vision represents him as the atoning high priest (see n. 26), while the rider of the white horse depicts him as the victorious 'King of kings' (Rev 19,16). As the first figure represents the effects of the first coming of Jesus Christ and the second figure his Second Coming, then it would be true to conclude that Jesus fulfils his messianic ministry in two stages, firstly as high priest and then, only at the end of history, as the victorious warrior king. This double aspect of his ministry can be compared with the double eschatological role of Melchizedek as related in the fragmentary 'Melchizedek Scroll' (11QMelch) found at Qumran (cf. Heb 7; Ps 110,4; Gn 14,18-20), or, alternatively, with a sequential realization of the roles of the two messiahs expected by the Qumran Essenes: a priest messiah and a king messiah ('the messiahs of Aaron and Israel'; e.g., 1QS 9:11).

<sup>28</sup> While recalling the angel in Dn 10,5-6, whose face shone like lightning, the brilliance of the angel's face in this vision also establishes a link with the mighty angel in Rev 10,1.

<sup>29</sup> John's shocked reaction is typical of those who have experienced similar visions in the past, especially in the passage following the vision of the angel in Dn 10,5-6 (i.e., Dn 10,7-12; also Dn 8,17-18; Ez 1,28; Ex 20,19). The same hand which held the seven stars and controls the elements of the universe now raises up the seer and reassures him (cf. Lk 1,13.30; 2,10; Mk 16,6).

<sup>30</sup> In Revelation, the 'First and the Last' refers only to Christ (cf. Rev 2,8; 22,13), but in the OT it is an epithet for God (Is 41,4; 44,6; 48,12). It is virtually synonymous with the titles 'Alpha and Omega' (see n. 13) and 'Beginning and End' both of which are used of God (Rev 1,8; 21,6) and of Christ (22,13). The transfer of these titles to Christ emphasizes again the divine unity of God and Christ.

<sup>31</sup> Again the 'Living One', and 'I am alive for ever and ever' are both descriptions commonly applied to God Almighty (in both OT and NT), but are here clearly applied to Christ, because of the reference to his death and Resurrection.

<sup>32</sup> This is the first mention of 'Death and Hades' (cf. 6,8; 20,13.14), which in Revelation refers to the two divisions of Sheol in Jewish tradition, and to Purgatory and Hell in Christian theology. Until the final judgment (20,14), these are the post-mortem abodes for all the souls who fail to get to heaven

<sup>19</sup>Therefore write what you saw, and what is now, and what is to take place after these things.<sup>33</sup> <sup>20</sup>As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw on my right and the seven golden lampstands:<sup>34</sup> the seven stars

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(cf. 14,13). Keys are a symbol of authority (cf. Is 22,15-25). The one speaking has the power to imprison or liberate souls from these intermediate states of the afterlife, a power that was traditionally considered the prerogative of God and God alone.

<sup>33</sup> This command to 'write' has three parts: the first part of this command is a repetition of the command to write "what you see" in Rev 1,11, only now it is in the past tense "what you saw", confirming that it refers to the vision that has just been described in 1,12-16. The object of the third part of the command is a recurring verbal formula "what is to take place (soon) after these things", which not only represents the main purpose of sending the Revelation to God's servants (1,1), but also marks the beginning (4,1) and end (22,6) of the main section of John's book. Finally, the object of the second part of the command "what is now" aptly describes the messages to the seven contemporary churches in Rev 2-3, which follow in the text. This tripartite command concisely outlines the content of the entire Book of Revelation.

<sup>34</sup> The symbolism of this vision so far evokes the ancient Jerusalem temple liturgy. It corresponds to the start of the daily service on the annual Day of Atonement, when the high priest entered the Sanctuary to clean and refill the *menorah*. In Revelation, an analogous liturgical activity is described in a Sanctuary of cosmic proportions, focussing here on the earthly part of it (which actually corresponds to the inner court of the former temple). This verse gives the final step in interpretation by revealing its 'mystery', or hidden meaning: the stars are angels and the lampstands are churches. It is an ecclesiological vision representing the role of the churches on earth as bearers of heavenly light, established and maintained by the risen Christ. This is the background for the messages which follow in Rev 2-3, where the Lord's reproof and exhortation, leading to the purification of the churches, are fittingly compared to the trimming and refuelling of the *menorah*, and the tools he uses for this are the 'sword from his mouth' and the oil of the Spirit. The heavenly part of the Sanctuary will be revealed in detail in Rev 4-5 and in several liturgical visions thereafter. Temple and liturgical symbolism play a fundamental part in uniting all the visions in Revelation and are therefore a key to their interpretation 'as a whole'. This is not gratuitous: Moses was granted a vision of the heavenly Sanctuary and used this as the plan for building the tabernacle (Ex 25,8-9), which later became a model for the future temples

are angels of the seven churches,<sup>35</sup> and the seven lampstands are seven churches.<sup>36</sup>

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in Jerusalem. Here John has a vision of the original Sanctuary seen by Moses in heaven, which became the archetype of the temples in Jerusalem. The temple-liturgical imagery in Revelation can therefore be clarified by comparison with the liturgical activity and plan of the Jerusalem temples. This commentary will include insights from this comparison, in all the relevant passages (see also [link 9](#)).

<sup>35</sup> The identity of these angels (Rev 1,20; 2,1.8.12.18; 3,1.7.14) has been the cause of endless discussion, complicated by the fact that the speaker sometimes addresses them in the singular, and sometimes in the plural. According to their role in this vision, the angels are Spirits granted to each community by the risen Christ, as a channel of communication with himself and with the divine Life in heaven. This vision will become clearer in Rev 4, where the lights of the seven lampstands (churches), already identified as stars and angels, are further identified as “the seven flames of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God” (4,5; cf. 1,4). The same seven Spirits of God have been sent out into all the earth and are symbolized by the seven horns and the seven eyes of the Lamb (5,6; cf. 3,1). Finally, these flames burning ‘before the throne’ recall the class of angels called Seraphim (cf. Is 6,2) and match ‘the seven angels that stand before God’ (Rev 8,2), who are later given seven trumpets to blow (8,6) and seven libation bowls to pour out (15,5-8). Given that the number ‘seven’ signifies fullness and totality, the seven stars, angels, flames, Spirits, horns and eyes, all represent the Holy Spirit of God in his various operations and characteristics. Furthermore, another term for ‘the angels that stand before God’ (cf. Lk 1,19) is ‘the angels of the Presence’ (cf. Tob 12,15) or simply ‘archangels’. According to biblical tradition, one of the archangels, Michael, was appointed as guardian angel of the people of God (Dn 10,21; Rev 12,1), identified at that time with the people of Israel. According to the interpretation presented here, not one, but all seven archangels now function as the heavenly guardians of the people of God, and these are the angels of the churches.

<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that the symbol of the lampstand bearing the light of the Lord does not specifically represent the idea of a church community as such, but rather its role in bearing witness to the Lord. Since this symbol primarily represents the idea of witness, it can therefore be applied without contradiction or inconsistency to represent a nation (Zech 4,1-14), a church (Rev 1,20), an individual (Rev 11,4; Jn 5,35; Ps 132,17; Sir 48,1), or even the Old Testament prophetic message (2Pet 1,19).

*The Seven Messages to the Churches* <sup>37</sup>

II <sup>1</sup>To the angel of the church in Ephesus<sup>38</sup> write:

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<sup>37</sup> Though preceding the main body of the book (Rev 4,1-22,6), these messages nevertheless form an integral part of it, as shown by the numerous references to later visions. As noted above (n. 22), the message for each church is intended for all. Each message has a similar form: it begins with the self-presentation of the risen Christ, echoing selected attributes from the description in the opening vision (1,12-20), and concludes with his promises, to 'the one who overcomes', of rewards described in the final visions (Rev 20-22). The body of each message contains Christ's positive and/or negative judgment of the state of the church addressed, followed by corrective advice or exhortation, and in some cases a final consolatory remark (Smyrna and Philadelphia receive only positive judgment, Sardis and Laodicea only negative judgment, and Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira have both positive and negative aspects). Certain important generalizations can also be made about their content: (1) they relate to "what is now" in the seven churches (cf. 1,19) and so reflect actual problems faced by those communities in the first century AD. (2) The diagnosis of, and remedy for, these problems is dictated by Christ (to John, for its angel) in the form of a prophetic oracle, patterned on OT prophetic speech. (3) The problems addressed, though coalescing into three over-lapping agencies of Satan (*the throne of Satan*: Roman administration, *teaching of Satan*: false apostles/prophets, Nicolaitans, Jezebel; *synagogue of Satan*: false Jews), all relate to a single danger, that of compromise with the prevailing society. The faithful are exhorted to resist, or 'overcome', this temptation, and accept whatever suffering this may entail. For those who 'overcome', the rewards are great and eternal. For a general overview, see [link 7](#).

<sup>38</sup> At the time of writing, Ephesus was a great administrative, judicial, commercial and cultural centre on the west coast of the Roman Province of Asia, and one of its main cities alongside Smyrna and Pergamum, which was the titular capital. Her function as a port was declining because the harbour was silting up. From her early days, Ephesus had been the centre of the cult to Artemis, whose gigantic temple (the 'Artemision') was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. From an early date (29 BC) the Roman imperial cult was established there with the building of a shrine dedicated to the goddess Roma and a deceased emperor, mainly for use by resident Roman citizens. At the end of the first century, a temple was built to the emperor Domitian (c. 90 AD), under whom the city flourished, and later to Hadrian and Severus. With the help of Priscilla and Aquila, St. Paul



This says<sup>39</sup> the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.<sup>40</sup>

I know your deeds, your labour and endurance,<sup>41</sup> and that you can- not endure wicked men, and have put to the test those calling themselves apostles and are not, and have found them false.<sup>42</sup> <sup>3</sup>Yet

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established a church in Ephesus (ca. 52 AD; Acts 18,18-22) and later stayed there for more than 2 years (Acts 19,8-12). It became a centre from which he preached to all the surrounding peoples, starting in the synagogue of the large and long-established Jewish community there (cf. Josephus Flavius, *Ant.* 12.119; 14.262-264). Timothy was the first bishop of the church (1Tim 1,3) and, according to reliable tradition, St. John the Apostle moved to Ephesus just prior to the siege of Jerusalem (66 AD). Apart from John's temporary exile on Patmos, he resided there and led the church, until his death at the end of the first century (98 AD). Today, the uninhabited ruins of Ephesus lie close the Turkish town of Selçuk.

<sup>39</sup> An almost exact reproduction of the opening phrase of the Hebrew prophets: "Thus says the Lord".

<sup>40</sup> The attributes are taken from Rev 1,13.16 and are relevant to the message (Rev 2,5).

<sup>41</sup> The importance of deeds as a basis for Christ's evaluation of the churches runs throughout the seven messages (cf. 2,2.19; 3,1.8.15) and into the main part of the text—as a measure of authentic faith (cf. 9,20; 14,13; 19,8; 20,12; 22,12; Jas 1,22-25; 2,14-17). The Ephesians' deeds are the product of praiseworthy labour and endurance, but absent is the vital component of love (2,4).

<sup>42</sup> The mention of 'false apostles' ('apostle' is a transliteration of the Greek word meaning 'emissary' or 'missionary') accords with the state of the churches up to the end of the first century, when itinerant 'apostles' and 'prophets' (true and false presumably) went about preaching, teaching and leading worship in the churches (cf. 1Cor 12,28). In the second century this function was taken over by resident presbyters (priests) and bishops. It is not stated what the 'false apostles' were teaching, or how they were tested, but in view of the consolatory remark at the end of the message, it is quite possible that they were emissaries of an influential group called Nicolaitans and were rejected by the Ephesians because of their detestable practices (Rev 2,6). The practice of examining Christian preachers had its origin in the testing of prophets in the OT (cf. Dt 18,20-22) and was encouraged in the Church (1Thess 5,19-21; 1Jn 4,1-3; *Didache* 11-13). The threat of false teachers in this particular church was foreseen by St. Paul



endurance you have, and you have endured for the sake of my name and have not weakened.

<sup>4</sup>But I have *this* against you, that you have lost the love you had at first.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Therefore remember how far you have fallen and repent, and do the works you did at first;<sup>44</sup> and if not, I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.<sup>45</sup> <sup>6</sup>But this you have, that you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>7</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.<sup>47</sup>

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(Acts 20,29) and reported by St. Ignatius of Antioch in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century (*Eph.* 6–9).

<sup>43</sup> The emphasis on doctrinal purity has caused the Ephesians to abandon the love of Christ and fellow man that they had at first. It has strained relations within the community and caused hearts to grow cold. Doctrinal purity may be desirable, but not at the cost of neglecting the main commandments—love of God and one another—a fundamental rule for all doctrinal disputes in the Church.

<sup>44</sup> Literally: “repent and do the first deeds”.

<sup>45</sup> The seriousness of their fall is now apparent: no repentance, no more church in Ephesus. Christ’s coming is mentioned several times in the messages: three times in judgment (Rev 2,5.16; 3,3) and twice with reward (2,25; 3,11). From the context, it is clear that Christ’s threat to uproot the church does not refer to his final *Parousia*, because by that time there will be no further need for churches or temples (cf. 21,22). This threatened judgment must therefore represent a prior visitation.

<sup>46</sup> The nature of these detestable practices is revealed in later messages (2,14-15.20), but the point here is that Christ is not asking the Ephesians to change their negative attitude towards them. Greater love for God and fellow man does not lead to tolerance of sin and wickedness. From this consolatory remark, it could be inferred that the Ephesians’ hatred of the practices of the Nicolaitans had helped them to reject the ‘false apostles’. If this is correct, then the ‘false apostles’ can indeed be identified as members of the influential group of Nicolaitans.

<sup>47</sup> Like a refrain, this universal ‘hearing’ invitation is repeated at the end of each of the seven messages and has a long history in the OT prophetic tradition. Based on Is 6,9-10, it presumes that many of the hearers are unable to grasp the message (also Ez 3,27), because they have become like the idols they adore, unable to see or hear (cf. Ez 12,2; Jer 5,21; Ps 115,4-

The one who overcomes<sup>48</sup> – I will let him eat from the Tree of Life, which is in the paradise of God.<sup>49</sup>

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8; 135,15-18). Taken up by the NT, this sense persists: Christ's message will enlighten some, but confuse and metaphorically 'blind' others (cf. Mt 11,15; 13,9-17.43; Mk 4,9.23; Lk 8,8; 14,35). Three points arise from its use here: (1) the message to the church at Ephesus is addressed by the risen Christ through the Spirit, which is also the angel of the church (see n. 35). This mediated form of address evokes the role of the *Paraclete*, or Spirit of Truth, in Jn 14–16 (esp. Jn 16,12-15). (2) The message is not restricted to Ephesus, or to the seven churches, but is also for every individual who is able to grasp it. (3) The individuals who encounter these messages are not all going to be enlightened by what they hear, some may even be further confused (in the history of interpretation, this has proved to be stunningly correct).

<sup>48</sup> Continuing at the level of the individual, every message concludes with a promise to 'the one who overcomes', or 'conquers' (ὁ νικῶν), a word that implies fighting on behalf of the one making the promises. In the messages themselves, the theme of fighting and 'conquering' is not explained, but it does recur often in the main body of the text (cf. Rev 5,5; 6,2; 11,7; 12,11; 13,7; 15,2; 17,14; 21,7), where it relates to the historical and eschatological struggle of Christ and his followers against the devil and his followers. The followers of Christ 'overcome' the devil through 'the blood of the Lamb' (12,11a), i.e., faith in Christ's atoning death (1,6; cf. 1Jn 5,4), 'the word of their witness' (12,11b) and 'loving not their life up to death' (12,11c). Although the term 'conqueror' evidently applies to those who lose their lives as martyrs, it is not restricted to them, since the last phrase can be understood as complete self-renunciation up to death with or without martyrdom (cf. Mk 8,34-35 et par; Jn 12,25). In this case, it includes the saints and confessors.

<sup>49</sup> The promised rewards link up once again with the main body of the text, in this case with the final vision (Rev 21–22): the New Jerusalem is the Paradise (etymologically a walled garden or park) of God in which the fruit-bearing Tree of Life grows (22,2), and into which 'the one who overcomes' is here assured entry (cf. 22,14), while others are refused (cf. 22,15.19). Since the New Jerusalem is identified with the Bride of the Lamb in heaven (21,9-10), and the Bride will not be ready until the eschatological transformation at the end of history (19,7-9), the promise must refer to that future time. It is clearly an eschatological, and not an 'inaugurated' promise. Referring back to the Garden of Eden (Gn 2,9; 3,23-24), the promise of entry into the Paradise of God, to eat of the Tree of Life, signifies

<sup>8</sup>And to the angel of the church in Smyrna<sup>50</sup> write: This says the First and the Last, the one who was put to death and returned to life.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>9</sup>I know your affliction and poverty — but you are rich<sup>52</sup> — and the

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the full restoration of the God's original intention for mankind, which embraced eating from the Tree of Life. But then Adam and Eve sinned by eating first from the forbidden tree and they were banned from the Garden before they could 'eat from the Tree of Life and live forever' (Gn 3,22-24) — a ban that extends to all their descendants and prevails up to now. So, the fruit of the Tree of Life does indeed give eternal life and may be a metaphor for individual Christian salvation, but the promise here signifies more than that: nothing less than participation in the consummation of mankind's collective salvation, that is, eternal life in the presence of God in the context of a sinless, totally transformed and renewed creation.

<sup>50</sup> Smyrna (nowadays Izmir) was a wealthy port city 35 miles north of its main rival, Ephesus. She was the first city in Asia Minor to erect a temple in honour of the goddess Roma (193 BC), even before Rome had become the dominant power in the region. For her faithfulness to the Roman cause, Smyrna was chosen worthy to host the imperial cult under Tiberius (26 AD), where worship was to become a test of loyalty to Rome and a cornerstone of imperial policy. Inscriptions from the following century confirm the presence of a wealthy, socially integrated, even privileged, Jewish community, as in other cities of Asia at the time. The Book of Revelation contains the only NT mention of the church at Smyrna, but it is probable that both Paul (Acts 19,10) and John preached there. John's disciple, Polycarp, was appointed bishop of the church at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and it appears that John may have been present at his consecration (cf. Eusebius, *Hist. Ecc.* III, 36.1; IV,14.3). By the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the city had an important Christian community and received letters from Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, after visiting the church on his way to martyrdom in Rome in 105 AD. Polycarp was actively serving in this church, when John's Revelation was received and, in him, the message to Smyrna found a receptive hearer, in the light of his martyrdom there in 155 AD (cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*).

<sup>51</sup> Attributes taken from Rev 1,17-18 and relevant to those who will follow Christ in martyrdom (2,10).

<sup>52</sup> The Lord knows the great difficulties experienced by the community at Smyrna: not just persecution but also, and probably as a result, material poverty (cf. Heb 10,34). Nevertheless, their faithfulness under these conditions has earned them true spiritual wealth—treasure in heaven (cf.

blasphemy of those saying they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is going to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and you will have hardship for ten days.<sup>54</sup> Be faithful up to death and I will give you the

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Lk 6,20; 2Cor 6,10; Jas 2,5; 1Cor 1,26-29)—the exact reverse of the state of the church in Laodicea (3,17).

<sup>53</sup> Blasphemy (βλασφημία) signifies impious speech against God, against his people, or against sacred things. On the simplest level, this refers to the curses and anathemas that were being proclaimed against the Jewish Christians (cf. Justin, *Dialogues* 16.4; 47.5; 96.2), the most famous being the *Birkat haMinim* curse, ironically called a 'benediction', added to the other benedictions of the *Amidah* prayer (c. 90-95 AD), recited thrice daily in the local synagogues, and whose purpose was to deter synagogue attendance by Christians. On a deeper level, the mention of Jewish 'blasphemy', followed immediately by the prediction of Roman persecution (2,10), matches historical reports of Jews informing against Christians for the Roman authorities and local Gentiles (cf. Acts 13,45.50; 14,2-7.19; 17,5-9; 18,12-17; 1Thess 2,14-16; *Mart. Polycarp* 12,1-2,13,1). The judgment against the blasphemers 'who say they are Jews' suggests that their blasphemy against Christ or Christians was aimed at denying Christians their Jewish identity, which offered them the same religious tolerance accorded to the Jews and exempted them from full participation in the imperial cult. Without this protection, they were liable to prosecution on two counts: as members of an 'illegal association' and as impious rebels against society's pagan religious norms, for which they were too often put to the test (see n. 54), especially towards the end of Domitian's reign (95-96 AD; see [link 7](#)). The message here is that the blasphemers themselves are the ones who have lost their Jewish identity by siding with Satan, the devil, represented here by the Roman authorities. It is implied, though not stated, that the believers in Christ are the true Jews and the new Israel (cf. Rev 1,6; 5,10; 7,4-8; 12,17, cf. Ex 19,6; 1Pet 2,9-10; Jas 1,1).

<sup>54</sup> Under Roman Law, there were no punishments involving long-term prison sentences. Prison was mainly used as a means of compelling obedience to legal injunctions, or as a place of temporary restraint while awaiting trial or execution. The devil, operating through the Romans, is about to test the faith of a group of Smyrnian Christians, probably by coercing them to offer incense to an image of the emperor, in the so-called imperial cult. Refusal led to the death penalty and was called obstinacy

crown of life.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>11</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes will certainly not be hurt by the second death.<sup>56</sup>

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(*contumacia*). To the Jewish mind, this 10-day probation recalls the 10 days of Awe, the period of probation between the annual judgment that Jewish tradition associates with New Year's Day and the Day of Atonement, when the sentence of life or death is finally given for the subsequent year (see especially n. 190).

<sup>55</sup> For the Smyrnian church, the 10-day probation clearly carries the possibility of martyrdom, which will be rewarded, posthumously and paradoxically, with the 'crown of life'. This is the supreme achievement of a life of faith: eternal life and salvation. The word for crown (στέφανος) is a wreath of the kind awarded to the victor in athletic competitions (cf. Rev 3,11; 6,2), a metaphor used elsewhere in the Scriptures and in early Christian writings for the struggle to lead the life of faith (e.g., 2Macc 6,10; 9,8; 11,20; 14,4; 17,11-16; 1Cor 10 24-27; Phil 2,16; 3,14; 2Tim 2,5; 4.7-8; Heb 12,1-2). It is appropriate here because Smyrna was a regional centre for athletic sports and games.

<sup>56</sup> Once again, as at Rev 2,7, the promise to the 'one who overcomes' relates to the eschatological future, for the 'second death' does not become a reality until the final judgment (Rev 20,14; 21,8). The 'first death' is the loss of physical life, whereupon the immortal soul goes either to Heaven ("those that die in the Lord"; 13,14), or to the temporary post-mortem abodes called 'Death and Hades' (the two divisions of Sheol in Jewish tradition [cf. 1En 22:1-14; Lk 16,19-31], or Purgatory and Hell in Christian theology). At the final judgment, and not before, these temporary abodes called 'Death and Hades' will give up the souls of the dead, who will then 'rise' for judgment. If Christ had deleted the name of any of these souls from his Scroll of Life, prior to the final judgment (Rev 3,5), so it no longer appears in the Scroll (13,8; 17,8; 20,14-15, 21,8), then that deleted soul will be sentenced to the 'second death' (2,11; 20,6.14; 21,8), that is, the 'lake of fire' (19,20; 20,10.14.15; 21,8)—a reality that is far worse than the 'first death' since it involves the eternal torment of that soul (14,9-11; cf. Mt 10,28). Those whose names remain inscribed in the Scroll of Life will be able to enter by the gates into the New Jerusalem (21,27; 22,14), whereas those whose names have been deleted will be confined to the lake of fire, the second death, outside the walls of that City (14,10; 21,8; 22,15). The concept of the second death of the wicked was already familiar to the

<sup>12</sup>And to the angel of the church in Pergamum<sup>57</sup> write: This says the one who has the sharp two-edged sword.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>13</sup>I know where you live—where the throne of Satan is—yet you hold to my name and did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death amongst you, where Satan dwells.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>14</sup>But I have a few things against you, because you have there some that hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to throw a stumbling-

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hearers of the Targums (cf. *Tg. Neofiti* Dt 33:6; *Tg. Onqelos* Dt 33:6; *Tg. Isaiah* 22:14; *Tg. Jeremiah* 51:39,57).

<sup>57</sup> Pergamum (nowadays Bergama) lay 45 miles northeast of Smyrna and was the most northern of the seven churches. She was the capital of the independent kingdom of the Attalids, which was bequeathed to the Romans in 133 BC to become the Roman Province of Asia, the richest Province in Asia Minor. Pergamum remained the official capital of the Province and the seat of the Roman governor or pro-consul. With a long history of religious activity devoted to pagan deities including Zeus, Athena, Demeter, Dionysius and Aesclepius, she was one of the first cities in Asia to build a temple to Rome and her Emperor (29 BC). As capital of the Province, Pergamum became established as a regional centre for the imperial cult. There was a fine library there, from which the word Pergamene, or parchment, is derived. Apart from what is written in this message, nothing is known about the church in Pergamum.

<sup>58</sup> Attribute taken from Rev 1,16 and relevant to the threat reported in the message (2,16).

<sup>59</sup> Whereas the other communities are known by their essential character, reflected mainly in their deeds, this church is characterized by the place where she lives, termed the ‘throne of Satan’ and the place where Satan dwells. There are several indications that this is a direct reference to the Provincial seat of the Roman administration and the dwelling of the Provincial governor in the city. This would certainly be consistent with the identification of the devil and Satan with the antichristian activities of the Roman administration in the previous letter (2,9-10). As a reason for the over-zealous enforcement of the imperial cult, it would also explain the testing of the church’s faith and the martyrdom of Antipas (2,13)—the only martyr named in the whole book, apart from Jesus Christ, with whom he shares the title “faithful witness” (cf. 1,5; 3,14). Under these testing conditions, the church is highly praised for her faithfulness to Christ.

block before the sons of Israel, to eat idol-sacrifices and to fornicate.<sup>60</sup> <sup>15</sup>So you too, in the same way, have some that hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.<sup>61</sup> <sup>16</sup>Therefore repent, and if not I am coming to you soon and

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<sup>60</sup> In fact, there is only one criticism of the church at Pergamum: they tolerate having in their community several individuals who advocate eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols (indicating consumption of pagan cultic meals) and fornication (a metaphor for idolatrous worship that may also include immoral sexual activity). These acts implied some degree of participation in local pagan customs and represented a compromise with the prevailing pagan society. This would have had social, economic and political benefits for Christians, as well as permitting participation in the Roman imperial cult and eliminating the main cause of persecution (especially when participation was enforced as a test of loyalty to the ruling power, see n. 54). Approval of these acts must therefore have been attractive to many Christians, despite having been specifically forbidden by the Church leaders at the Council of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15,20,29; 21,25). The influence of these wayward members of the Pergamum church is compared to that of the pagan prophet Balaam, who refrained from cursing the Israelites directly (Nm 22,4–24,25), but then advised the Moabite king, Balak, to send women to seduce them into idolatry and eating idol-sacrifices (Nm 25,1-3; 31,16). It is implied that this teaching would lead the Pergamum faithful away from their Lord, although there is no indication that they had yet succeeded in deceiving anyone. One supposes that the church leadership had successfully challenged their false teaching, but this message implies that more severe measures were needed: the false teachers should not even be tolerated as members of the community and should be expelled.

<sup>61</sup> Finally, the Balaam-like false teachers are identified as Nicolaitans, who were mentioned in the message to the Ephesians as a group whose practices should be hated (Rev 2,6). Here, the emphasis is on their teaching alone. In the next message, their teachings and practices are alluded to (see n. 69). Identified by a specific teaching of their own, these are clearly not just secularized Christians willing to compromise with the prevailing pagan society and, in that way, make life easier for themselves. Writing nearly a century later, Irenaeus considers them to be a Gnostic sect (*Adv. Haer.* 1.26,3; 3.11,1), a view which is upheld by most modern scholars, even though there is no mention of their name, nor of 'eating idol-sacrifices and fornication' in any of the known Gnostic sources from that time. Nevertheless, it is known that docetic-Gnostic ideas were circulating widely in the Mediterranean region at the time and had been confronted



will fight them with the sword of my mouth.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>17</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who overcomes I will give from the hidden manna,<sup>63</sup>

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by other Church leaders (1Cor 8-11; Col 1-2; 1Jn 2,22; 4,2). Furthermore, several early Church Fathers identify Gnostics in precisely the same terms, as those who 'eat meat sacrificed to idols' and who attend 'every festival celebrated in honour of idols', without worrying whether these acts may jeopardize their final salvation (Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 1.6; Justin *Dial.* 35; Eusebius *Hist. Ecc.* IV,7). Some even postulated that the Nicolaitans were followers of Nicolaus of Antioch, one of the seven deacons selected to serve the needs of the earliest Jerusalem church (Acts 6,1-6), but there is little evidence for this. Whether by coincidence or not, the name Nicolaus ('Victor of the people') is a plausible Greek rendering of the Hebrew Balaam ('Lord of the people'), raising the possibility that this is not an actual name, but rather a symbolical name derived from that OT pagan prophet.

<sup>62</sup> The attention of the community may have been so focused on the external threat that, unlike at Ephesus, they were too tolerant of those who posed an internal threat with their false teaching. The command to repent is clearly directed at the community and is intended to lead to the expulsion of the false teachers. However, if this is not forthcoming the Lord will come and judge the false teachers himself, in a way that will prefigure his coming to defeat his enemies at the end of history (cf. Rev 19,15). Significantly, Balaam was also threatened with being 'killed by the sword' of the angel of the Lord, if he continued to oppose Israel (Nm 22,23.31-33).

<sup>63</sup> To 'the one who overcomes', two rewards are promised that are not mentioned again in the final visions or anywhere else in the book. This suggests that they do not refer to the eschatological future, as in the promises of the previous two messages, but rather to the inaugurated present (the 'now') of Christian life. This inference is almost self-evident with the 'hidden manna' (cf. Ex 16,4-36): the messianic longing for this heavenly food was widely recognized, at a very early stage, as fulfilled by Christ through the Eucharist (cf. 1Cor 10,3-4; Jn 6). The Eucharistic reference would have been obvious to the first hearers of Revelation. The eating of the heavenly manna is clearly intended to contrast with the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. The second reward is somewhat less evident, but no less significant for those who wield divine authority in the Christian community. Its enigmatic description is unravelled in the next note (n. 64)



and I will give him a little white stone, and on the stone a new name is written which no one knows except the one who receives it.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>18</sup>And to the angel of the church in Thyatira<sup>65</sup> write: This says the

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<sup>64</sup> The Greek word for 'stone' (ψῆφος) could denote a pebble, a gem or a stone set in a ring, but its interpretation very much depends upon the mysterious 'new name' written on it. A new name for the recipient would be of little use if he were the only one to know it. In fact, in a later message, it emerges that Christ is the one with a 'new name' (Rev 3,12), suggesting that the promised object is a signet ring symbolizing authority exercised on his behalf. Then later in the text, the name written on the returning Christ, which "no one knows except himself" (19,12), must be his new name, since his old name is 'Word of God'. So, the 'little white stone', with Christ's new name written on it, is a true symbol of Christ, given in anticipation of his return. But how can Christ's 'new name' be known only to himself and at the same time only to the one receiving the little white stone? What is implied is that the Lord reveals his new name only by means of the gift of himself, symbolised, as we have seen, by the gift of the little white stone. The one who comes to know his new name, through receiving the little white stone, knows it only by virtue of the indwelling presence of Christ, who therefore does not cease to be the only one who knows it (cf. Lk 10,22; Jn 17,26). Signifying the mysterious indwelling of Christ within the one who knows it, the name that comes to mind is 'Immanu-El', that is to say 'God is with us' (cf. Is 7,14).

<sup>65</sup> Thyatira (nowadays Akhisar) lay about 40 miles southeast of Pergamum. Originally founded by the Seleucids as a frontier garrison, the city later became subject to Pergamum and bequeathed to Rome at the same time (133 BC). Towards the close of the first century AD, the city's main importance lay in her crafts and trade, for numerous trades' and craftsmen's guilds flourished in the city at this time: clothiers, tanners, bakers, potters, linen workers, wool merchants, slave traders, shoemakers, dyers and copper smiths. In this setting, there would have been little pressure to conform to the Roman imperial cult, as at Pergamum and Smyrna. However, members of the church in Thyatira who were also members of trade guilds would have faced pressures to participate in their licentious festivities, which were dedicated to the various pagan deities of the city. Apart from this message, Thyatira is only mentioned once in the NT as the hometown of Lydia, the merchant of purple fabric and Paul's first convert in Philippi (Acts 16,14-15.40). At some point towards the end of the second century, the entire church became Montanist, before

Son of God,<sup>66</sup> whose eyes are like a blazing fire and his feet like bronze.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>19</sup>I know your deeds, and your love, faithfulness, service and endurance, also that your last deeds are better than the first.<sup>68</sup> <sup>20</sup>But I have *this* against you, that you tolerate Jezebel, the woman who calls herself a prophetess and teaches and deceives my servants to fornicate and to eat idol-sacrifices.<sup>69</sup> <sup>21</sup>And I gave her time to repent and she does not want to

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converting back to the Catholic Faith the following century. This may have been the reason that the anti-montanist group, the 'Alogoi', concluded falsely that there was no church in Thyatira when John was writing.

<sup>66</sup> This is the only occurrence of this title in Revelation, and is related to the speaker's reference to God as Father at the conclusion to this message (Rev 2,27-28; cf. 1,6; 3,5; 3,21;14,1) and also to the citation of Psalm 2 (Ps 2,7-9; see n. 78).

<sup>67</sup> Attributes taken from Rev 1,14-15, and related to the speaker's role in 2,23.

<sup>68</sup> This is a very high commendation for the church at Thyatira: love is foremost and their conduct is constantly improving in Christian virtue, in contrast to that of Ephesus.

<sup>69</sup> The criticism here is similar to that of Pergamum, because the problem is the same, though more severe. The church in Thyatira was tolerating the presence of a woman who presented herself as a prophetess. Prophets had an important role in the early Church (cf. 1Cor 14), which was close to that of the apostles (1Cor 12,28; Eph 4,11) and involved teaching under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Eph 3,5; Rom 12,6). The problem, though, was that this woman was a false prophetess, who deceived other members of the church by promoting the same practices that were taught by the Nicolaitans (Balaamites) in Pergamum, namely 'fornication and eating meat sacrificed to idols' (cf. Rev 2,14-15). Forbidden by the Church (Acts 15,20.29) and detested by the risen Christ (Rev 2,6), these practices refer to the idolatrous festivities dedicated to local pagan deities. Participation was obligatory for members of trade guilds, so non-participation would have incurred social, political and economic penalties. To stress the seriousness of her influence on the faithful, the false prophetess is referred to as Jezebel, the Phoenician wife of King Ahab who promoted the idolatrous cult of Baal in Israel (1Kgs 16,31-33; 1Kgs 18-21), until she and her house were destroyed by divine command (2Kgs 9), for her "harlotries and sorceries" (2Kgs 9,22).

repent from her fornication.<sup>70</sup> <sup>22</sup>Behold, I am throwing her onto a bed<sup>71</sup> and those committing adultery with her into great distress, unless they repent from her practices;<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Her activity in the church appears to have been well established. The prophetess had been invited to repent at some point in the past, but to no avail. The circumstances are not known, but this may refer to a rebuke issued by the author, John himself. As well as teaching others to fornicate, she continued to fornicate herself. Literal fornication, prostitution or sexual immorality, was too well known as a sin to be tolerated by the community, so this activity is undoubtedly to be understood figuratively for some form of idolatry. This was indeed a traditional biblical usage of the word (e.g., 1Chr 5,25; Ps 73,27; Jer 3,6; Ez 16,17; 23,19; Hos 9,1), since the spiritual lust for idols was regarded as analogous to disordered sexual lust, which it also sometimes involved. In Revelation, the word and its cognates are almost always used in a figurative sense, except in vice lists (cf. Rev 9,21; 21,8; 22,18). The ‘fornication’ of the prophetess confirms that the source of her inspiration was certainly not the Holy Spirit, but rather one or more of the local pagan deities, which were regarded as demons (cf. Dt 32,17; 1Cor 10.19-21; Rev 9,20). She therefore has no place inside the community of Christ.

<sup>71</sup> No further chance for repentance will be given to Jezebel. The time of her judgment has come and it will take the form of an illness that will end in death, since her penalty cannot be less than that of her children (2,23). To be ‘thrown on to a bed’ is a Hebrew idiom for sickness (cf. Ex 21,18; 1Macc 1,5; Jdt 8,5). The sickbed on to which she will be thrown by Christ is clearly contrasted with the beds on which pagan participants recline in their idolatrous feasts. In this context, there are also clear sexual connotations with the mention of ongoing ‘adultery’ in the rest of the verse.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Committing adultery’ is another biblical metaphor for idolatry, where the other partner is the idol (cf. Jer 3,9; Ez 23,37). But this is not the case here: the wording suggests that Jezebel continues to entertain adulterous lovers even after being thrown on her sickbed, and it is these people who are here invited to repent. Significantly, though, they are invited to repent of *her* practices, and not their own, which again suggests a metaphorical or spiritual interpretation. Furthermore, the penalty for their non-repentance is not death, as with Jezebel and her children (Rev 2,23), but just ‘great suffering’. The conclusion is that the ‘adulterers’ are Christians who show a serious interest in Jezebel’s teaching, but have not yet fully adopted it. They may have been especially attracted to her during her illness, because of some new aspect of her teaching, causing this to be

<sup>3</sup>also I will kill her children with pestilence,<sup>73</sup> and all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and will give to each one of you according to your deeds.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>24</sup>But I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, all who do not keep this teaching, who do not know the deep things of Satan as they say<sup>75</sup>: I am not

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termed 'the deep things of Satan' in the next verse (2,24). In this case, 'committing adultery' simply means 'associating with', or 'showing a disloyal interest in'.

<sup>73</sup> Her 'children' should be distinguished from 'those committing adultery with her', not only by the radical difference in terminology (offspring versus lovers), but also by the severity of the penalty (death versus great suffering). Though her adulterous lovers may come and go, her 'children' are her closest followers—those who think and act like her and therefore suffer the same fate. In the Greek original we find "I will kill her children with death", which can either be understood as a Semitism representing emphasis ("I will certainly kill") or the Greek word for 'death' (θάνατος) can be translated by 'pestilence' (as at 6,8). Since Jezebel's teaching to 'fornicate and eat idol-sacrifices' is identical to that of Balaam in the previous message (2,14), and since pestilence was the punishment for those who followed it (Nm 25,3-9), 'pestilence' seems the appropriate way of translating θάνατος in this context.

<sup>74</sup> What happens in this church must be made known in all: (1) As an aid to their faith in the presence of the risen Christ, who sees all that goes on in his churches and acts in judgment over them, even before the time of final judgment. (2) As a warning to keep away from the Nicolaitans, whose influence was already spreading widely in the region (Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira) and was not yet recognized for the grave problem it really was. The expressions describing Christ's omniscience and justice are both derived from the OT (esp. Jer 17,10), with frequent NT re-readings applied to Christ: 'the one who searches minds and hearts' (Jer 11,20; Ps 7,10; Rom 8,27; 1Thess 2,4); 'who rewards each one according to their deeds' (Ps 62,13; Mt 16,27; Rev 20,13; 22,12).

<sup>75</sup> The teaching of Jezebel, and by inference that of the Nicolaitans, is here called knowledge of 'the deep things of Satan'. This is important because it confirms its Gnostic character: in ancient sources the Gnostic sects are known for their professed interest in 'the deep things'. The 'the deep things of Satan, as they say' could either be a true quotation taken from the heretics and indicating their professed ability to know the depths of evil and depravity without coming to harm or compromising their salvation in

putting any other burden on you; <sup>25</sup>only hold to what you have until I come.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>26</sup>And the one who overcomes and attends to my work until the end<sup>77</sup>—I will give him authority over the nations <sup>27</sup>just as I also received from my Father, and he will shepherd them with a rod of iron, to break *them* into pieces like pots of clay;<sup>78</sup>

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any way. Or more likely it could be the speaker's ironical twist to their claim to possess the Spirit and know 'the deep things of God' (cf. 1Cor 2,10; Rom 11,33; Eph 3,18). In truth, he is saying, it is not the 'depths of God' they know, but the 'depths of Satan'.

<sup>76</sup> Those who have not been influenced by this teaching should carry on as they are. Their virtuous conduct was highly commended by the speaker in the opening lines of his message (Rev 2,19) and there is no better way to await Christ's coming. The wording here recalls the highly relevant decision of the Council of Jerusalem, sent half-a-century previously to the churches of Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you do well. Farewell" (Acts 15,28-29, ESV).

<sup>77</sup> 'The one who overcomes', here, is further defined as 'the one who attends to my works until the end', which is an attempt to translate "the one who *keeps* my works" in the original Greek. As this lies somewhere between "keeps my commandments" and "does my works", an alternative may be "the one who does the works I command." As it is an individual who is addressed, the 'end' can refer to the death of that person, or to Christ's *Parousia*, whichever may come first. Of note, there is no suggestion that this end should be defined by martyrdom, thus confirming that the rewards for those who overcome are not for martyrs alone (cf. n. 48).

<sup>78</sup> The reward is messianic authority over the nations, as the speaker himself, the risen Christ, received from God. The rest of the verse is an application of Psalm 2,8-9 (LXX) to the faithful follower of Christ. Several points can be made: (1) this messianic authority has already been received and is currently being exercised by the speaker in fulfillment of God's promise in Psalm 2 to his Son, the Messiah. (2) The speaker promises to share this power equally with his faithful followers, but this kind of authority can only be exercised after they die. (3) It is therefore implied that these faithful souls will resurrect and participate in the millennial kingdom of Christ, as described later in the text (cf. Rev 20,4-6). (4) This

<sup>28</sup>and I will give him the Dawn Star.<sup>79</sup> <sup>29</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

III <sup>1</sup>And to the angel of the church in Sardis<sup>80</sup> write: This says the one

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millennial kingdom, also called the 'first resurrection', has been inaugurated and is not to be regarded as a future stage in the history of salvation, as understood by the millennialists. (5) The verb 'shepherd' here follows the Septuagint version (LXX) of the unpointed Hebrew word תרעם (from the root רעה) and conveys the meaning of lead, herd, guide and rule. It is repeated at 12,5 and 19,15. The Masoretic version (MT) differs by translating it as 'break' from the root רעע. Both are legitimate interpretations.

<sup>79</sup> The 'Dawn Star', or Venus as it is known nowadays, is the brightest light in the heavens apart from the Sun and the Moon and its appearance heralds the new day. In this context, the 'giving' of this star can be taken as an assurance of the imminent consummation of God's kingdom and the 'new day' of creation. In 22,16, the bright Dawn Star is identified with the speaker, the risen Christ. He himself is the assurance of the imminent arrival of the eschatological transformation and new creation, as well as the fulfilment of the ancient messianic prophecy attributed to Balaam: "A star shall advance from Jacob, and a staff shall rise from Israel" (Nm 24,17). In NT times and before, the star was a familiar symbol for the expected Davidic king (*Test. Levi* 18:3; *Test. Judah* 24:1).

<sup>80</sup> Sardis was situated 35 miles southeast of Thyatira and about 40 miles due east of Smyrna. As the ancient capital of Lydia, she was renowned for her wealth, acquired mainly from the gold sediment in her river, from a thriving wool-textile industry and from her prime location upon several trade routes. After being visited by Alexander the Great (334 BC), she continued to prosper during the Hellenistic period and became the capital of the Seleucid kingdom. Several temples dedicated to Greek deities were built at this time, with an especially large one dedicated to Artemis. In the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, a large group of Jews from Mesopotamia were settled here by Antiochus III, and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, Sardis passed over to the kings of Pergamum and then to the Romans (133 BC). In 17 AD, a large part of the city was destroyed by an earthquake, but was rebuilt rapidly with imperial help. During the same century, at least two temples were dedicated to Roman Emperors (Augustus and Vespasian) indicating the establishment of the imperial cult. There is evidence of a large and politically powerful Jewish community in this city throughout the Roman and Byzantine periods—one of the largest and most important in Asia

who has the Seven Spirits of God and the seven stars.<sup>81</sup>

I know your deeds; that you have a name for being alive and yet you are dead.<sup>82</sup> Be awake and restore those that remain and were about to die,<sup>83</sup> for I have not found your deeds perfect in the sight of my God.<sup>84</sup> Therefore remember how you received and heard; be observant and repent.<sup>85</sup> For if you are not awake, I will come like a thief and you will never

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Minor—but little is known about the church there. In about 105 AD, St. Ignatius passed through Sardis on his way to Rome, but there no evidence that he made contact with the church. In the second century AD, one of her bishops, Melito of Sardis (died 180 AD), wrote a number of works, of which only a few fragments survive. Some of these show that he battled to separate Judaism and Christianity.

<sup>81</sup> The 'Seven Spirits' were mentioned in the Trinitarian greeting of the prescript at Rev 1,4, and will be mentioned again at 4,5 and at 5,6, in contexts that identify them with the seven stars in the right hand of the speaker (the "one like a son of man": 1,16), which are the 'angels of the churches' (see n. 35). So, the attributes mentioned here merely refer to different functions of the same Holy Spirit. The mention of 'seven stars' recalls the start of the message to the Ephesians (Rev 2,1).

<sup>82</sup> Sardis is one of only two churches (along with Laodicea) to receive an entirely negative evaluation of her deeds from the speaker, the risen Christ. The church had the appearance and reputation of being full of life and vitality, but in reality, in the sight of God, it was dead, or nearly so. The impression is of a church where the externals of religion are given a lot of time and importance, but where the inner spirit and power are missing. The emphasis on the external form of religion, at the expense of its inner spiritual content, has caused a kind of death to the influence of the Spirit.

<sup>83</sup> This death is also a kind of stupor or sleep. So, the solution is to wake up and, in this way, revive what is left, so that the deeds of this church may be perfect in the eyes of God.

<sup>84</sup> The imperfection of the church's deeds betrays her spiritual insensitivity, which in turn is reflected in the actions of her members. They are performing the right deeds, but they are not performing them adequately. At this stage, it is not possible to say precisely what their deeds are lacking (in contrast to 2,4-5).

<sup>85</sup> The church set out in the right way and is here being recalled to her condition at first. This raises the question of the precise nature of her deviation. There is a strange silence here regarding the usual internal and external threats mentioned in the previous letters and nothing is said



know at what hour I will come upon you.<sup>86</sup> <sup>4</sup>But you have a few names in Sardis who have not defiled their clothes, and they shall walk with me in white, because they are worthy.<sup>87</sup>

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about specific causes. Nevertheless, this new situation recalls a very old problem—one that was strongly articulated by the prophet Isaiah (Is 29,13) and taken up by Christ in the Gospels: “This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts” (Mk 7,6-7; cf. Mt 15,7-9). It is quite possible that the church at Sardis had lapsed back, through the influence of Judaizers, into being a sect of Judaism that focussed on observing the *mitzvot* (commandments), while foregoing the reality of redemption in Christ. This would have ensured good relations with the mainstream Jewish community and allowed them the same privileges under Roman Law, to practice their religion freely and be exempt from participation in pagan rituals. However, the sidelining of redemption would have led to their spiritual slumber or ‘death’, while also explaining their need to return to the preaching they heard at first. Judaizers were known in the region at the time and were described by St. Ignatius as: “no more than tombstones and graves of the dead” (*Phil.* 6, cf. Mt 23,27-28)—terms that echo the criticism of this church. His main confrontation with them seems to have been at Magnesia: “If we are still living in the practice of Judaism, it is an admission that we have failed to receive the gift of grace” (*Magn.* 8); “To profess Jesus Christ while continuing to follow Jewish customs is an absurdity” (*Magn.* 10).

<sup>86</sup> So, the main problem is inattention to the Spirit, which will certainly include the Spirit’s message in this book. The penalty for this lack of attention and vigilance will be ignorance of the time of Christ’s coming. There is no mention here of Christ’s coming to perform a local judgment or consolation (as in Rev 2,5.15; 3,20), so the implication is that this coming refers to his end-time *Parousia* (as in 2,25; 3,11)—an impression that is largely confirmed by its close resemblance to the text at 16,15, and to other NT references to the *Parousia* (Mt 24,42-44; 1Thess 5,2). One important corollary to this is that by being awake to what the Spirit is saying in the prophecy of this book, the hearer will indeed know the hour of his final coming (cf. Rev 10,7).

<sup>87</sup> Another result of their inattention to the Spirit is defencelessness against a certain type of sin, in particular those inner sins of thought, to which only the Spirit can alert the soul. Thoughts of envy, lust or rage are going unchecked, while the outward appearance and reputation of this church are preserved (cf. Mt 23,27-28). The result, for most of the



<sup>5</sup>The one who overcomes will dress himself like this in white clothes,<sup>88</sup> and never will I scrub his name from the Scroll of Life, and I will declare his name before my Father and before his angels.<sup>89</sup> <sup>6</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

<sup>7</sup>And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia<sup>90</sup> write: This says

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members of this church, is that these sins have stained their white garments, which represent the righteousness they received at baptism (cf. Zech 4,2). This would certainly fit a situation (see n. 85) where God's commandments are being observed at a lower level than the one demanded by Christ and enabled by his Spirit; where the letter of the Law is kept, but not its Spirit (Mt 5,20; Rom 2,29; 7,5-6; 2Cor 3,6). However, there are a few members of the community who have been alert to the Spirit, and have avoided these sins, and kept their robes white and spotless. They are worthy, like Christ (cf. Rev 5,2.4.9.12), and will walk with him as his true disciples, in a way that anticipates the purity of the 144,000 followers of the Lamb described later in the text (14,1-5).

<sup>88</sup> These white clothes are also a reward for 'the one who overcomes', even though these church members may, in the past, have defiled their garments for some reason. The promise refers primarily to the afterlife of the faithful in heaven (cf. 6,11; 7,13-14) or in the consummation (cf. 22,14), but can also be applied to the present life, if the regular inspection and washing of garments is taken to represent the self-examination and absolution of sin through the Sacrament of Confession (see also n. 517).

<sup>89</sup> This is another statement referring to the visions at the end of the book—to a text about the final judgment (20,11-15). Since those whose names are not found written in the Scroll of Life will be subjected to eternal condemnation (20,15), the assurance given in this verse is truly comforting. Furthermore, this statement throws light on the process of judgment: the speaker, the risen Christ, is the one who will determine the eternal destiny of every individual by choosing to keep, or to erase, his or her name from the Scroll of Life entrusted to him (5,7-9). The details of this process will become apparent later in the text (also see n. 90, [link 16](#)). The final part of this verse, the confession of the name, has parallels in the Gospels (more specifically in Q: Lk 12,8; Mt 10,32).

<sup>90</sup> Philadelphia (now Alasehir) is 30 miles southeast of Sardis and sixty miles east of Smyrna, and was founded in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC by the ruler of Pergamum, Attalus Philadelphus. It was a small city in a fertile volcanic region, known for its vineyards and frequent earthquakes. Along with 12

the Holy One, the True One,<sup>91</sup> who holds the key of David, who opens and no one will close, and closes and no one opens.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>8</sup>I know your deeds; since you have little strength—even you have kept my order and not denied my name<sup>93</sup>—look, I have set before you an

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other cities in the area, Philadelphia was flattened by the earthquake in 17 AD and received imperial aid for reconstruction, changing her name temporarily to Neo-Caesarea. This message is the first mention of a church in Philadelphia, but shortly afterwards she is visited by Ignatius of Antioch on his way to Rome and praised highly in his subsequent letter to that community, in which he also briefly mentions the presence of Judaizers there (*Phil.* 6,1). In AD 155, eleven Christians from Philadelphia were martyred along with Polycarp at Smyrna (*Mart. Polycarp* 19.1). These separate pieces of information all concur in presenting the church as devout and courageous. Eusebius briefly mentions (*Hist. Ecc.* 5.17.4) a prophetess active here in the first century, called Ammia, whom the female Montanist prophetesses, of the later part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, claimed as a predecessor.

<sup>91</sup> These titles and attributes are not taken from the opening vision (Rev 1,9-20). Elsewhere in Revelation the ‘Holy One’ is a title for God, as in the OT (4,8; 6,10; cf. Is 40,25), but in the NT it is also a common designation for Christ (Mk 1,24; Lk 4,34; Jn 6,69; 1Jn 2,20; Acts 3,14; 4,27.30). In the Biblical tradition, the ‘True One’ is not simply someone who is authentic, or tells the truth, but evokes especially the trustworthiness of God in keeping his covenantal promises (cf. Ex 34,6; Is 65,16). A similar meaning can be discerned in Revelation, when applied to Christ, since the title is frequently found in the couplet ‘Faithful and True’ (Rev 3,14; 19,11; 22,6).

<sup>92</sup> The key of David alludes to the keys given to Eliakim, the newly appointed steward of the royal household in the times of Isaiah (Is 22,22), therefore representing executive authority over the affairs of the king. In Revelation, the king is God, who has given to Christ, as representative of the House of David (Rev 5,5; 22,16), the keys of his divine kingdom. In the hands of the risen Christ, the key represents messianic authority over God’s kingdom, to allow or forbid entry to whomever he wishes, an authority which he has shared with Peter (cf. Mt 16,19). To this kingdom, the Pharisees were shutting the door and forbidding entry to everyone (Mt 23,13). Christ uses the key to open the door to this kingdom for the Philadelphians (Rev 3,8).

<sup>93</sup> Apart from Smyrna, Philadelphia is the only church to avoid divine censure: they have obeyed Christ’s order to endure (cf. 3,10) and continue

open door which no one can close.<sup>94</sup> <sup>9</sup>Behold, I will hand over some of the synagogue of Satan—those saying they are Jews and are not for they lie— behold, I will make them come and worship at your feet and they shall know that I love you.<sup>95</sup> <sup>10</sup>Since you have kept my order to endure,<sup>96</sup> also I will keep you from the hour of the trial that is to come upon the whole world, to test the inhabitants of the earth.<sup>97</sup>

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to witness faithfully to his name in the face of active resistance. Her lack of strength may refer to her small size and influence.

<sup>94</sup> The assurance that the door to God's kingdom is open implies that the antagonists in the message were conspiring to deny they had access to this kingdom.

<sup>95</sup> The antagonists in Philadelphia are the Jews, described here in identical terms to those at Smyrna (2,9), as 'a synagogue of Satan'—a term that implied collusion with the Roman authorities. In Smyrna, the Jews were blaspheming Christ and Christians and denying any relationship with them. Here, the Jews seem to be claiming that they alone have the key to the entrance into God's kingdom. To correct them, Christ will bring some of them to worship with the Christians, so they will experience for themselves the presence of God and his kingdom in the Church (cf. Is 45,14; 60,14). Despite the reaffirmation of the Jews as 'a synagogue of Satan', there is no specific indication, here, that the Jews are colluding with the Roman authorities to persecute the Christians, as at Smyrna (see n. 53).

<sup>96</sup> This is a reference back to "even you have kept my order and not denied my name" (Rev 3,8). In both places, the Greek word translated by 'order' (λόγος) is also 'word', so literally we have: "Since you have kept the word of my endurance", which can also be understood as "the word about Jesus' own endurance", that is to say, the Church's teaching, or κήρυγμα, about Jesus.

<sup>97</sup> The time of trial, here, is global ('the whole world') and generalized. The intended subjects are the 'inhabitants of the earth', a term that recurs often in Revelation in a negative sense to denote the unredeemed (6,18; 8,13; 11,10; 13,8.12.14; 14,6; 17,2.8). The trial therefore refers to the eschatological judgments of God on the rebellious and unredeemed world, described later in the text (especially the three woes: 8,13; 9,12; 11,14). From this trial, the Philadelphians will be protected by Christ, in ways that are not specified here, but evoke the special treatment extended to the 144,000 (cf. Rev 7; 9,4; 12,6.14; 14,1).

<sup>11</sup>I am coming soon,<sup>98</sup> hold to what you have so that no one may take your crown.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>12</sup>The one who overcomes—I will make him a pillar in the Sanctuary of my God, and never will he go out again, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the City of my God, of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from my God, and my own new name.<sup>100</sup> <sup>13</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

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<sup>98</sup> In the context of the final trial, it seems that the *Parousia* or Second Coming is intended here, as at 1,7; 2,25;16,15; 22,7.12.20 (in 2,5.16, Christ's coming is linked to a local judgment). Imminence ('soon') is sometimes stressed, and at other times not.

<sup>99</sup> In contrast to the Smyrniats (2,10), the Philadelphians have already received their 'crown' or 'wreath' (στέφανος), but the possession of this supreme award is conditional on maintaining their standard ('hold what you have', cf. 2,25). This consolatory remark, in addition to the implied comparison with the 144,000 (see n. 97), and in the absence of any censure, must surely put Philadelphia at the top of all the churches.

<sup>100</sup> Most of the current translations of Revelation translate the Greek word ναός (Sanctuary) by the word 'temple'. In the NT, however, ναός almost invariably refers to the central and most sacred part of the temple complex (ἱερόν), which is most appropriately translated by the word 'Sanctuary'. This confusion over terminology has probably helped to obscure the significance of the temple theme in Revelation. Becoming a pillar in the Sanctuary of God is metaphorical language, also used by St. Paul when speaking of the leaders of the mother church in Jerusalem (Gal 2,9). This is an important point, since it indicates the metaphorical nature of the temple described in Revelation, especially at Rev 11,1-2. As in other parts of the NT (e.g., Eph 2,19-22; 1Pet 2,4-10; Heb 12,22-24), the Sanctuary and temple are not made up of stones, but of the people of God. The permanence of the pillar in God's Sanctuary indicates the promise of an everlasting place in the presence of God and applies to the present age of partial fulfilment, since there will be no Sanctuary or temple in the future consummation (Rev 21,22). The three names inscribed on the pillar assure the subject that he belongs eternally to God, the New Jerusalem and to Christ and imply that, in the future consummation, he will be among the servants with God's name on their foreheads, serving him and reigning forever before his throne in the New Jerusalem (cf. 22,3-4). For Christ's new name, see n. 64. The emphasis on the imminence of the end-time and

<sup>14</sup>And to the angel of the church in Laodicea<sup>101</sup> write: This says the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of the creation of God.<sup>102</sup>

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the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven, in this message, may have inspired the Montanists, a mere fifty years later, to announce the great tribulation as imminent and to prophesy, in its wake, the descent of the New Jerusalem at Pepuza, only seventy miles to the east of Philadelphia.

<sup>101</sup> Laodicea (nowadays Eski-hisar) was situated in the Lycus Valley at the intersection of two important trade routes, about 40 miles southeast of Philadelphia and 80 miles east of Ephesus. Established in the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century BC by the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus II, it became an important judicial, administrative, commercial and financial centre in the Roman period. There is evidence of a large and well-integrated Jewish community at Laodicea, which, as at Sardis, had grown in size, wealth and influence from those Jewish families who had migrated from Mesopotamia under Antiochus III. The leading citizens of Laodicea were among the richest in Asia and they contributed generously to the city's development. This was at no time more evident than after a devastating earthquake in 60 AD, when imperial finance for reconstruction was refused and provided entirely by the inhabitants. Apart from her banking, the city prospered from her wool-textile industry and was also renowned for its nearby medical centre and products, including locally made eye ointment. As shown in this message (3,17) and also in the *Talmud* (cf. *b.T. Shabbat* 147b, 119a; *b.T. Baba Metzi'a* 84a), Laodicea had a reputation for wealth and luxury. The church at Laodicea, together with the churches at Colossae, 10 miles to the east, and Hierapolis, 6 miles to the north, was probably established at the time of St. Paul's residence in Ephesus (Acts 19,10), by his companion Epaphras from Colossae (cf. Col 1,7; 4,12-13), who later sought Paul's intervention over a problem of false teaching (Col 2,4). Although Paul had never visited the region (Col 2,1; Acts 16,6), he addressed the problem from prison, in letters to the Colossians and Laodiceans (Col 4,16), although the latter has since been lost. The risen Christ's message to the Laodiceans is similar in many respects to that of Sardis, for the severity of criticism and the absence of commendation. In neither message is there any indication of a particular internal or external threat. Out of all the messages, this bears the least relation to the opening vision (1,9-20), and most closely reflects recognizable features of the city where the church was located.

<sup>102</sup> The speaker's titles are not found in the opening vision (1,9-20), but rather expand on Rev 1,5. As a name, 'Amen' only occurs here and at Is 65,16 (MT), where it is the title of God in the new creation that is he about

<sup>15</sup>I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I would rather you were cold or hot.<sup>103</sup> <sup>16</sup>So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I am about to vomit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup>For you say: "I am rich and have plenty and there is nothing I need", and you do not know that you are the wretched one, pitiable and poor and blind and naked. <sup>18</sup>I advise you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich, and white clothes so that you may dress yourself and not expose the shame of your nakedness, and ointment to anoint your eyes so that you may see.<sup>104</sup>

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to establish (Is 65,17-25). In assuming this divine title, which has the basic meaning of 'reliable and sure', Christ is indicating the inauguration of this new creation as well as his leading and trustworthy role in its fulfilment. The titles that follow are also connected to this role: as the faithful and true witness to God's plan for the new creation, as well as its origin and active cause (ἡ ἀρχή). The terminology of these titles is similar to, though not dependent on, the hymn to Christ in St. Paul's letter to the neighbouring city of Colossae (cf. Col 1,15-18) and suggest these two passages have the common aim of reasserting Christ's unique role against a local tendency to merge it into a hierarchy of mediating powers, in a syncretism of non-conformist Judaism, speculative philosophy and incipient Gnosticism.

<sup>103</sup> Deeds again form the basis of Christ's evaluation (cf. 2,2.19; 3,1.8) of the church. Without any exceptions, the entire church is on the point of divine rejection because it is lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold. Although this remark is phrased in terms that recall the temperature and quality of the water supply in this city (lukewarm, insipid and nauseous due to high limestone content), in contrast to the temperature of the water at the neighbouring cities of Colossae (cold) and at Hierapolis (hot), it clearly refers to a spiritual state that can, and must, be corrected. The nature of this shameful state is specified by what follows in the text.

<sup>104</sup> The church's main problem is an attitude of self-sufficiency, due to her financial and material wealth. The truth is that she lacks all the things she thinks she has in abundance. Because she does not even know she is in need of these things, she is even more pitiable than those who are aware that they lack them, because she is deceived. Her correction lies in being aware of her utter dependence on Christ through petitionary prayer. The commodities she is advised to acquire from him correspond to those for which the city of Laodicea became famously wealthy—banking, wool and textiles, eye ointment made from a local ingredient called "Phrygian powder". Even her airs of independent self-sufficiency have their precedent in the local background of the city: in her refusal to accept aid

<sup>19</sup>All those whom I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent.<sup>105</sup> <sup>20</sup>Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come to him and eat with him and he with me.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>21</sup>The one who overcomes – I will let him sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat with my Father on his throne.<sup>107</sup> <sup>22</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

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from the Roman imperial authorities for the rebuilding of the city, following a devastating earthquake in 60 AD. The message to this church could apply equally to the city as a whole. In all the messages, but especially evident in this one, the speaker is attempting to build up the church in a morally distinctive way, and to emphasize its distinctiveness from the surrounding city.

<sup>105</sup> Despite the negative appraisal, there is also good news. Not only is Christ's harsh rebuke for this church inspired by his love for her, but also it is not yet too late for her to repent from her complacent self-sufficiency and correct it with an injection of zeal. Clearly, however, strong and harsh words are needed to shake her from her self-deception and help her take the right steps to salvation.

<sup>106</sup> The final exhortation is one of the most beautiful in the whole Bible (cf. Cant 5,2). It is addressed to the soul of every individual believer ('if anyone..'), but especially to those who place their trust in themselves, like the members of this community: Christ is waiting to reveal himself to every soul that recognizes his voice of truth and opens itself to him.

<sup>107</sup> The promise of a share in the ruling authority of Christ is very similar to the promise at the end of the message to the church at Thyatira (Rev 2,26-27), but whereas the promise there is clearly addressed to the one who overcomes, at the end of his mortal life ("who keeps my works until the end"), it is here repeated without that specification. It could therefore be readily applied to those who have already been deemed conquerors within their own lifetimes. Their participation in the authority of Christ in this life can be equated with the gift of the little white stone, understood as a signet ring or royal seal symbolizing the indwelling presence of Christ, newly named "*Immanu-El*" (2,17, see n. 64). Since their participation in the ruling authority of Christ refers to their ruling authority on earth, in the present age, these 'conquerors' can be recognized as the unidentified members, sitting on thrones, in the millennial kingdom of Christ (20,4). This is yet more evidence, in the text itself, that Christ's kingdom with his saints (20,4-6) is a reality in the present age, already inaugurated, and that the vision in Rev 20,4-6 is retrospective (see nn. 452, 453, 454).



Baseline Prophetic Narrative

– the Throne, the Lamb’s Scroll and Opening of its first Six Seals<sup>108</sup>

IV     <sup>1</sup>After this I looked and behold, an open door in heaven<sup>109</sup> and the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet,<sup>110</sup> was saying: Come up here and I will show you what must take place after these things.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>2</sup>At once I came to be in spirit<sup>112</sup> and behold, there was a throne set

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<sup>108</sup> The third and final section of the book starts here (see n. 33) and its purpose is specifically ‘to show what must happen in the future’ (4,1; cf. 1,1; 22,6). The section is basically structured by a linear sequence of events, of a judgmental character, organized in three successive series of sevens: the breaking of the 7 seals of the scroll, the blowing of 7 trumpets and the outpouring of 7 bowls of libation. From the last member of each series the next series arises, giving the impression of increasing focus and attention on the final events. This ‘baseline prophetic narrative’, however, is interrupted in four places by large sections of text (7,1-17; 10,1-11,14; 12,1-15,4; 17,1-19,5), all related to each other by verbal and thematic links. These interruptions constitute a ‘prophecy within the prophecy’, which is identified with the renewal of the author’s prophetic activity in 10,11. The significance of this will be discussed in the relevant place. For further details, see [link 2](#).

<sup>109</sup> The opening vision took place in the earthly part of the cosmic Sanctuary, which corresponds to the inner court of the former temple (see n. 34). Here, however, the author ascends into the heavenly part of the Sanctuary (cf. 7,9,15). It corresponds to the former Sanctuary itself, which was indeed entered by ascending a flight of steps. The ‘open door’ is an allusion to the opening of the door into the Sanctuary, every morning, at the start of the morning service. At the sound of the opening of this door, the lamb that had been prepared for the ‘whole offering’ was slaughtered (*m.Tamid* 3:7; 4:1). The ‘open door’ would therefore indicate that the corresponding sacrifice had already taken place (cf. Rev 5,6). Similar temple imagery can be found in *Test. Levi* 5:1; *1En* 14:15.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Rev 1,10; for the identity of this figure, see n. 25.

<sup>111</sup> This formula is repeated at 22,6 and therefore defines the longest section of the text (4,1-22,6). It represents the main purpose for which the Revelation was given to the Church (cf. 1,1).

<sup>112</sup> In contrast to simply ‘being’ in spirit in 1,10, here the prophet is also ‘taken up’ in spirit, indicating a state of spiritual rapture, or ecstasy, that exceeds his spiritual preparation for the opening vision (see n. 16).



in heaven, and One seated on the throne,<sup>113</sup> <sup>3</sup>and the One who is seated appears like jasper stone and carnelian, and around the throne is a halo looking like emerald.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Also around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and sitting on the thrones twenty-four elders clothed in white clothes, with golden crowns on their heads.<sup>115</sup> <sup>5</sup>And out of the throne come lightnings and noises and

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<sup>113</sup> Attaining the heavenly part of the cosmic Sanctuary, the first thing the author sees is the throne of God, representing God's absolute and transcendent sovereignty over all creation. God's throne is a central reference point for all the subsequent visions of Revelation (e.g., 7,11.15; 11,16; 14,3; 19,4) and the throne vision is also a traditional starting point for prophetic activity (1Kgs 22,19-23; Is 6,1-6; Ez 1; Dn 7,9-10; cf. 1En 14; 60:1-6; 71; 2En 20-21; *Apoc. Abraham* 15-18). In contrast to the Sanctuary in the former temple (Ex 40,1-3), there is no veil dividing the heavenly Sanctuary and preventing this beatific vision of the throne (cf. Mk 15,38). The entire heavenly Sanctuary therefore corresponds to the area behind the veil in the former Sanctuary, the area that used to be called the 'Holy of holies'. The same area is later called the 'Sanctuary of the tent of the testimony in heaven' (Rev 15,5; cf. Nm 9,15; 17,22; 18,2)—a name that identifies it as the heavenly model shown to Moses as a plan for the tent of testimony in the desert (Ex 25,8-9) and, at a later stage, for the first and second temples in Jerusalem. The Sanctuary seen by John in heaven is therefore the archetype of the Jerusalem temples. Because of this typological correspondence, the temple and liturgical imagery in Revelation can be elucidated by means of a comparison with the structure and liturgies of these ancient temples.

<sup>114</sup> The author does not dwell on the visible form of the 'One seated on the throne': he is described simply in terms of two precious stones: jasper and carnelian. Later in the text, jasper is said to be "clear as crystal" (Rev 21,11), which suggests that it is intended to represent the Godhead (cf. 1Tim 6,16). On the other hand, carnelian is blood-red in colour and may represent the divine throne. Finally, this effusion of light and colour is surrounded by an emerald-green halo. These three stones, jasper, carnelian and emerald, were among the best-known precious stones in antiquity (cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 110c; Ex 28,17-20; Ez 28,13).

<sup>115</sup> The enthroned elders form a heavenly council surrounding the divine throne (cf. 1Kgs 22,19; Dn 7,9). Their possession of crowns indicates they are glorified men, not angels (cf. Rev 2,10). In both the OT and NT, the term 'elder' describes a person with social or religious authority, often exercised

thunders,<sup>116</sup> and before the throne seven flames of fire are burning which are the Seven Spirits of God,<sup>117</sup> and before the throne *it is* like a glassy sea similar to crystal.<sup>118</sup> And in the midst of the throne and around the

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in a conciliar context. In Revelation, the elders perform important roles in the liturgy unfolding in heaven: they prostrate before God in worship (4,10; 5,14; 11,16; 19,4), offering him their crowns (4,10); they have harps and sing hymns of praise to God (4,11; 5,8-10; 11,17-18); they have bowls full of incense (5,8), which will be offered at the appropriate time with the prayers of the saints (8,3-4). One elder acts as an interpreter for the author (7,14-17). Their liturgical functions, and number (24), suggest that the elders are analogous to the heads of the divisions of priests and Levites in the second temple (cf. 1Chr 24-25). In the first centuries of this era, it was quite common to refer to these leaders as elders (cf. *m.Yoma* 1:5; *m.Tamid* 1:1; *m.Middoth* 1:8).

<sup>116</sup> Usually linked to theophanies, (cf. Ex 19,16; Ez 1,13; Ps 77,18-19), the same phenomena are described along with events taking place in the heavenly Sanctuary, and are particularly associated with the last of each series (seals, trumpets, bowls): they occur at Rev 8,5 (the opening of the 7<sup>th</sup> seal) accompanied by an earthquake, at 11,19 (the blowing of the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet) accompanied by an earthquake and a heavy hail, and at 16,18 (the pouring of the 7<sup>th</sup> bowl) accompanied by a violent earthquake and huge hailstones. The expansion of the expression indicates the progressive intensification of the eschatological judgments and, more importantly, links these with the approaching manifestation of God.

<sup>117</sup> The seven flames, which are the Seven Spirits, recall the Seraphim (lit. 'the burning ones') described by Isaiah in his throne vision (Is 6,1-6). They correspond to the lamps that were kept perpetually alight before the Lord in the tabernacle and in the temple Sanctuary that was later modeled on it (Ex 27,20-21; Lev 24,1-4). For their relation to the lights of the seven lampstands in Revelation, and other manifestations of the Spirit, see n. 35.

<sup>118</sup> The surface of this glassy 'sea' forms a floor for the Sanctuary in heaven and recalls the sapphire pavement under God's feet in Ex 24,10 (also Ez 10,1). It also corresponds to the 'bronze sea' that stood in the temple, between the outer altar and the Sanctuary, and contained water for the priests to purify themselves before entering the Sanctuary or serving at the altar (Ex 30,17-21; 1Kgs 7,23-26). In the same part of the temple, there were also ten basins for washing the offerings (1Kgs 7,38-39; 2Chr 4,6). Situated between the earth and the heavenly Sanctuary, the glassy sea appears to have the same function as the water in the ancient

throne<sup>119</sup> are four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind: <sup>7</sup>and the first living creature is like a lion, and the second living creature like an ox, and the third living creature has a face like that of a human being, and the fourth living creature is like a flying eagle. <sup>8</sup>And the four living creatures—each one of them has six wings—are full of eyes all round and within, and take no rest day or night saying:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,<sup>120</sup>  
the One who was and who is and who is to come.<sup>121</sup>

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temple: that of purifying those martyrs and saints who enter the heavenly Sanctuary (cf. Rev 7,13-15).

<sup>119</sup> The adverbial expression “in the midst of the throne and around the throne” can be taken to mean “at the throne and surrounding it”. This description of the four living creatures as part of the throne itself, while at the same time providing a level of protection around it, conforms to traditional views on the location and function of the Cherubim.

<sup>120</sup> These four supernatural beings are similar, though not identical, to the guardians of the divine throne, the Cherubim, seen and described by Ezekiel (Ez 1 and 10). But whereas the four beings seen by Ezekiel were all the same—each had a human form, a head with four faces (human, lion, ox and eagle), four wings and there were four wheels nearby, whose rims were full of eyes (Ez 1,5-12.16-18)—John sees the same features distributed among four different beings: one has a human face, two have an animal form (ox and lion) and one is like a bird (eagle). They have six wings instead of four and the many eyes are seen upon the beings themselves (this is repeated twice: Rev 4,6.8). In the number of their wings and in their ceaseless worship, expressed by the refrain “holy, holy, holy...”, these heavenly beings also resemble the Seraphim in Isaiah’s throne vision (Is 6,2-3). Their zoomorphic features suggest they are the heavenly representatives of all living beings and their many eyes indicate they are infused with God’s Spirit (cf. Rev 5,6). Their continual adoration forms the origin and centre of a chorus of praise that spreads out to involve the entire created world (5,13). It draws attention to the holiness, power and eternity of God in such a way as to indicate their main task is to guard and sustain the sovereignty of the Creator over his creation. Finally, the form and function of these four living creatures are epitomized by the two Cherubim on the cover of the ark that was placed in the Holy of holies of the earthly temple (cf. Ex 25,18-22).

<sup>121</sup> For the description of God as “the One who was and who is and who is to come”, see n. 10.

<sup>9</sup>And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to the One seated on the throne, to the One living for ever and ever, <sup>10</sup>the twenty-four elders fall down before the One seated on the throne, and worship the One living for ever and ever, and they place their crowns before the throne saying:

<sup>11</sup>Worthy are you, our Lord and God,  
to receive the glory and the honour and the power,  
because you created all things,  
and by your will they came into being,  
and were created. <sup>122</sup>

V <sup>1</sup>And I saw on the right of the One seated on the throne <sup>123</sup>a scroll with writing on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals. <sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> The worship of the four living creatures is immediately followed by the worship of the 24 elders—a synchrony that is reflected in other parts of the text (Rev 5,8,14; 11,16; 19,4). The elders' worship is expressed physically in the traditional way of prostration (the Greek and Hebrew words for 'worship' are indeed derived from the word for 'prostrate'). By removing their crowns and placing them before the divine throne, the elders show that their honour is nothing compared to that of the One they are worshipping. This act of subservience is endorsed by the wording of their praise, which directs all honour, glory and power to God, for willing and creating everything that exists.

<sup>123</sup> The adverbial phrase 'on the right', or alternatively 'at the right side', is the correct translation of ἐπὶ τὴν δεξιάν ('in the right hand' would require the preposition ἐν). In the context of God's throne, this expression is pregnant with messianic significance, for in the OT the messianic king of Israel is "the man of God's right hand" (Ps 80,17), who sits at God's right side and is honoured as his co-regent (Ps 110,1). In the NT, the expression recurs in various forms to denote the messianic authority and universal dominion given to Jesus Christ, after his Ascension to heaven (cf. Mt 26,64; Mk 14,62; Lk 22,69; Rom 8,34; Eph 1,20; Col 3,1; Heb 10,12; 1Pet 3,22; also Acts 2,33.36; 5,31; Heb 8,1; 12,2).

<sup>124</sup> The author, though, does not see a king but a scroll 'at the right side' of God. "Few features of the Revelation have been so widely discussed as the nature of the scroll... sealed with seven seals" wrote Beasley Murray. With writing on both sides this scroll recalls the scroll, also written on both

<sup>2</sup>And I saw a mighty angel calling with a loud voice: Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals?<sup>125</sup> <sup>3</sup>And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look at it.<sup>126</sup> <sup>4</sup>And much I wept because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look at it.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>5</sup>And one of the elders says to me: Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so that he may open the scroll and its seven seals.<sup>128</sup> <sup>6</sup>And I saw, in the midst of the throne and the

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sides, that was given to Ezekiel to eat (Ez 2,9-3,4), which in turn establishes a connection, as yet undefined, with the analogous 'little scroll' that will later be given to John to swallow and digest (Rev 10,8-11). The fact that the scroll was sealed with seven seals suggests a role in judgment, since scrolls of judgment were often described as sealed until the Day of Judgment (1En 90:20; cf. 1En 89:61-64, 68-71).

<sup>125</sup> The 'mightiness' of the mediating angel indicates the scope and importance of the mission here (and at Rev 10,1 and 18,24). He calls out to the whole creation (see next verse) for someone who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals. As with any scroll that has been rolled up and sealed along its free edge, all the seals must first be broken before the scroll can be unrolled and opened; nevertheless, the opening of the scroll is mentioned first to show that this is the recipient's main task. The recipient must be worthy for this task. The suspense is maintained until 5,6-10, where the worthy recipient is revealed, as well as the reason he is found to be worthy (n. 139).

<sup>126</sup> The mighty angel's call has gone out to the whole of creation, here represented by a tripartite division into heaven, earth and under the earth, but no one is found worthy enough to open the scroll or look at its contents. One wonders why such worthiness is required to open this scroll, and why the recipient of the scroll merits such high praise (5,9-10). This is related to the function of the scroll, which is revealed subsequently (see n. 190).

<sup>127</sup> Anxiously awaiting God's judgment in the way described in Dn 7,9-28 (esp. v.10), the author must have wondered why none of the crowned elders, sitting so close to the sealed scroll in heaven, was found worthy for this task. Perhaps he even despaired of ever finding anyone more worthy than they. So, gazing in desperation at one of the elders, he burst into tears.

<sup>128</sup> And it was from one of the elders that consolation came. Someone had been found worthy through a victory he had won. He was the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, identified by his ancient messianic titles: the 'Lion of the tribe of Judah' (cf. Gn 49,9-10) and 'the Root of David' (cf. Is 11,1.10; Rom 15,12, Rev 22,16; n. 520).

four living creatures, in the midst of the elders,<sup>129</sup> a Lamb<sup>130</sup> standing, like one that had been slain;<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> In a union and sharing of authority that could not be more intimate, the owner of these titles is then seen at the centre of the throne of God, encircled by the four living creatures and by the heavenly council of elders cf. Rev 3,21; 22,3).

<sup>130</sup> Although his title is Lion, what the author actually saw was a Lamb (ἀρνίον). 'Lamb' is the most widely used designation for Jesus Christ in the Book of Revelation (28 times in all), representing him not only as an eternal sacrificial victim (Rev 5,6.9.12; 13,8; cf. 1,5b), whose blood has overcome the influence of the devil, sin and death (12,11), but also as the reigning Messiah (5,5.8; 6,16-17; 7,17; 14,1-5), who will return to fight and conquer God's enemies (17,14). As messianic conqueror, the Lamb is identified not only with 'the rider of the white horse', as both have the unique title 'King of kings and Lord of lords' (17,14 and 19,11-16), but also with the 'one like a son of man' (1,10-20), as both have died and now live forever (1,18; 2,8 and 5,6), both have the seven spirits of God (3,1 and 5,6), both have assumed ancient titles for the Messiah (22,16 and 5,5), both have the same relationship to God as Father (2,28, 3,21 and 14,1) and both are at the centre of God's throne (3,21 and 5,6; 7,17).

<sup>131</sup> The Lamb is standing, like one that had been slain. In the Septuagint, the word for slain (σφάζω) commonly translates טָהַר, the Hebrew word for the slaying of the victims of sacrifice. This image evokes not only the expiatory effect of Christ's blood (Rev 1,6, n. 11), but also the ubiquitous temple and liturgical imagery of the text, which has so far indicated the start of the daily morning service on the Day of Atonement (see nn. 25, 26). In this context, the mention of a sacrificial Lamb recalls the daily offering of an immaculate one-year-old male lamb, slain as the 'continual whole offering' (the *Tamid*), at dawn, when the Sanctuary gate was opened (*m. Tamid* 3:7, 4:1; n. 18). According to the Law, the blood of a 'whole offering' did indeed have expiatory properties (Lev 1,4; 16,24; in combination with other sacrifices: Lev 9,7; 14,20; cf. Job 1,5; 42,8) and in the book of *Jubilees* the expiatory effect of the *Tamid* sacrifice is twice described as a continual means of atonement for the Israelites (*Jub.* 6:13-14; 50:11). The fact that the sacrificed victim is now 'standing' implies his return to life and is generally accepted as an allusion to Christ's Resurrection. As well as revealing his Ascension, his presence in heaven, intact and entire, represents both the 'continual' effects of his sacrifice and its completeness. There is another aspect to the sacrificial symbolism: as 'the Lamb that was slain' can be identified with the 'one like a son of man' (see n. 130), and

he had seven horns<sup>132</sup> and seven eyes,<sup>133</sup> which are the Seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>7</sup>And he came and took from the right of the One seated on the throne.<sup>135</sup> <sup>8</sup>And when he took the scroll, the four living creatures and the

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since the first represents the sacrificial victim and the second the high priest during the daily service on the Day of Atonement, and both are Jesus Christ, the appearance of this figure here, at the throne of God in the heavenly Sanctuary, evokes the most memorable part of the annual Rite of Expiation in the Jerusalem temple on the Day of Atonement, when the high priest entered the Holy of holies with the blood of the sacrifices in order to expiate the Sanctuary building (cf. Lev 16,32-33; Heb 9,11-14). By analogy, the appearance of the Lamb here, at the throne, has an expiatory effect on the heavenly Sanctuary. This expiation is later described as the defeat of Satan together with his angels, and their expulsion from heaven so that “no longer was any place found for them in heaven” (Rev 12,7-11; see [link 15](#)).

<sup>132</sup> The horn is an ancient symbol of strength and power (cf. Dt 33,17) that is widely used in apocalyptic texts (Dn 7,7-8,24; 1En 89:43; 90:9,37-38; *Test. Joseph* 19:8-9; cf. also Rev 12,3; 13,1.11; 17,3.12). As seven represents fullness and totality (see n. 22), the seven horns of the Lamb denote fullness of power, omnipotence, thus confirming that he is not just a passive sacrificial victim, but also a powerful ruler/warrior for whom the title of ‘Lion’ is apt (Rev 5,5). In this role, he evokes and surpasses all the other horned animal figures in the apocalyptic tradition.

<sup>133</sup> The seven eyes, here presented as an attribute of the Lamb alongside the horns, represent the fullness of vision that constitutes perfect knowledge of heavenly and earthly realities, i.e., omniscience.

<sup>134</sup> This description should be taken to refer to the Lamb’s seven horns and eyes together, the plenitude of his divine power and insight, identifying them with the Holy Spirit sent into the world by Christ (see n. 35), in order to bring his victorious mission to completion. More specifically, it relates the seven spiritual attributes of the Messiah (Is 11,2) to the “seven eyes of the Lord which range throughout the earth” (Zech 4,10), which are identified with the seven lamps in Zechariah’s vision (Zech 4,2, cf. Rev 4,5) and represent the Lord’s vital presence on earth (Zech 4,6; 2Chr 16,9).

<sup>135</sup> Only in the next verse do we learn that it is the scroll that the Lamb came and took. The precise identity of this scroll will be discussed later (n.190), but it is worth noting here that, in the context of a liturgy for the Day of Atonement (see n.131), this action corresponds to the taking of the Torah Scroll by the high priest, after the completion of the Rite of



twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb<sup>136</sup>—each one having a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.<sup>137</sup>  
⁹And they sing a new song<sup>138</sup> saying:

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Expiation, in order to read to the assembly (*m.Yoma* 7:1-2). A similar significance can therefore be extended to the present context: the Rite of Expiation in the liturgy of the Sanctuary in heaven is complete (cf. Jn 19,30). Now the means of salvation has been provided in full, the process of judgment can begin.

<sup>136</sup> This simple statement in the previous verse barely conveys the enormous significance of the action described here by the author, i.e., the Lamb assuming his messianic task of bringing God's plan of salvation and now judgment to completion. Instead, the significance of this event is only really grasped from the universal liturgical praise described in this verse. In Rev 4,10, the 24 elders fell down before (worshipped) the One seated on the throne, after the four living creatures "gave glory, honour and thanks". Here, the four living creatures and the 24 elders all fall down together before the Lamb. One immediately perceives that the Lamb is accorded the same worship as the One seated on the throne.

<sup>137</sup> This is another reminder of the liturgical role of the elders: the harp (or lyre: κιθάρα) was the instrument traditionally used by the Levites to accompany the psalms in the ancient temple (cf. Ps 33,2) and the bowls (φιάλη) were sacred objects used by the priests for the libation offerings. Each elder has both Levitical and a priestly task, showing that the old separation between the Levites and the priests is no longer in effect (cf. Ez 44,10-16). The bowls contain certain varieties of incense, which represent the prayers of the saints (cf. Ps 141,2). In due course, the incense will be given to an angel for the incense offering on the golden altar before the throne (Rev 8,3-4). However, at this moment, the harps are at the forefront, as the elders prepare to sing.

<sup>138</sup> They go on to sing a 'new song'. The stated newness of this song seems to distinguish it from the previous song, in which the elders glorified God for his act of creation (4,11). The new song that follows will glorify the Lamb in similar terms for his act of redemption. Can we not infer that the new song is a heavenly anticipation of the total renewal of creation set in motion by this redemption? What follows is indeed a much more effusive and extensive hymn of praise than the previous one. The expression also alludes to the psalms where 'new song' is mentioned as a form of worship (especially Pss 96 and 98), often as an invitation to "sing to the Lord a new song". Above all, though, it recalls the new song of praise for the



Worthy are you to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
because you were slain  
and with your blood you bought people for God  
from every tribe and tongue and race and nation,  
<sup>10</sup>and made them a kingdom and priests for our God<sup>139</sup>  
and they shall reign on the earth.<sup>140</sup>

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redemption that God will accomplish through his Servant in Is 42 (Is 42,10).

<sup>139</sup> In the previous song, the One seated on the throne was worthy of praise because he created all things (Rev 4,10). Here, the Lamb is worthy of praise because his sacrificial death has 'bought' people for God from all over the world, and has set them apart as priests and rulers (cf. Dn 7,14). Although this act of redemption is universal, the language used to describe it is that of God's Covenant with Israel at Sinai (Ex 19,6). Similar wording is used at Rev 1,5b-6 and 20,6 (also 1Pet 2,9). The implication is that the Israel's redemption from slavery and their reconstitution as God's kingdom under the Sinaitic Covenant are now being fulfilled on a global scale by the Lamb's sacrifice. Although the redemption is described as 'buying people', as in a slave market, it is not money that is used, but the Lamb's blood (cf. Is 52,3). Furthermore, the people who are being 'bought', so that they can be 'slaves' of God, were not formerly slaves to a tyrannical dynasty or even to a human owner; they were enslaved to worldly desires and to sin. This is just one metaphor, among many, used in the text to express the mystery of expiation, atonement and reconciliation effected by the Lamb's blood: it not only 'buys' people for God (Rev 5,9; cf. 14,4) and makes them a 'kingdom and priests' (1,6; 5,10), but it also frees them from their sins (1,5b), enables them to clean and bleach their clothes (7,14; 22,14), and it empowers them to participate in the battle against the devil (12,11). Although the metaphor of slave purchase in these passages may allude to the redemption of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, it would be a mistake to compare the Lamb's sacrifice with the sacrifice of the lambs at the first Passover (Ex 12). Their blood merely warded off a physical death (an apotropaic function) and had nothing of the expiatory and atoning effect of the Lamb's 'blood' in Revelation. For more on the symbolism of the Lamb's sacrifice, see [link 15](#).

<sup>140</sup> 'They shall reign' in the future tense (βασιλεύσουσιν) is the reading adopted by the Critical Text (*Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28<sup>th</sup> edition), but there are good reasons for preferring a variant reading in the present

<sup>11</sup>And I saw and I heard, the sound of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, <sup>12</sup>and they were saying with a loud voice:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain  
to receive the power and riches  
and wisdom and strength  
and honour and glory and praise.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>13</sup>And every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and everything in them, I heard saying:

To the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb  
be the praise and the honour and the glory  
and the might for ever and ever.<sup>142</sup>

<sup>14</sup>And the four living creatures said: Amen. And the elders fell down and worshipped.<sup>143</sup>

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tense, 'they reign' (βασιλευουσιν). Although there are good textual witnesses for both (κ and P [024] for the first, A and 046 for the second), the second is preferable on exegetical grounds: in 20,4-6, it is clear that the inherent function of the priests is to rise and reign contemporaneously with Christ, who reigns now (cf. 1,5.9). There is no hint that these priests must wait before they can reign (cf. 3,17.21). As the appointment of the priests began in the past, according to both 1,6 and 5,10, it can be assumed that they have been reigning since the time of their appointment and are therefore reigning now (see also nn. 452, 453).

<sup>141</sup> The praise radiates out from the four living creatures and the 24 elders, to involve the innumerable host of angels around the throne in heaven. Their praise of the Lamb is again much more effusive and extensive than anything that has preceded it (Rev 4,8-11).

<sup>142</sup> In the ever-widening chorus of praise spreading out from the throne, it is the turn of all the creatures on earth, in the sky and in the sea, to offer their praise to the Lamb, not omitting to direct their praise, firstly, to the One sitting on the throne. This is a timely reminder that the Creator is the first to be praised for the Lamb's Redemption and that although distinct in identity, they are united in dignity and purpose.

<sup>143</sup> The 'new song' of praise now returns to where it all began and concludes with an Amen, and prostrations from its initiators. It has not gone unnoticed by various commentators that the form of prayer in Rev 4-

VI <sup>1</sup>And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals,<sup>144</sup> and I heard one of the four living creatures saying, as with a voice of thunder: Come!<sup>145</sup> <sup>2</sup>And I looked and behold, a white horse, and the one sitting on it had a bow and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and so to overcome.<sup>146</sup>

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5, first to God the Creator and then to the Redeemer, parallels the form of the traditional morning and evening prayer in the Synagogue, dating from pre-Christian times. This prayer starts with praise of God for his work of creation (*Yotser*) and concludes with praise for his acts of redemption (*Emet weYatsiv*).

<sup>144</sup> Having returned to the area of the throne, the seer's attention now focuses on the Lamb as he proceeds to break the seven seals of the scroll, one by one. What follows is the first of a series of seven events of a liturgical character (to be followed by the series of seven trumpet blasts and then by the series of outpourings from seven libation bowls). The breaking of each of the first four seals is the occasion for a specific mission from heaven to earth, executed by a different horse and rider. The four single horses and their riders recall the first vision in the book of Zechariah (Zech 1,7-17), but in every other respect their description alludes to Zechariah's later vision of four teams of horses and chariots (Zech 6,1-8), called the 'four winds (or spirits) of heaven' (Zech 6,5). Like these 'four winds of heaven', John sees the four horses and their riders leaving the presence of God in heaven to go out into the world.

<sup>145</sup> This command is announced by each of the four living creatures in turn (Rev 6,1.3.5.7) at the start of each of the four missions. It indicates a close hierarchical connection between the four living creatures in heaven and the four horsemen setting out to cover the earth. As the main task of the four living creatures is to guard and sustain the sovereignty of the Creator over his creation (see n. 120), it can be inferred that the four horsemen perform a similar role on earth, namely, to uphold the sovereignty of God over his creation.

<sup>146</sup> The rider of the white horse carries a bow, is given a crown and, certain of victory, goes out conquering. Some features of this mission set it apart from the other three: its white colour, which always denotes affinity with the risen Christ (e.g., Rev 2,17; 3,4.5; 4,4; 6,11; 7,9.12; 19,11.14; 20,11), its emphasis on conquering, which is a word used almost always for Christ and the people of God (in all but two cases: 11,7; 13,5) and finally the absence of any mention of negative effects (cf. 6,4.6.8). Also in

<sup>3</sup>And when he opened the second seal,<sup>147</sup> I heard the second living creature saying: Come! <sup>4</sup>And out came another horse, fiery-red, and the one sitting on it was permitted to take peace from the earth so they slay one another, and a great sword was given to him.<sup>148</sup>

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Zechariah's vision, one team of horses differed from the others: it brought God's Spirit to the Land of the North in order to inspire the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the temple and so prepare for the coming of the Lord (Zech 6,8). Being different from the others, the first horse in Revelation would appear to have an analogous function as a carrier of God's Spirit. All the evidence points to this horse and its rider as symbolizing the invincible force that leads to the establishment of the messianic kingdom amongst men (cf. Is 49,2; Ps 45,4-5). Since this comes about through the proclamation of the Gospel, there is an evident relation between the mission of the white horse and that of the disciples of Jesus (Mk 16,15-18; Rom 8,37; 1Jn 5,4-5). So important is the mission of evangelization that the end of this age will not come before the Gospel of the Kingdom has been proclaimed throughout the whole inhabited earth (Mt 24,14), or in other words until the white horse has passed throughout the world (Rev 6,1-2). There is also an evident resemblance between the role of the white horse and that of the four living creatures: the white horse and its rider represent the force that leads to acknowledgement of, and submission to, the sovereignty of God over his creation.

<sup>147</sup> The next three horses all represent forces which have destructive effects on human life and wellbeing. Not only do they recall the messianic woes that will precede the Second Coming in the 'synoptic apocalypses' (Mk 13; Mt 24; Lk 21), but they also evoke the prophetic warnings, addressed to the people of Israel, of the consequences of failing to keep their covenant with God and observe his commandments (Lev 26,14-46; Dt 28,15-69; Jer 29,17-19; Ez 5,1-17). In the expansions to Exodus 20 in the Targums *Neofiti* and *Pseudo-Jonathan*, the same terrible chastisements are anticipated for those who break the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of the Ten Commandments given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. In this context, the three horses represent the results of rejecting the sovereignty of God. They reveal 'the anger of God from heaven' (cf. Rom 1,18-32) for those who refuse to be conquered by the love of God in Christ (the white horse). All the apparent 'evils' of the next three horses are, in fact, heavenly chastisements recalling humankind to their Creator and Redeemer.

<sup>148</sup> In this passage, the rider of the red horse takes away peace and brings violence and murder. The red colour of the horse is symbolical of bloodshed, but the rider's sword (μάχαρα) is not so much a weapon of war

<sup>5</sup>And when he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying: Come! And I looked and behold, a black horse, and the one sitting on it had a yoke in his hand.<sup>149</sup> <sup>6</sup>And I heard *what was* like a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying: A litre of wheat for a day's wage, and three litres of barley for a day's wage, and with the oil and the wine do not be unjust.<sup>150</sup>

<sup>7</sup>And when he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying: Come! <sup>8</sup>And I looked and behold, a pale green horse and the one sitting on it; his name is Death and Hades followed him,<sup>151</sup> and

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(ῥομφαία, cf. Rev 6,8) as a tool of murder, assassination and violent assault. The primary reference here, then, appears to be social strife, internecine murder and ideological conflict, rather than open warfare.

<sup>149</sup> The colour of this horse (black) suggests it represents injustice, oppression and misery. This is further defined by the yoke (ζυγός) in the hand of its rider, symbolizing servitude and exploitation (cf. Jer 27,1-22). There is no need here to consider the yoke as a pair of scales, as many have done.

<sup>150</sup> Literally: "A *choenix* of wheat for a denarius and three *choenices* of barley for a *denarius*". The *choenix* was a volume equivalent to about one litre and the *denarius* was a Roman silver coin equal in value to a day's wage for hired labour (cf. Mt 20,1-16). The voice is that of one of the four living creatures giving instructions to the rider of the black horse, showing again the close hierarchical connection between the four living creatures in heaven and the four horsemen setting out on their global mission. The instruction envisages a situation in which staple foods such as wheat and barley are selling for unjustly high prices, while more luxury items such as oil and wine are affordable. People must work long and hard to pay for the essentials of life, but their labour is alleviated by the enjoyment of a few luxuries—the wine and the oil. The situation is one of servitude and economic exploitation, mixed with a few inexpensive and transient pleasures.

<sup>151</sup> The last horse is pale green, the colour of failing health and life. To emphasize the point, the rider's name is Death. Unlike the other horsemen he has no instrument, but instead has a companion whose name is Hades. These two are mentioned elsewhere in the text, as the abodes in the netherworld where the dead who fail to enter heaven (cf. Rev 14,13) await the final judgment (cf. 20,13), and from which only the risen Christ has the power to free (1,18). In Christian theology they correspond to Purgatory

authority was given to them over a quarter of the earth to kill with the sword, with famine and with pestilence, and by the wild beasts of the earth.<sup>152</sup>

<sup>9</sup>And when he opened the fifth seal, I saw below the altar the souls of those who had been slain<sup>153</sup> because of the Word of God and because of the Witness which they held.<sup>154</sup> <sup>10</sup>And they cried out with a loud voice

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and Hell, while in the Jewish tradition they represent the two parts of *Sheol*, one for the righteous and the other for sinners, that are separated by an unbridgeable gulf (cf. Lk 16,19-31; 1En 22:1-14). Here, though, they are described as the personifications of these post-mortem abodes.

<sup>152</sup> These personifications of Death and Hades have the power to kill up to a quarter of the world's inhabitants through war (represented by the battle sword ῥομφαία), famine, disease and by wild animals. These four forms of death correspond to the "four acts of judgment" that will afflict those who have gone astray (Ez 5,17; 14,21).

<sup>153</sup> The opening of the fifth seal reveals the souls of the martyrs 'under the altar in heaven', described subsequently in the text as the golden altar before the throne, on which the incense is offered (Rev 8,3). Their position 'under the altar' evokes the part of the daily morning service, in the second temple, when the fully prepared members of the daily whole offering, or *Tamid* sacrifice, were taken to the lower part of the ramp of the outer altar to await their elevation on to its flaming hearth (*m.Tamid* 7:3). Their consumption in the fire was their 'presentation to God'. Since the *Tamid* sacrifice has already been identified with Christ the Lamb (see n. 131), the analogy, here, between the souls of the martyrs and the members of this sacrifice clearly implies the identification of the martyrs with the Lamb—an identification that recalls the doctrine of the Church as the body of Christ (1Cor 12,27; Rom 12,5; Eph 4,11-16). Here, in the manner of the martyrs, the Church is being prepared for her 'presentation before God'.

<sup>154</sup> The martyrs were slain because of the Word of God and the witness that they held. This is a slight variation of the usual formula 'Word of God and Witness of Jesus'. Although 'the witness which they held' could refer narrowly to the 'Witness of Jesus' transmitted to the Church by John in the text (subject of the genitive; see n. 6), it appears to refer more generally to the witness given by the martyrs to Jesus (object of the genitive). There is, to say the least, a deliberate ambiguity here, so that both meanings are equally acceptable.

saying: How much longer, Holy and True Master, until you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?<sup>155</sup>

<sup>11</sup>And a white robe was given to each one of them,<sup>156</sup> and they were

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**155** The martyrs ask how long they must wait until God's vindication of the cause for which they lost their lives. Since their longing for justice will not be satisfied until the time of the final judgment (Rev 16,6; 19,2; cf. *1En* 47:1-4), the martyrs show that they are impatiently waiting for this event. This impatience for divine judgment is very revealing: it suggests that the present heaven ('the first heaven') does not entirely satisfy their eternal longings (cf. CCC 1024); these are actually directed towards the eternal state following God's final judgment, which the text calls the 'new heavens and new earth'. The 'inhabitants of the earth' (יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ in the OT, e.g., Jer 6,12; 18,18; 13,13) is a contemporary designation for those who are attached to the world and its idols, and rebellious or hostile to God (cf. Rev 3,10; 6,10; 8,13; 11,10; 13,8.12.14; 17,2.8). Precisely the same expression, with a similar significance, is found 18 times in the Parables of Enoch (*1En* 37:2,5; 40:6,7; 43:4; 48,5; etc).

**156** The white robe (στολή) was a type of ceremonial dress worn by people of high society. The post-mortem gift of white robes (στολή) to these martyrs distinguishes them from the martyrs who already possess white robes (στολή) when they are killed later, in the great tribulation (Rev 7, 9.13-14). Their martyrdom allows them to wash and bleach their robes in the blood of the Lamb (7,14). After being washed and bleached (7,14) by passing through the great tribulation, the robes of the innumerable host of martyrs will be clean and bright, which is the description given to the fine linen of the Bride (19,8), thus identifying the innumerable host of martyrs with the Bride of the Lamb and their robes (στολή) with her fine linen. Finally, we are told that the fine linen of the Bride represents the righteous work of the saints (19,8). The implication, therefore, is that unlike the martyrs in 7,14, the martyrs under the altar in 6,11 had not been able to perform the righteous deeds necessary to make their own robes. This identifies them not only with the martyrs of the OT whose deeds had not been rendered 'righteous' by faith in Christ, but also with those early Christian martyrs who were killed for their faith so soon after conversion that they had no time to perform righteous deeds. In either case, the granting of white robes to these martyrs recalls the Church's doctrine of indulgences, by which the saints are able to produce fine linen robes not only for themselves, but also for those who are identified with the Bride and, for whatever reason, have not been able to perform the righteous deeds needed to make their own robes (cf. 14,13).



told to rest<sup>157</sup> for a short time more,<sup>158</sup> until also their fellow-servants and their brothers had been consecrated,<sup>159</sup> those about to be killed just as

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**157** The theme of the ‘rest’ (ανάπαυσις) of the martyrs here, and of the saints in 14,13, resonates with the Creator’s rest on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of Creation, the Sabbath (cf. Gn 2,1-3; Heb 3,7-4,11), and indicates how the eternal law concerning the Sabbath (Ex 20,8-11; Dt 5,12-15; cf. 5,17) was fulfilled in the NT, and was not abrogated. Just as the Sabbath formed the basis of the Covenant between God and Israel (Ex 31,12-17; 35,1-3), so also the ‘Sabbath rest in heaven’ continues to be an important part of the new and eternal Covenant established in Jesus Christ. The theme of the Sabbath rest in heaven underlies the description of the 1,000-year reign of Christ with his saints later in the text (Rev 20,4-6), and will be discussed in the appropriate place (n. 456).

**158** The opening of the fifth seal brings us up to only a ‘short time’ before the final expression of divine justice. Taking this to be an eschatological event, occurring at or near the end of history, we can infer that the activities of the four horsemen, described following the opening of the first four seals, represent a summary of the entire historical process from the Ascension of Christ to a ‘short time’ before the divine judgment.

**159** Most modern translations have something like “until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters” (NSRV). However, the word ‘number’ does not appear in any of the Greek manuscripts and its inclusion perversely implies that a predetermined number of Christ’s witnesses must perish before the judgments of God will be revealed. Such a belief would encourage Christians to hasten the end by provoking their own martyrdom, leading to the trivialization of this supreme act. Literally translated, the martyrs under the altar must wait “until also their fellow-servants and their brothers have been *filled* (πληρωθῶσιν)”. This can either be understood simply as ‘*perfected*’, by martyrdom in this case, or as a subtle allusion to ‘priestly consecration’, since ‘to fill the hand’ is the literal translation of the ancient Hebrew expression for the consecration of the priests (תִּלְמַם: the etymology is obscure). Furthermore, this Hebrew expression is translated literally in the Greek version of the OT (LXX) using the same verb or its cognate forms (πληροῦν, πίμπλημι, ἐπιπίμπλημι τὴν χεῖρα). In this context, then, the use of the Greek verb that means ‘to fill’ not only evokes the priestly consecration, but also suggests an act of consecration that involves the whole soul and not just the ‘the hand’. It is not stated in the text precisely what fills the souls of these martyrs, but it seems to be the vision



themselves.<sup>160</sup>

<sup>12</sup>And I saw when he opened the sixth seal,<sup>161</sup> and a great earthquake occurred <sup>162</sup> and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood,<sup>163</sup> <sup>13</sup>and the stars of heaven fell to the earth as a fig-tree drops its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind, <sup>14</sup>and the heaven departed as a scroll being rolled up, and every

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of the throne itself, after their martyrdom, that entirely fills their souls and so completes their consecration (cf. Acts 7,55-56; 2,28; cf. 1En 47:4).

<sup>160</sup> They are waiting for the fulfilment of the vision that follows in Rev 7,9-17, and describes an innumerable crowd of martyrs standing before the throne in heaven, after having been killed for witnessing their faith in a persecution that is called 'the great tribulation' (7,14; see n. 184).

<sup>161</sup> Whereas the fifth seal was opened a short time before divine judgment, the sixth seal takes us to the threshold of the final judgment itself—the 'Day of the Lord'—described with a mosaic of apocalyptic imagery adapted from the OT. It can be seen as a response to the martyrs' growing impatience for the delivery of divine justice at the 5<sup>th</sup> unsealing (6,10). The cosmic phenomena of 6,12-14 describe the dissolution of the 'first heaven and the first earth', in which seven parts of the cosmos disintegrate (earth, sun, moon, stars, heaven, every mountain and island). In 6,15-17, all of human society, represented by seven social classes, tries to hide from the impending anger of God and the Lamb.

<sup>162</sup> Through its association with divine theophany (cf. Ex 19,18), the earthquake is already an eschatological phenomenon in the OT (Is 2,19; Am 8,8; 9,5; Joel 2,10; Hag 2,6). In this context, it appears in the Gospels (Mk 13,8; Mt 24,7) and also in some of the later Jewish apocalypses (*Test. Moses* 10:4; *4Ezra* 5:8; *2Bar* 70:8). In Revelation, the earthquake is almost always used of the divine visitation for eschatological judgment (cf. Rev 6,12; 8,5; 11,19; 16,18; also n. 116). Only at 11,13 does the earthquake occur in a different context.

<sup>163</sup> The darkening of the sun and the turning of the moon to blood are first found together in Joel 3,4 (cf. Acts 2,20) as phenomena that will appear "before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes" (Joel 3,5). The context is exactly the same in Revelation. The likeness of the darkening of the sun to sackcloth is suggested by Is 50,3. Similar images of the sun and moon, as judgment approaches, are found in Is 13,10, Joel 2,10 and 3,15, and are taken up in the NT at Mt 24,29 and Mk 13,24-25.

mountain and island was moved from its place.<sup>164</sup> <sup>15</sup>And the rulers of the earth and the great men and the military officers and the rich men and the strong men and every slave and free-man<sup>165</sup> hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains,<sup>166</sup> <sup>16</sup>and they say to the mountains and to the rocks: Fall on us and hide us from the face of the One seated on

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**164** The stars fall from heaven, the heavens depart and every mountain and island is moved from its place. All this points to the end of the existing structure of the cosmos—the dissolution of “the first heaven and the first earth” (cf. Rev 21,1; Mt 24,35 et par). Here the ‘apocalyptic’ imagery vividly evokes Is 34,4. The disappearance of the mountains and islands is found again at Rev 16,20, the disappearance of heaven and earth at 20,11. As these events cannot be repeated, the later accounts (16,20; 20,11) must be referring to the same ending, confirming that, despite appearances, the vision of the sixth seal is not yet the end, but just an anticipation of the end. The end will certainly come in its time, but only in a way that will allow for the prayers of the saints to be heard (8,1-4) and the people of God to be saved (Rev 7). The way this will happen is described in the rest of the book, following a predetermined order that leads more gradually, and with plenty of warning, to the ‘Day of the Lord’.

**165** These seven classes of men (rulers, great men, military officers, rich men, strong men, every slave and freeman) cover every stratum of society, from highest to lowest, indicating all of human society is intended. Elsewhere in Revelation, similar groups are mentioned as allies of the beast, receiving his mark (13,16) and suffering defeat in the final war (19,18-21).

**166** In Is 2,10.18-21, those hiding from the ‘terror of God’ in caves and among rocks are Israelites who have assimilated with the local people, become rich and worship idols made by their own hands. It is again idolatrous Israel who say to mountains “cover us!” and to the hills “fall on us!” in Hos 10,8, presumably out of shame. Similarly, in this passage, the people who are hiding from the anger of God and the Lamb seem to be fully aware of their sins and rebelliousness against the Godhead, but, recalling the original sin of Adam and Eve, they decide to hide from ‘the face of God’ when judgment approaches (Gn 3,8). They would rather hide and then die in their collapsing world, than plead for mercy and forgiveness. Their impenitence is a sign they have rejected the Lamb and spurned his invitation to repent and be forgiven. Those who reject divine salvation will have to face divine judgment.

the throne and from the anger of the Lamb, <sup>17</sup>for the great day of their anger has come, and who can survive?<sup>167</sup>

*First Interruption (7,1-17): Preparation and Purification of the Faithful* **168**

VII <sup>1</sup>After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth so that no wind should blow over the earth or over the sea, or against any tree.<sup>169</sup> <sup>2</sup>And I saw another angel

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**167** The mention of ‘great day’ (Rev 16,14) and divine ‘anger’ (11,18; 19,15; cf. Ps. 2,5.12) in the rebels’ question proves that they believe they are about to experience the final judgment at the end of history. Then, using words and phrases taken from historical judgment scenes (Joel 2,10-11; Nah 1,5-6; Mal 3,2), the rebels ask whether anyone can survive the catastrophe, expecting a negative reply. This is a curious scenario because, as described in later parts of the text (cf. n. 164), the end does not happen in this way, so suddenly and without warning. There will be more time for repentance after the opening of the 7<sup>th</sup> seal and many will be saved (Rev 7). This premature and very frightening vision of the end seems to depict a situation in which sudden and total destruction appears imminent and inevitable. In modern times, precisely such a situation of sudden and “mutually assured destruction” was generated by the Cold War nuclear arms race. Even by hiding in underground bunkers, it was unlikely that mankind could have survived the aftermath of a nuclear war (‘the nuclear winter’). Mercifully, such a catastrophic ending now seems to have been averted through nuclear-arms limitation treaties, although the weapons still exist, treaties can be broken and more and more countries are circumventing international agreements in order to obtain these weapons.

**168** The passage that follows answers the rebels’ question about ‘who can survive’. It interrupts the narrative between the opening of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> seals and is the first of the four major interruptions in the text (see n.108). It is divided into two visions (Rev 7,1-8; 7,9-17) which link up with the other main interruptions (10,1-11,14; 12,1-15,4; 17,1-19,5). So, it is these other interruptions that give the context and the information to fully understand the two visions in this chapter (7,1-17).

**169** The notion that angels controlled the elements was widespread in second temple Judaism (cf. *Jub.* 2:2; *1En* 18:1-5, 34:1-36:3, 69:22). Here, in addition to the angels of the winds, the angel of fire (Rev 14,8) and of water (16,5) are also mentioned. The angels of the winds stand at the ‘four corners’ of the earth, since the earth was classically conceived of as a square (cf. Is 11,12; Rev 20,8), and restrain the winds from damaging the

coming up from the rising of the sun,<sup>170</sup> holding a seal of the living God,<sup>171</sup> and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels who were permitted to harm the earth and the sea, <sup>3</sup>saying: Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we seal the servants of our God on their foreheads.<sup>172</sup>

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natural environment. If the damage they are restraining is the start of divine judgment, then this vision is describing a pause in the unleashing of the events associated with it. One wonders whether this pause is the earthly equivalent of the 'silence in heaven' (Rev 8,1).

<sup>170</sup> The 'rising of the sun' is an expression for the 'East'. Apart from the sun, many good things are associated with the East (cf. Gn 2,8; Is 41,2; Ez 43,2; Mt 2,1-3). In an eschatological context like the present one, an angel coming from the East evokes the first stage in Ezekiel's prophecy of the return of God's glory to the reconstituted temple in Jerusalem, since this too approaches from the East (Ez 43,1-2.4).

<sup>171</sup> The angel is holding a seal of the living God, most probably in the form of a signet ring or cylinder upon which the name of God and the Lamb is written (cf. Rev 14,1; 22,4). Although common in the OT (Josh 3,10; Hos 2,1; Ps 42,3; 84,3), the appellation 'living God' is used only here in Revelation (but cf. Rev 1,18; 15,7). It is apt in situations where God is about to intervene on behalf of his people and contrasts with the false gods who cannot do anything.

<sup>172</sup> Here is the reason for asking the angels to restrain the harmful winds they control: a group of God's servants must first be sealed. The closest OT parallel is Ez 9,2-4. This sealing not only denotes possession, as in the practice of branding servants and slaves, but also confers protection against the worst of the divine judgments to fall on the earth (Rev 9,4; see n. 213). In brief, the 144,000 are protected in order to serve God as his servants. The text informs us later that the sealing leaves an imprint of the name of God and of the Lamb on their foreheads (cf. Rev 14,1; 22,4). In the context of a heavenly liturgy analogous to that of the second temple, this act evokes the priestly blessing (Nm 6,22-27) which was recited after the incense offering in the daily morning service: "And I will place my name on the Israelites and I will bless them" (Nm 6,27). We can infer from this that the sealing of the 144,000 takes place during the prayerful silence following the incense offering in the heavenly liturgy (Rev 8,1-4; see n. 191), even though it is described prior to this. Although there is no doubt the sealing takes place on earth, there is debate about what it means in practice: does it refer to Baptism, or to the gift of the Holy Spirit or to some other spiritual experience? We take it to refer to a preparatory kind of mystical experience. There is some confirmation for this in the 'wax seal'

<sup>4</sup>And I heard the number of those who were sealed:<sup>173</sup> a hundred and forty-four thousand were sealed<sup>174</sup> from all the tribes of the sons of Israel;<sup>175</sup>

<sup>5</sup>from the tribe of Judah twelve thousand were sealed,  
from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand,

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metaphor adopted independently by St. Teresa of Avila to describe the soul's first experience of union with God's will, as she describes in ch. 2 of the 5<sup>th</sup> Mansion, in her *Interior Castle*.

**173** The author did not see the sealing performed, but just heard the result. The result is evidently more important.

**174** The result is that 144,000 people were sealed. Scholars like to tell us that this number is too tidy to be a statistic, and so they assume it is purely symbolic. However, the text will go on to identify this group of people as an army and armies were indeed composed of round numbers of this magnitude. We should not, therefore, exclude a literal interpretation of this group. The actual number, though, should not unduly concern us, since it is divinely determined: it is the total number of those who are sealed by the angel.

**175** The following list of those who are sealed from the 12 tribes of Israel alludes to the census that God commanded Moses to perform in the desert of Sinai (Nm 1), of all the fighting men in each tribe except Levi, as a preparation for the military organization of their camp (Nm 2). However, there is a much closer correspondence between this passage in Revelation (Rev 7,4-8) and the law for the anointed king in Qumran's 'Temple Scroll' (11QT; col. LVII; 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. BC): "This is the law [that they shall write for him]... [They shall count,] on the day they appoint hi[m] king, the sons of Israel from the age of twenty to sixty years according to their standard (units). He shall install at their head captains of thousands, captains of fifties and captains of tens in all their cities. He shall select from among them one thousand by tribe to be with him: twelve thousand warriors who shall not leave him alone to be captured by the nations. All the selected men whom he has selected shall be men of truth, God-fearers, haters of unjust gain and mighty warriors. They shall be with him always day and night. They shall guard him from anything sinful, and from any foreign nation in order not to be captured by them" (*Complete DSS in English*, 214). The parallels between the 144,000 (12 x 12,000) and the 12,000-strong (12 x 1,000) army of the King of Israel will become even more striking in subsequent visions of this group in Revelation (i.e., Rev 14,1-5; 17,14; 20,7-10). In brief, the sealing of the 144,000 appears to signify their selection as members of a messianic army that accompanies the Messiah (cf. 14,1-5).

from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,  
<sup>6</sup>from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,  
<sup>7</sup>from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,  
<sup>8</sup>from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand were sealed.<sup>176</sup>

<sup>9</sup>After this I looked and behold, a vast multitude which no one was able to number, from all nations and tribes and races and tongues,<sup>177</sup> clothed in

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<sup>176</sup> With the conquest and enforced exile of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, at least nine or ten of the tribes in this list ceased to exist as a separate entity (all except Judah, Levi and possibly Benjamin). Nevertheless, the return of the ten tribes and the reunion of all Israel were traditional elements in the eschatological hope of those tribes that remained (Is 11,11-16; 27,12-13; Jer 31,7-9; Ez 37,15-23; Sir 36,11; Tob 13,13; 2Bar 78:5-7; *Test. Joseph* 19:4) and there is also evidence in ancient sources that the ten tribes would return specifically in order to take part in the messianic war (cf. Is 11,14; 1QM; 4Ezra 13:39-50; *Sib. Or.* 2:170-76). The messianic army of 144,000 appears to respond to this expectation, although in the NT the 12 tribes of Israel are identified with the Church (cf. Mt 19,28; Rom 2,29; Gal 3,29; 6,15; Phil 3,3; Jas 1,1). So, the 144,000 are not the Church as such, but they are selected from the Church, and sealed, for a particular mission on earth. The list of tribes is slightly unusual in that Dan has been left out and, in its place, Manasseh is included, even though it is only a branch of the tribe of Joseph, which is also mentioned. The particular order of tribes is original and does not appear to follow any of the known lists. Judah appears first, probably because it is the tribe of the Messiah (cf. Gn 49,9-10), who is called the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev 5,5).

<sup>177</sup> The second vision starts here. Though often confused, there are at least three features showing how this multitude (Rev 7,9-17) differs from the group of 144,000 described in the last vision (7,1-8): (1) the people in this vision are innumerable, (2) they are in heaven and (3) they have been martyred in the 'great tribulation'. In contrast, the 144,000 are numbered

white robes<sup>178</sup> and with palms in their hands,<sup>179</sup> standing before the throne and before the Lamb,<sup>10</sup> and they cry out with a great sound saying:

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and countable, they are still on earth and they are protected from harm (which includes martyrdom). The sheer vastness of the multitude in heaven recalls the divine promise that Abraham's descendants would grow to an immense number (Gn 15,5; 22,7), implying that this multitude should be seen as the bulk of Abraham's descendants or, in other words, as the totality of the 12 tribes of Israel. In a NT context, this is another way of describing the Church (cf. Gal 3,7.14.16.18.29; Rom 4,16-17). As with those who were bought with the blood of the Lamb from every tribe, tongue, race and nation (Rev 5,9), so also this multitude come from all nations, tribes, races and tongues. These observations help to clarify the relationship between the multitude in this vision (7,9-17) and the 144,000 in the last vision (7,1-8): together they form a large part of the Universal Church, i.e., Church triumphant in heaven (vast multitude) and Church militant on earth (144,000). The 144,000 have been selected from the entire multitude and protected from martyrdom, in order to fulfill a particular mission on earth.

<sup>178</sup> The white robes identify this multitude of martyrs in heaven with the martyrs under the altar, who were impatient for vindication in the divine judgment (6,9-11). They were given a white robe and told to wait 'a little longer' until 'their fellow servants and brothers are killed like they themselves' (6,11). This vision describes the fulfilment of that terrible expectation, as a result of the 'great tribulation' (see n. 184). These two visions cannot be understood as simultaneous, as some claim, because the mood differs: it changes from one of impatient longing in 6,9-11 to one of joyful celebration in 7,9-17.

<sup>179</sup> In Maccabean and Roman times, waving palm branches signified victory over an enemy (1Macc 13,51; 2Macc 10,7), in this case the persecutor (cf. Rev 15,2), but to an Israelite they would also evoke the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, or Sukkot, (e.g., Lev 23,39-43; Ps 118,15-29; Neh 8,15; 2Macc 10,7), when palm branches were 'waved', 'hosannas' were sung, the people of Israel lived in shelters for seven days, and on the last 'great day' 'living' water was ceremoniously poured (cf. Jn 7,37-39). This feast had a fourfold significance: (1) it was primarily an autumnal feast celebrating the gathering of the produce from "the threshing floor and the winepress" (Ex 23,16; Dt 16,13); (2) it was a commemoration of God's presence and protection during the Israelites' journey through the desert from Egypt to the promised land, a time when they used to live in tents. (3) according to the prophet Zechariah, the



Salvation is from our God, the One seated on the throne,  
and from the Lamb!<sup>180</sup>

<sup>11</sup>And all the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures,<sup>181</sup> and fell down before the throne on their faces and worshipped God <sup>12</sup>saying:

Amen, the praise and the glory and the wisdom and the thanks  
and the honour and the power and the strength  
be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.<sup>182</sup>

<sup>13</sup>And one of the elders responded, saying to me:<sup>183</sup> These clothed in white robes, who are they and where did they come from? <sup>14</sup>And I said to him: My Lord, you know. And he said to me: These are the ones coming from the great tribulation,<sup>184</sup> and they have washed their robes and bleached

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celebration of this feast will express the joy of the eschatological presence of God (Zech 14,16-19). (4) the procedure of this feast was adopted by the Maccabees to re-consecrate the temple after its profanation in the days of the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes (2Macc 10,6; 1,9). All of these biblical associations are reflected in the celebration described in this passage, as later visions will show.

<sup>180</sup> This acclamation of the salvation of God and of the Lamb not only echoes, but also reveals the fulfilment of the plea in Ps 118,25 which says "O Lord grant salvation, O Lord bring success". The singing of this verse did indeed have a special place in the liturgical celebration of the feast of Tabernacles when it was accompanied by the waving of palms, just as it is represented in this vision.

<sup>181</sup> The throne is surrounded by three concentric circles, the innermost being the four living creatures, then the elders, and then the angels (cf. Rev 5,5).

<sup>182</sup> In wording, this doxology to God is very similar to the doxology to the Lamb in 5,12.

<sup>183</sup> As in 5,5, one of the elders provides essential commentary on the vision (for similar dialogue see Ez 37,3-4; Zech 4,2.5). It is essential because it helps to identify the crowd and the temporal orientation of this vision.

<sup>184</sup> As noted above (n. 178), this vision represents the fulfilment of the instruction to the martyrs under the altar (Rev 6,9-11): here their fellow servants and brothers are seen in heaven 'after being killed like they were' (6,11). Recalling Daniel's end-time prophecy of a tribulation more severe



them in the blood of the Lamb.<sup>185</sup> <sup>15</sup>Therefore they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night in his Sanctuary,<sup>186</sup> and the One seated

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than ever before (Dn 12,1; cf. Mt 24,21; Mk 13,19), the event which led to their deaths is called “the great tribulation” (ἡ θλίψις ἡ μεγάλη), which refers to an intensification of persecution against the faithful that is expected to precede the eschatological consummation of God’s plan (cf. “final Passover” in CCC 677). The use of the definite article in ‘the great tribulation’ implies that the readers had been informed about it as a future event and indeed, by the first century, it had already become a fixed element of the traditional eschatological expectation (*Test. Moses* 8:1; *Jub.* 23:11-21; *4Ezra* 13:16-19; *2Bar* 27:1-15; Mt 24,6-21, esp. 21; 1Cor 7,26; Rev 3,21; *Didache* 16:4-5; *Hermas Vis.* 2.2.7). The relation of this vision to the martyrs under the altar (Rev 6,9-11) confirms that (1) the crowd is composed entirely of martyrs (since they have been killed) and (2) this is a prophetic vision of the faithful at or near the time of the eschatological consummation (since the martyrs were told to await this event before their vindication at the final judgment could be executed).

<sup>185</sup> By passing through the great tribulation, these martyrs are able to wash and bleach their robes (στολή) in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7,14). After being washed and bleached, the robes of the martyrs will then be clean and bright, which exactly describes the fine linen of the Bride (19,8), thus identifying these martyrs with the Bride of the Lamb, and their robes (στολή) with her fine linen. Finally, we are told that the fine linen of the Bride represents the righteous work of the saints (19,8). It is implied that the deeds of these martyrs were not pure and perfect, but rather stained with self-love (cf. 3,2-5; cf. 1Jn 1,7; Heb 9,24). Nevertheless, these witnesses of Jesus Christ have persevered along the way of perfection—continually washing their robes in the blood of the Lamb—before attaining the greatest perfection by means of their martyrdom—bleaching their robes in the blood of the Lamb. Only those who have washed their robes will be able to enter the Holy City (Rev 22,14).

<sup>186</sup> Because they have purified themselves by washing their robes, the martyrs are now fit to worship God continually in his Sanctuary (ναός)—a term recalling the most sacred part of the ancient temple in Jerusalem which contained the Ark of the Covenant, the incense altar and the *menorah* and only the priests were allowed to enter. The area around God’s throne in heaven therefore corresponds to the ancient Sanctuary (see nn. 34,109) and the martyrs correspond to an order of priests (cf. 1,6; 5,10; 22,6) serving in the liturgical worship (see n. 350). As members of the priesthood serving in the Sanctuary, mention of purification through

on the throne will spread his tent over them.<sup>187</sup> <sup>16</sup>They shall hunger no longer, nor shall they thirst any more, neither shall the sun strike them, nor any burning heat, <sup>17</sup>because the Lamb at the centre of the throne will shepherd them and lead them on to fountains of Waters of Life,<sup>188</sup>

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washing cannot fail to evoke the ‘bronze sea’—a huge bronze basin filled with water—in the outer court of the ancient temple, where the priests washed and purified themselves when serving there. Forming the pavement of the heavenly Sanctuary (4,6) and situated between the earth and the heavenly Sanctuary, the glassy sea (4,6) appears to have the same function as the bronze sea in the ancient temple: that of purifying those martyrs and saints who enter the heavenly Sanctuary and participate in its liturgy (see n. 118). This sea will certainly have received the blood of the Lamb, either from the time of his own Ascension to heaven, or from a continual oozing from his wounds (cf. 5,6).

<sup>187</sup> God will spread his tent over them (from the verb σκηνοῦν). The verb originally meant to dwell in a temporary dwelling or tent (σκηνή), but later dropped its temporary character. In the NT, it is found only in the writings of John (Jn 1,14; Rev 7,15; 12,12; 13,6; 21,3) where it refers uniquely to the dwelling and protective presence of God among his people (השכיח). Since this is precisely the theme that is celebrated at the Feast of Tabernacles, the use of this verb can be added to the other allusions to this feast in 7,9-17. On a general level, it evokes God’s presence among his people during the exodus from Egypt, later in the temple, and finally at the eschatological consummation of God’s plan (Ez 37,21-28; esp. v. 27; cf. Rev 21,3-4). In line with later prophecies (Zech 2,10-11; 14,16-19), this passage has people from all nations sharing in this blessing.

<sup>188</sup> The blissful state of the multitude is then described in terms taken from Is 49,10. This is the longest allusion to the OT in Revelation and is typical of the way the author adapts the OT to the new messianic setting. The shepherd is no longer God (cf. Is 40,11; Ps 23,1,3; 80,1), but the Lamb, and the water to which he leads his flock is not just water, but ‘Waters of Life’ (or ‘living water’)—a phrase which is typical of John (cf. Jn 4,14; 7,38; Rev 21,6; 22,1.17; see n. 481). These small modifications give the passage the character of a targumic paraphrase. It should come as no surprise that the Lamb is also the shepherd, because, as messianic leader (Rev 5,5), several passages of OT prophecy ascribe this task to him (Is 49,1; Mic 5,2-5; Ez 37,24). In the NT and later, Jesus is often described as the shepherd of God’s flock (e.g., Jn 10,1-16; Heb 13,20; 1Pet 2,25). In Revelation, also, the Messiah is the divine shepherd, but this is the only place in the text

and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.<sup>189</sup>

*Baseline Prophetic Narrative resumed*

*– the Seventh Seal and the Sounding of the first Six Trumpets*

VIII <sup>1</sup>And when he opened the seventh seal,<sup>190</sup> there was a silence in

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where he shepherds the faithful. In every other occurrence of this verb (Rev 2,27; 12,5; 19,15), it refers to his rule over the nations.

<sup>189</sup> This final expression is drawn from the eschatological promises in Is 25,8 and is repeated in a very similar passage at the end of the text (Rev 21,3-4). It brings to an end the interruption which responded to the question ‘who can survive the anger of God and the Lamb’ (6,17), with a vision of two distinct groups of the people of God, one celebrating God’s salvation and presence in the heavenly Sanctuary, after being martyred during the period of eschatological tribulation (7,9-17), and the other of an army of 144,000 people on earth who, during the same period, are divinely protected from plagues and persecution (7,1-8; 9,4; see n. 213).

<sup>190</sup> The text now returns to the series of seven seals, to reveal the Lamb opening the 7<sup>th</sup> and last seal of the scroll. This is an important stage, because only at this point, and not before, is he able to open the scroll to examine and modify its contents. Before going any further, the purpose of this scroll must be considered more thoroughly. It has already been noted that its seven seals imply a role in judgment (see n.124). The worthiness required of the one who is to open the scroll (5,2-5.9), and the universal praise given to him on this account (5,9-14), all point to an extremely important role for the scroll and the one who now possesses it. There is only one scroll in the possession of the Lamb that has such an important role: the Scroll of Life from the foundation of the world (13,8; 17,8)—a register of the names of all the people who have ever lived (cf. Ex 32,32-33; Is 4,3; Dt 29,20; Ps 69,29; Dn 12,1; Mal 3,16-18; Lk 10,20; Phil 4,3; Heb 12,23, also 1En 47:3; Jub. 19:9; 30:20,22). The Scroll of Life has a vital role at the final judgment: those whose names are inscribed in it will live eternally and the rest will be condemned to eternal perdition (Rev 20,12.15; 21,27). The act of final judgment therefore entails erasing names from this scroll, which the Lamb has authority to do (3,5; cf. 1En 108:3). So, from this moment—the moment he is able to open the scroll—the Lamb is also able to erase any name he chooses from those inscribed within. The process of universal and final judgment is about to begin, as the Day of Atonement is coming to an end. Foreshadowing this process is the annual Jewish New Year tradition, when the whole world is brought

heaven for about half-an-hour.<sup>191</sup>

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before the Lord to be judged for the coming year. Scrolls are said to be opened in heaven, and trumpets are blown. The fate of the few who are very good or very bad is sealed, but for the vast majority the decision as to whether they will live or die is postponed for 10 days, until the end of the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), to take account of their prayers and penitence. For a local and limited parallel, see n. 54 (Rev 2,10); for further discussion on the analogy with the Jewish New Year Tradition, see [link 16](#).

<sup>191</sup> The breaking of the 6<sup>th</sup> seal anticipated a vision of wrathful judgment following the opening of the 7<sup>th</sup> seal. Instead, there is an anti-climax: a half-hour silence in heaven. In the OT, silence in heaven or on earth is indicative of imminent theophany and divine judgment (e.g., Is 41,1; Ps 76,8-10; Job 4,16; Hab 2,20; Zech 2,17). That sense would certainly suit the context, but it is not the whole story. This silence is full of activity: (1) the text states that this is the time for the incense offering in the heavenly liturgy and, as in the ancient temple, this was also the time for communal prayer (Rev 8,3-4; Ps 141,1-2; Jdt 9,1; Lk 1,10). With the sounding of a loud gong (*m.Tamid* 5:6; 3:8), which could be heard as far as Jericho, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and its surroundings were invited to prayer, and one can suppose that, for a brief period at least, silence fell on the city. In the Jewish tradition, it is claimed that at this time there was also silence in heaven so that the Almighty could hear the prayers of his people (*b.T. Hagigah* 12b; *b.T. Avodah Zarah* 3b). A similar explanation applies to the silence in this context. (2) The prayers of the saints rise with the smoke of the incense (Rev 8,3) and the only prayer mentioned in the text up to this point is the plea of the martyrs for vindication and the delivery of divine judgment (6,9-11). Since the initial response to this prayer is the sealing of the 144,000, one would expect this response to occur soon after the incense and prayers are offered up, here, during the period of silence following the opening of the 7<sup>th</sup> seal. This is confirmed by analogy with the order of the daily service in the ancient temple: the priestly blessing, to which the sealing of the 144,000 corresponds, does indeed occur straight after the incense offering (*m.Tamid* 6:3-7:2; see n. 172). This re-ordering would also unite the restraining of the destructive winds (Rev 7,1-3) with the silence in heaven (8,1-4). (3) After opening the final seal, the Lamb is able to open the scroll and examine its contents. At this point, he would want to communicate the relevant content to the churches by sending his angel to his servant John, as described in Rev 10 (cf. Rev 1,1; 22,6.16). The period of silence would therefore be a fitting moment to prepare the 'little scroll' for transmission to John (10,8-11; see n. 237 for how this could be done).

<sup>2</sup>And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.<sup>192</sup> <sup>3</sup>And another angel<sup>193</sup> came and stood on the altar;

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It would appear, then, that the half-hour silence is packed with preparations for the delivery of divine justice. Some have suggested that it lasts half-an-hour because this was the actual duration of incense offering in the Jerusalem temple. Whatever the precise explanation, half-an-hour suggests a relatively long pause (1/48<sup>th</sup> of the total duration of the Day of Atonement). One final question concerns the theological import of a silence in heaven: how would it be felt on earth? One assumes that it would generate a period of prayer and reflection among the faithful—a period of awe and silent contemplation—even more profound than in Jerusalem, at the sound of the gong, in second temple times. One wonders whether the “silence in heaven” would not also bring a temporary halt to spiritual communication between heaven and earth, producing a feeling of abandonment and isolation among the faithful. If this is so, it could be interpreted as a purificatory “dark night” for the Church: an ideal time to focus on the “Word of God and the Witness of Jesus”, given to John and recorded in the Book of Revelation.

<sup>192</sup> The seven angels who stand before God (cf. Lk 1,19) are the seven archangels, also called angels of the presence (Tob 12,15; Jub. 1,27.29; 2,1), angels of the Face (Is 63,9) or chief princes (4Q403.1.1). In *1En* 20:1-8 they are named: Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Sariel (Saraqael), Gabriel, Remiel. They have a very high position in the hierarchy of angels, indicating that their role here is of great importance. They can be identified with other groups of seven angelic beings mentioned in the text (see n. 35). For the significance of the trumpets, see n. 201.

<sup>193</sup> This is ‘another’ angel, not one of the seven trumpet-angels, but probably the angel ‘in charge of the fire’ (Rev 14,18; n. 194). In the heavenly liturgy, the functions of the angels correspond to those of the priests in the liturgy of the ancient temple—one angel performs the offering of incense (8,3), angels sound the trumpets (8,2.6), pour the libations (16,1) and prostrate themselves before the throne (7,11-12). Just as the ‘one like a son of man’ represents the high priest (see n. 26), so the angels represent his priestly colleagues in the heavenly liturgy. However, the role of the angels in Revelation is certainly not limited to the liturgical ministry: they also transmit messages and warnings (e.g., 2,1; 14,6-11), revelations and interpretations (17,1.7; 21,9); they control the elements and forces of nature (7,1; 9,11; 14,18-19; 16,5) and fight in the wars of God (12,7; 19,14; 20,1). In spite of all this, they are the fellow-servants of the

he had a golden censer<sup>194</sup> and much incense was given to him to offer,<sup>195</sup> on the golden altar before the throne,<sup>196</sup> with the prayers of all the saints. <sup>4</sup>And the smoke of the incense went up with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God.<sup>197</sup>

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witnesses of Jesus, of the prophets and of all those who take to heart the words of Revelation (19,10; 22,9).

<sup>194</sup> The word used here for censer (λιβανωτός) actually means frankincense, but the adjective 'golden' shows that an incense carrier or censer is intended. In the Jerusalem temple, the censer with incense would be accompanied by a fire pan containing burning coals from the outer altar, on which a fire was always kept alight (Lev 6,2.5.6). At the time of the incense offering, these coals were taken into the Sanctuary and placed upon the incense altar, and then the incense was sprinkled over them (*m.Tamid* 5:4–6:3). As the text does not mention a fire pan of burning coals, we must suppose that the situation in heaven is reversed and that the fire is always burning on the incense altar, and not on the outer altar as in the second temple (which will be identified in due course, see n. 362). Tending the perpetual fire on the incense altar would then be the function of the angel in charge of the fire (Rev 14,18; cf. Is 6,6; Ez 10,2).

<sup>195</sup> Since each of the 24 elders had a bowl full of this incense (Rev 5,8), a large amount of incense is involved. On another level, it is of interest that *much* incense was given to this angel to offer, for in Rite of Atonement on the annual *Yom Kippur* in the second temple, the high priest was given much more incense to offer than usual, in order to fill the inner chamber—the Holy of holies—with smoke 'lest he may die' (Lev 16,12-13; cf. *m.Yoma* 4:4-5). Although this confirms that the heavenly liturgy is a liturgy of Atonement, it is odd that the angel offering the incense is just 'another angel', and not the one representing the high priest (see n. 26). This would imply that the angel representing the high priest is occupied with a different function (see n. 190).

<sup>196</sup> This golden altar is the same as the one seen after the opening of the fifth seal (Rev 6,9), with the souls of the martyrs beneath it. Explicit here is the correspondence between this altar and the altar of incense, covered with gold, which Moses commissioned and then placed inside the Tent (Ex 30,1-10; 37,25-28). Later, in the temple, this altar was situated inside the Sanctuary, in front of the veil in the 'Holy Place'. In this vision, it is 'before the throne', because there is no longer a veil dividing the heavenly Sanctuary as there was in its earthly counterpart (see n. 113).

<sup>197</sup> The incense has already been identified with the prayers of the saints (Rev 5,8). Here the incense is offered *with* the prayers of the saints (8,3)

<sup>5</sup>And the angel took the censer and filled it from the fire of the altar<sup>198</sup> and

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and its smoke rises *with* these prayers (8,4). One imagines the incense as a preserved form of the unanswered prayers of the saints throughout history, up to the present day. The burning and breakdown of the incense would then release these prayers, allowing them to rise as smoke before the throne, accompanied by the prayers of the faithful on earth at this time (cf. Ps 141,1-2). The association of incense with the prayers of the people of God derives from the ancient temple liturgy, during which the incense offering was a time of communal prayer (cf. Jdt 9,1; Lk 1,10).

<sup>198</sup> The casting of fire from the incense altar in heaven on to the earth brings a dramatic and decisive end to the silence in heaven. On the analogy of the daily service in the second temple, this action corresponds to the moment when the flesh and cereal offerings were thrown on to the fire of the outer altar and burnt entirely (*m.Tamid* 7:3; 3:1; 4:3). Conversely, in the heavenly liturgy, the fire is thrown on to the offerings. This difference can be explained by the fact, noted above, that in the heavenly Sanctuary fire is kept burning on the incense altar (see n. 194), and fire from this altar is used to ignite the offerings (in the earthly temple, fire was kept alight on the outer altar and was taken inside the Sanctuary to burn the incense). It follows that the motive for throwing fire on to the earth is to kindle the offerings. Taking the heavenly fire to be the 'Holy Spirit' and the offerings as the faithful on earth who offer themselves "as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God" (Rom 12,1), the action of throwing heavenly fire on to the earth can be understood as a 'new Pentecost'. This highly significant act can be expected to strengthen the witness of the faithful and prepare them to face martyrdom, whenever necessary. There are also good reasons to see this action as the start of the period of 1,260 days, signaled by the start of the mission of the two witnesses (cf. Rev 11,2) and the beginning of the exodus of the 144,000 (cf. 12,6). For a presentation of these reasons, please see [link 17](#). Having identified the primary purpose of the divine fire, purifying and intensifying the mission and service of the faithful (the kindling of the offerings), it would be surprising if this fire did not also have other effects. This is also suggested by comparison with the vision in Ez 10,1-7, where an angel takes burning coals from under the divine throne-chariot as it departed from the first temple, prior to the judgment on Jerusalem and the exile of God's people in 586 BC. Given that the coals were the means of destructive judgment on Jerusalem, the tossing of heavenly fire in Rev 8,1, by analogy, signifies the onset of the delivery of divine justice and judgment on earth.



threw it to the earth,<sup>199</sup> and there were thunders and noises and lightnings and an earthquake.<sup>200</sup> <sup>6</sup>And the seven angels with the seven trumpets prepared themselves to blow.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> As the destination of the fire, the earth presents itself as the place that corresponds to the outer altar in the ancient temple. The precise details of this correspondence will become apparent later (see n. 362).

<sup>200</sup> See n. 116.

<sup>201</sup> This is a resumption of 8,2. In the daily service of the ancient temple, after the offerings were thrown on to the altar to be burnt, two silver trumpets were sounded, the wine libations were poured and psalms were sung (*m.Tamid* 7:3). These liturgical actions represented the terminus and culmination of the daily service in the ancient temple—the ‘presentation of the offerings before God’. So, following the incense offering and the firing of the offerings in the text (Rev 8,1-5), the seven trumpets strongly evoke this climactic part of the temple service and remind us that here, in ch. 8, we are entering the concluding part of the heavenly liturgy. However, apart from this daily liturgical function, trumpets had several other uses in the OT that are important here. Firstly, they were sounded at the New Year convocation, which is still regarded as a time of repentance, judgment and opening of scrolls, all of which are evoked by the present context (Nm 29,1-6; see n. 190). Secondly, in ancient Israel, trumpets were sounded to rally and direct the people of God during battle. This military significance of the trumpets would certainly fit into the context of the ‘war in heaven’ that is described in chapter 12 (Rev 12,7-9) and is also suggested by the effects of the trumpet blasts: i.e., falling angels (demons) and other heavenly bodies (8,7.8.10.12; 9,1). From this point of view, the sounding of the trumpets signals to the armies of God’s people that a war is taking place in heaven, for which they are called to assemble and participate. Finally, trumpets are associated with the ‘end of the world’, which is particularly appropriate for the 7<sup>th</sup> and last trumpet blast (Rev 11,14-18; Is 27,13; Zech 9,14; Joel 2,1; Zeph 1,16; 4Ezra 6,23; 1Thess 4,16; Mt 24,31; 1Cor 15,52; *Didache* 16:6). In this context, the trumpets are about to announce a series of plagues that will strike the earth and its natural environment. These plagues certainly allude to some of the plagues of Egypt (Ex 7–11), but only very loosely and in no recognizable order. Despite the considerable differences, it would appear that the author wishes us to read the trumpet-plagues as part of an exodus narrative that is analogous to the biblical Exodus, and to interpret them theologically in the same way as the plagues of Egypt, i.e., as the catalyst of a moral and also physical separation between the Israelites and the Egyptians. For the Israelites, who knew the divine will, the plagues



<sup>7</sup>The first one blew, <sup>202</sup> and there was hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was thrown to the earth; and a third of the earth was burnt up and a third of the trees were burnt up and every green herb was burnt up. <sup>203</sup>

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helped their faith and brought them to glorify God, but for the majority of the Egyptians they were a cause of hardening and impenitence. By analogy, for the faithful in John's vision, the trumpet-plagues are signs of God's greatness and glory, while for the unbelievers they lead to further alienation and impenitence. In brief, the trumpet-plagues can be expected to increase the separation between the believers and the unbelievers.

<sup>202</sup> The first four trumpets are of the same kind: the trumpet is sounded, something falls 'ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ' (Rev 8,10)—from the 'sky' (from a physical point of view), or from 'heaven' (from a spiritual point of view)—and a third of the natural environment is affected in some way, starting with the land, then the sea, then the fresh water and finally the luminaries (in this last case nothing falls from heaven in order to cause the described effect). The final three trumpets follow a more elaborate pattern and are pre-announced as a series of three 'woes'. The language and imagery of the trumpet-plagues can therefore be interpreted in two ways: on the physical level, the falling of celestial objects (hail, mountains or stars) represents the fragmentation and dissolution of the 'first heaven' described after the opening of the sixth seal (6,12-17, esp. 13), reported now in a series of stages. On the spiritual level, the imagery suggests the effects of the 'war in heaven' between opposing armies of angels (Rev 12,7-9; cf. Is 34,5) and, therefore, an overlap between this chapter (Rev 8) and chapter 12 (see [link 17](#)). These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive and their close association points to a synchronous, even causal, relationship. Stated simply, the physical collapse of the 'first heaven' (Rev 6,12-17) can be understood as the direct consequence, and outward visible sign, of the spiritual conflict in heaven (12,7-9). The full significance of the war in heaven will be considered in the appropriate place (n. 286). Whereas the detrimental effect of opening the 4<sup>th</sup> seal was limited to a quarter of the targeted element, the proportion affected by the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> trumpet-plagues rises to a third (cf. Rev 12,4).

<sup>203</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> trumpet-plague recalls the 7<sup>th</sup> plague of Egypt: the hail and fire that destroy plants and trees (Ex 9,24-25; Wis 16,16-19). The interpretation of the 'hail and fire mixed with blood' is ambiguous, as explained above (n. 202). The context indicates both a spiritual and a physical dimension, related as cause and effect, i.e., the angelic 'war in heaven' described in Rev 12,7-9 (spiritual conflict) leads to the dissolution of the 'first heaven' as described in Rev 6,12-17 (physical manifestations). The

<sup>8</sup>And the second angel blew, and *something* like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea; and a third of the sea became blood, <sup>9</sup>and a third of the creatures in the sea that have souls died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.<sup>204</sup>

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destructive 'hail and fire mixed with blood', which can be understood physically as lightning that ignites huge forest fires and severe hailstorms causing bloodshed, are therefore the earliest visible manifestations of the war between the rival angelic hosts in heaven (Rev 12,7-9). Even though the text states that every green herb is burned, consistency can be maintained by taking this to mean that every green herb is burnt up within the area affected, i.e., within the third of the earth that is actually burnt up. Whereas in former times it would have been difficult to imagine a plague affecting the natural environment to this degree, it requires little effort nowadays to interpret this plague literally as the consumption of natural forests by fire, arising from both natural and anthropogenic causes, and intensified by climate change. When a third of the forests have been lost over a short period (i.e., before they can re-grow), we can and should conclude that the first trumpet has sounded.

<sup>204</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> trumpet recalls the plague that turned the Nile into blood and all the fish perished (Ex 7,20-21). There, the plague was caused by the rod of Moses striking the river Nile; here, it is caused by something like a great mountain, burning with fire, falling into the sea. As before, both physical and spiritual interpretations should be considered. On the physical plane, and as an element of the eschatological transformation of creation through the dissolution of the 'first heaven' (Rev 6,12-14, see n. 164), the great mountain on fire could be a large asteroid or comet, which crashes into the sea and generates a tsunami so large that it sinks shipping and destroys offshore oil rigs. Looking like blood, the resulting crude-oil spills then pollute the oceans and kill off large populations of sea life. Sadly, there is nothing fantastic or unreal about this, which is why a number of astronomers are dedicated to identifying asteroids and tracking their orbits. Though very rare, catastrophic asteroid impacts have occurred in the past, causing widespread destruction and even extinction of life-forms (e.g., the disappearance of the dinosaurs 60 million years ago). As with the first trumpet-plague, the spiritual interpretation links this plague to the downfall of a third of the angels during the war in heaven (12,3.7). In this context, the great mountain burning with fire can also be interpreted as a 'fallen angel' (a demon) wreaking havoc on the sea, since angels are stars and stars are like burning mountains (cf. 1En 18:13; 21:6; Rev 9,1). The unavoidable inference is that the 'war in heaven' will result in the impact

<sup>10</sup>And the third angel blew, and a great star fell out of heaven burning as a torch and it fell on to a third of the rivers and on to the springs of water. <sup>11</sup>And the name of the star is called Wormwood, and a third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the waters because they were made bitter.<sup>205</sup>

<sup>12</sup>And the fourth angel blew, and a third of the sun was struck and a third of the moon and a third of the stars, so that the third part of them

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of a heavenly body on the sea, causing maritime destruction and marine contamination on a large scale.

<sup>205</sup> The 3rd plague has no parallel among the plagues of Egypt, though in the book of Jeremiah, eating wormwood is a divine punishment for those who have gone astray (Jer 9,14; 23,15). Wormwood is a herb (also called 'absinthe') whose sap is extremely bitter, so the star named 'Wormwood' in this verse turns fresh-water bitter and poisonous, and many people die from drinking the affected water. The same interpretive problem confronts us here, as with the 1st and 2nd trumpets: does the star called 'Wormwood' refer physically to a heavenly body (a star), spiritually to a fallen angel (a demon), or both, since stars were the visible symbols of angels (cf. Rev 1,20)? Favouring the spiritual interpretation, here, is the improbability that the physical impact of a single heavenly body could selectively poison the fresh water sources over an area as great as a third of the earth. On the spiritual level, one can readily interpret this plague nowadays as toxic fresh-water pollution caused by accidental, or incidental, industrial spillage, attributable to the havoc and chaos generated by a fallen angel, or demon. However, it would be remiss not to mention a physical interpretation that links the name 'Wormwood' to the energy source of a star (nuclear fission) and to a catastrophic historical precedent. In Russian, the herb wormwood is called 'Chernobyl', which was the name of the nuclear power plant that exploded in 1986, in Ukraine, causing radioactive contamination over large areas of Ukraine, Belarus, Europe and Scandinavia. It remains the world's worst nuclear disaster to date and it caused widespread death and disease from radioactive fallout, radioactive rainfall and the resulting fresh and groundwater contamination. Mercifully, this did not affect a third of the earth, but the affected areas will remain radioactive for centuries, and would be vastly expanded if there were similar incidents elsewhere (e.g., Fukushima, Japan, 2011). As the first and worst to date, Chernobyl, or Wormwood, is the prototype and eponym for nuclear catastrophes of this kind.

was darkened and the day did not give a third of its brightness, and likewise the night.<sup>206</sup>

<sup>13</sup>And I saw and I heard an eagle [angel] flying in mid-heaven,<sup>207</sup> saying with a loud voice: Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth from the remaining trumpet-blasts of the three angels about to blow!<sup>208</sup>

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**206** With the 4<sup>th</sup> trumpet, nothing falls from heaven to earth, because this plague affects the celestial bodies themselves, reducing by a third the light given out by the sun, the moon and the stars. It recalls the three-day darkness caused by the 9<sup>th</sup> plague of Egypt (Ex 10,21-23). In the OT, darkness is a common accompaniment of judgment (Is 13,10; Am 5,8; Joel 2,2) and also in the NT (Mk 13,24). Nowadays, one cannot avoid interpreting this plague as atmospheric pollution caused by natural (i.e., volcanic) or industrial particles substantially reducing the transmission of light from the heavenly bodies. A newcomer to the list is the fanciful ‘stratospheric sun-dimming technology’ of ‘solar geoengineering research’.

**207** There are good reasons for thinking that there has been a scribal error here. It is difficult to explain why an eagle should be the herald of what follows, while everywhere else the heralds are angels. This is especially true for a herald flying in mid-heaven, as the only other place the author sees a herald flying in midheaven (Rev 14,6), he describes it as “another angel”, and not ‘another eagle’. It is quite possible that, in an early manuscript, ‘eagle’ (ἄετός) was mistakenly copied instead of ‘angel’ (ἄγγελος), by the omission of the two *gammas* and the misreading of the *lambda* for a *tau*. In fact, in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, Andreas of Caesarea (in Cappadocia) replaced ‘eagle’ by ‘angel’ in his commentary on Revelation and this correction was then introduced into the family of manuscripts derived from it (M<sup>A</sup>). Mid-heaven is the place which the sun reaches at midday, so a herald proclaiming from mid-heaven would be seen and heard by all.

**208** The announcement warns of the intensification of the severity of the plagues following each of the last three trumpet blasts—they will now be called ‘Woes’. It is addressed to “the inhabitants of the earth” which is a recurrent formula in the text for the unredeemed people of the world (3,10; 6,10; 8,13; 11,10; 13,8.14; 14,6; 17,8; n.155). Whereas the first four plagues have so far affected only the natural environment, from now on they will also have a direct impact on human beings. In contrast to the first four plagues, these are unambiguously caused by ‘falling’ or ‘fallen’ angels, and not by natural phenomena. These angels serve Satan and are

IX      <sup>1</sup>And the fifth angel blew, and I saw<sup>209</sup> a star which had fallen from heaven to the earth,<sup>210</sup> and the key of the shaft of the Abyss was given to

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responsible for the terror, confusion and destruction on earth. God does not cause or command the terror and destruction, but gradually releases his control over these rebellious angels prior to the final judgment. As the prophecy proceeds towards the conclusive intervention of God, evil is granted greater freedom to act openly and shamelessly. For the judgment to be universal and eternal, everything that is hidden must be revealed: Satan and his angels, and their so-called ‘mystery of iniquity’ are an important part of this cosmic unveiling prior to judgment.

<sup>209</sup> While the author described the first four trumpet-plagues in six verses (8,7-12), the next two plagues need 21 verses (9,1-21). The visions he saw of these plagues are quite complex and full of similes, indicating that he struggled to describe the strange things he saw by comparing them with familiar creatures and objects. This is an important point for the interpretation of these visions: the author is not inventing scenes of torment, nor is he describing something known to him from the past. He gives the impression that he is seeing prophetic visions that will remain an enigma, even to himself, until the time of their future fulfilment. But why did the author describe them in such vivid detail? Was he trying to scare the ‘inhabitants of the earth’, even though they are not the addressees of this book? It is more likely that he foresees the complete fulfilment of their literal sense as a boost for the faith of the believers, in the same way as the plagues of Egypt were seen by the Israelites as signs of God’s redeeming action on their behalf (see n. 201).

<sup>210</sup> The star which fell after the 5<sup>th</sup> trumpet blew is described here as a person and is clearly a ‘fallen’ angel—a term reserved for the rebellious angels (demons) that serve the forces of evil (cf. *1En* 86:1,3; 88:1). This agrees with the identification of the agents of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> trumpet-plagues (burning mountain, star) as angels that are seen falling from heaven to earth. In this case, however, the star had already fallen by the time the author saw him, and perhaps for this reason the personification of the star has gone a stage further. The role of fallen angels in the trumpet series is very well explained by the ‘war in heaven’ described in *Rev* 12 (esp. 12,7-9). Once thrown out of heaven by God’s forces these angels are bent on causing trouble on earth, shown here preparing the first of three woes, in a way that echoes the warning about the fall of their leader: “woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you with great passion knowing that his time is short” (12,12).

him.<sup>211</sup> <sup>2</sup>And he opened the shaft of the Abyss and smoke went up from the shaft, like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened by the smoke of the shaft.<sup>212</sup> <sup>3</sup>And out of the smoke came locusts to the earth, and power was given to them as the scorpions of the earth have power. <sup>4</sup>And they were told not to harm the grass of the earth or anything green, or any tree, only the people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup>And it was given to them not so that they should kill them, but so that they will be tormented for five months; and their torment is like the torment of a scorpion whenever it stings a man.<sup>213</sup> <sup>6</sup>And in those days

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**211** The fallen angel was given ‘the key of the shaft of the Abyss’—a ‘divine passive’ that implies that God’s angels gave him the key. The key of the Abyss is in the hands of God’s angel in Rev 20,1, where it is used to shut and seal the Abyss, after the devil has been chained and thrown into it. This description of the key of the Abyss would seem to fit the role of the key of the shaft of the Abyss, suggesting that the two keys are in fact the same (see n. 449). Opening the shaft of the Abyss is therefore the same as opening the Abyss itself. Abyss (תהום in Hebrew), which literally means “bottomless”, is the underworld prison of the devil and his angels, the demons (cf. Rev 20,2-3; 1En 21:1-10). The demons feared to be sent to this place (Lk 8,31). In Revelation, the Abyss is synonymous with the ‘sea’ and the ‘waters’ (see n. 256), but is distinguishable from Death and Hades (which is synonymous with the two divisions of *Sheol*, and with Purgatory and Hell, cf. n. 32). It should be noted, though, that the Abyss, like Death and Hades, is only a temporary abode for the rebellious spirits. At the last judgment, the lake of fire will receive all those who have been condemned (cf. Rev 20,10), and the ‘sea’ will be no more (21,1).

**212** After receiving the key from God’s angel, the fallen angel is free to open this shaft and release smoke from the underworld into the air, where it causes further darkening of the light from sun, moon and stars (cf. 8,12). The rising smoke indicates the presence of fires below. The description of the smoke “like smoke from a furnace” is taken directly from the theophany on Mt. Sinai (Ex 19,18). According to Enoch, the Abyss was a terrible place with “great descending columns of fire” (1En 21:7).

**213** Locusts emerge from the smoke, but these locusts do not destroy the vegetation (Rev 9,4). They are not therefore real locusts. They are called ‘objects like locusts’ (9,7) in the detailed description that follows (9,7-10). In fact, they are more like scorpions in their power to torment men for a period of five months (9,5) and this appears to be the main aim of this

people will seek death and by no means will they find it, and they will long to die and death flees from them.<sup>214</sup>

<sup>7</sup>And the objects like locusts were similar to horses prepared for war, and on their heads *were things* like crowns similar to gold, and their faces were like faces of men,<sup>8</sup>and they had hair like women's hair, and their teeth were like a lion's;<sup>9</sup>and they had armour like armour of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the sound of many chariots of horses running into battle.<sup>10</sup>And they have tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails is their power to harm people for five months.<sup>215</sup> <sup>11</sup>They have a king over

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plague. Superficially, this plague recalls the 8<sup>th</sup> plague of Egypt when locusts devoured all the vegetation and fruit in Egypt (Ex 10,1-20), but more profoundly it resembles the prophet Joel's image of a fearsome locust plague to describe a violent invading army, whose purpose is to provoke repentance and herald the Day of the Lord (Joel 1,2-2,17). Similarly, in Joel's vision, the 'locust' plague darkens the air (Joel 2,2.10; 3,4). Furthermore, as in Joel's prediction that "on Mt. Zion there shall be a remnant... and in Jerusalem survivors whom the Lord shall call" (Joel 3,5), this plague does not affect those who have the seal on their foreheads (Rev 9,4). These are the 144,000 men sealed with the seal of the Living God (cf. 7,1-8), whose call to flee to the desert will be described later (Rev 12). Their immunity to this plague (9,4) suggests that they have already fled to their place in the desert by the time it strikes (see n. 293). As the core of the messianic army, they understand the blowing of the trumpets (8,6-12; 9,1-21), without the battle-cry, as a signal for the assembly of the combatants (Nm 10,7; Rev 14,1).

<sup>214</sup> The torment of this plague will be so awful that people would rather die, but they cannot. The theme is found in other parts of Scripture (e.g., Job 3,21; Jer 8,3) and in other apocalyptic writings (e.g., *Sib. Or.* 2.307-8; 8.353; 13.118; *Apoc. Elijah* 2:5,32).

<sup>215</sup> This lengthy description of the locusts is full of comparisons (similes) suggesting the author struggled to find the right words and concepts to relate what he saw in his vision. This is not symbolical or metaphorical language, but just plain descriptive. The locusts were like horses prepared for battle, with things like golden crowns on their heads, faces like men's faces, hair like women's hair, teeth like lion's teeth, breastplates like armour of iron, and they made a thundering din with their wings, like the sound of chariots rushing into battle. Their tails were like the tails of scorpions and here was their power to harm men for five months (cf. Rev



them, the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek the name he has is Apollyon. [In English: Destroyer].<sup>216</sup>

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9,5). The question remains: what on earth was the author trying to describe? Are these demons, as most commentators suggest? Do demons have such an exotic appearance and make such a noise? On the other hand, noisy winged objects made of metal, used in war and operated by men and/or women (faces like men's faces, hair like women's hair) would suggest the author is struggling to describe aircraft of some kind, but if this is the case why are they depicted as coming from the Abyss? The answer is that the Abyss is synonymous with the 'sea' and the 'waters' (see n. 256), and the waters are "peoples and crowds and nations and tongues" (17,15)—a formula that the author uses to refer to unredeemed human society. The Abyss, then, is not to be thought of as a physical place, but rather as the 'psychic' space, separated from God and existing in the hearts and minds of unredeemed men and women. The 'objects like locusts' could therefore be understood as an invention of unredeemed human minds. One thinks of warplanes, helicopters or drones, armed with an anti-personnel toxin like that of a scorpion, and aimed at civilian populations in situations of social unrest, anarchy or warfare.

<sup>216</sup> These infernal machines have a king over them, the 'angel of the Abyss', Abaddon in Hebrew, Apollyon in Greek, the Destroyer in English. The custom of giving the name in Hebrew is unique to John's Gospel and to Revelation (cf. Jn 5,2; 19,13.17.20; 20,16; Rev 16,16), and is evidence of a common authorship. In contrast to John's Gospel, though, the Hebrew name is here translated into Greek, implying that the present text is a translation from a Hebrew or Aramaic original. On the same principle, the name can be translated in every new translation (both the Armenian translation and the Latin Vulgate followed this pattern, as did many Church Fathers). But who is this destroying angel? In many episodes described in the OT, he is the divine agent of death and destruction (e.g., Ex 12,23; 2Sam 24,13; 1Chr 21,7-22,1; 2Kgs 19,35; 2Chr 32,21; Is 37,36; Sir 48,21; cf. Ez 9; Ps 78,49-51). By late Second Temple times, however, this angel became identified with Satan (Jn 8,44; 1Cor 5,5; Heb 2,14; 1Pet 5,8), or as Beliar/Belial, as Satan was often called in the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is reasonable to suppose, then, that this 'angel of the abyss' is indeed Satan, whose other names appear in Rev 12,9; 20,2. His location in the Abyss, at this stage in the narrative, long before Rev 20,1-3, lends emphatic support to the interpretation of the millennial reign of Christ, and the corresponding imprisonment of Satan in the Abyss (Rev 20,1-6), as a retrospective vision of the present age (see n. 453).



<sup>12</sup>The first Woe passed; behold, two Woes are still to come after this.<sup>217</sup>

<sup>13</sup>And the sixth angel blew, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God <sup>14</sup>saying to the sixth angel, the one with the trumpet: Release the four angels tied up at the great River Euphrates.<sup>218</sup>  
<sup>15</sup>And the four angels were released, those prepared for the hour and day and month and year in order to kill a third of mankind.<sup>219</sup> <sup>16</sup>And the number of troops of mounted men was two myriads of myriads; I heard the number

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<sup>217</sup> The first Woe describes the 5<sup>th</sup> trumpet-plague. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Woe describes the 6<sup>th</sup> trumpet-plague and by exclusion the 3<sup>rd</sup> Woe describes the plagues following the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet (see n. 267). Here, it is made clear that each of the three woes announced in 8,13 refers to a different trumpet-plague, and that the last three trumpet-plagues to which they refer follow each other in sequence.

<sup>218</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup> trumpet-plague begins with a command from heaven, again revealing that the evil about to be unleashed is sanctioned and controlled by heaven. The command is given by a voice coming from the golden incense altar (cf. 8,1-5), and is therefore likely to be that of the 'angel in charge of the fire' (see n. 193). This is appropriate because this plague kills men with fire, smoke and sulphur (9,18). This angel commands the angel who blew the 6<sup>th</sup> trumpet to release four fallen angels bound up at the River Euphrates. Repeating a pattern common to all the trumpet-plagues so far, angels in the service of evil will now be able to exercise their destructive function on earth with divine sanction and control. The River Euphrates is the first of several precise geographical locations mentioned in the text (the Holy City, 11,2; Babylon, 17,18; Harmageddon, 16,16; Jerusalem, 21,2.10), and is mentioned again in connection with the 6<sup>th</sup> bowl-plague (16,12). Although this location may have symbolic significance as the eastern border of the civilized world, from which destructive invasions emerge (*Sib. Or.* 4.115-39), its identification here as the place of detention for four evil angels is original (cf. 1*En* 10). It seems to implicate this region literally as the source of the diabolical inspiration for the 6<sup>th</sup> trumpet-plague.

<sup>219</sup> The plague instigated by these evil angels is planned for a very specific time and has a very specific result: the death of a third of mankind. This is a frightful massacre! The loss of a third of humankind recalls the proportions of the natural environment affected by the first four trumpet-plagues, and exceeds the quarter of men who die under the influence of the rider of the fourth horse (cf. Rev 6,8).

of them.<sup>220</sup> <sup>17</sup>And like this I saw the horses in the vision and those sitting on them—having armour the colour of fire, hyacinth and sulphur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and out of their mouths come fire and smoke and sulphur. <sup>18</sup>By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and the smoke and the sulphur coming out of their mouths. <sup>19</sup>For the power of the horses is in their mouth and in their tails, for their tails, which have heads, are like snakes and with them they cause harm.<sup>221</sup>

<sup>20</sup>And the rest of mankind, those who were not killed by these plagues, did not even repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and

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**220** If the angels are the inspiration for this massacre, its agents are described as “mounted men” numbering two myriads of myriads, which is twice 10,000 x 10,000, i.e., 200 million. The next verse tells us they are mounted on horses, but like the locusts in the previous trumpet-plague, these are not normal horses.

**221** In fact, these are very strange horses indeed: they have brightly coloured armour (basically red, blue and yellow), their heads are like lions' heads and their mouths emit the toxic fire, smoke and sulphur that kills a third of mankind. The power of these horses is in their mouths and in their tails. The power to harm with fire, smoke and sulphur is now attributed to the tails, which are like snakes with heads. So, the tails must be linked to the mouths, since it is the mouths that generate these toxic substances (9,17). For this vision report to be a complete description of the motor-car (automobile), the only missing detail is that the engine sits in the mouth of these 'horses', giving them power for locomotion, and generating the fire, smoke and sulphur that kills a third of mankind, exiting via the tail. The tail would then refer to the exhaust pipe carrying these substances to the rear. As with the 'objects like locusts' in the last vision, these strange horses are a human invention. The question remains as to how they kill so many people at a specific time (9,15). One suggestion is that, at the appointed hour, the evil angels inspire the drivers with madness (cf. Zech 12,4). The subsequent massacre on the roads adds to the fatalities due to respiratory diseases caused by air pollution and amounts to a third of mankind. There is little relation between this plague and any of the plagues of Egypt, except perhaps a short passage of reflection in the book of Wisdom (Wis 11,17-19). In nearly every respect, it is a uniquely original prophetic vision, as with the 5<sup>th</sup> trumpet-plague.

wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk, <sup>21</sup>and they did not repent of their murders, or of their sorceries, or of their sexual immorality, or of their thefts.<sup>222</sup>

*Second Interruption (10,1–11,14): Prophetic Commission and Mission* <sup>223</sup>

X <sup>1</sup>And I saw another mighty angel,<sup>224</sup> coming down from heaven,<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> As the end-time approaches, the main aim of the trumpet-plagues is to promote repentance among those who have not yet repented. In this aim, though, the plagues have been singularly unsuccessful. In fact, as with Pharaoh during the plagues of Egypt, it is probable that the ‘rest of mankind’, those who were not killed by the 6<sup>th</sup> plague, have become even more hardened and impenitent like Pharaoh. Five of the commonest sins are mentioned: idolatry in all its forms, murder, sorcery (magic arts), sexual immorality and stealing. The list of idols follows a common OT pattern (e.g., Dt 4,28; Ps 115,4; 135,15; Jer 1,16; Dn 5,4,23). The list of other vices has its origin in the 10 Commandments (Ex 20,13-15) and other NT lists more or less inspired by the same source (esp. Rev 21,8; 22,15, but also Mt 15,19; 19,18; Rom 13,9; Gal 5,20).

<sup>223</sup> Just as the first interruption (Rev 7,1-17) broke the baseline narrative between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> of the seal series, this second interruption (10,1–11,13) breaks it between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> in the trumpet series (see n. 108). It is divided into two closely related parts (10,1–11,2; 11,3-13) which have verbal and thematic links with the other main interruptions (7,1-17; 12,1–15,4; 17,1–19,5). So, it is these other interruptions that give the material with which to fully understand this section.

<sup>224</sup> There are only three interventions of a mighty (ἰσχυρός; strong) angel in Revelation (5,2; 10,1; 18,21). The first two appearances are connected by the theme of the scroll. In the first, the mighty angel calls for anyone who is worthy to come and open the scroll sealed with seven seals (5,2). In 10,1-2, the mighty angel holds a little open scroll in his hand and gives it to John to eat (10,2). If, as is likely, the mighty angel is the same in both contexts, the author seems to be establishing a link between the two scrolls. The nature of this link will become clearer as the narrative proceeds. It is possible that, with the attribute of mightiness, the author is also identifying the angel with the archangel Gabriel (whose name is Hebrew means “the might of God”).

<sup>225</sup> The participle “coming down” from heaven is theologically important here, for it contrasts with the numerous angels “falling down”, or “fallen”,

clothed with a cloud and with the rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun and his feet [legs] like pillars of fire,<sup>226</sup> and in his hand he had a little scroll that had been opened.<sup>227</sup> And he put his right foot on the sea

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from heaven in the trumpet series. The first is an angel who continues in the service of God, and the second is a defeated rebel angel, now in the service of evil. From ch. 4 up to this point, the author John has been in heaven. Since he sees the angel coming down from heaven, his viewpoint has clearly changed and he is now on earth. The purpose of this shift will soon become apparent: he will be asked to perform a particular task on earth (11,1-2). From now on, the earth will remain his principal observation point.

**226** The description of the angel here is remarkable, for in at least two aspects (the face and the feet) he resembles the Lord's angel in the introductory vision (Rev 1,10-20) and just like that angel, he also has features that are traditionally associated with Almighty God, such as the rainbow as in Rev 4,3, the cloud covering as in Ex 16,10, the pillar of fire as in Ex 13,21-22, and the general appearance as in Ez 1,26-28. It appears, then, that this is indeed the angel of the Lord, understood in the same sense as in the introductory vision (see nn. 25, 26). His appearance also recalls the opening verse of the book: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show his servants what must happen soon and which he made known by sending *his angel* to his servant John" (Rev 1,1-2, also 22,6,16). In this part of the text, the Lord's angel is bringing the Revelation of Jesus Christ, in the form of the little open scroll, to John, who then "bears witness to the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ, of all that he saw" (Rev 1,2). The echo of the first verse here, at the centre of the book, identifies this part as the real beginning—the part to which all the preceding text has been merely a preparation. We should now be expecting to hear its main message for God's servants in the Church (1,1; 22,6,16). It is worth noting that a pillar of fire is not a fitting image for the angel's 'feet', but seems better suited to his legs. As the Hebrew/Aramaic root רגל can mean both 'foot' and 'leg', the use of the Greek word for 'foot' here (which is only very rarely used for 'leg', but never in the NT), could be evidence for a translation from a Hebrew/Aramaic original by somebody who did not grasp the imagery, i.e., somebody other than the author. The appearance of the rainbow here is profoundly reassuring (cf. Gn 9,8-17, as will be explained later, in n. 233).

**227** The Exodus theme is prominent in the angel's features: the pillars of fire recall the pillar of fire that protected (Ex 14,19,24) and guided (Ex 13,21-22) the Israelites in the wilderness, the cloud evokes the cloud that

and the left on the land,<sup>228</sup> and cried out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring.<sup>229</sup> And when he cried out, the voices of the seven thunders

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covered Sinai at the giving of the Torah tablets (Ex 19,16; 24,15), and the little scroll recalls the Torah tablets themselves (Ex 24,12). Following the allusions to the Egyptian plagues in the trumpet series, the description of the angel here indicates an analogy between the little open scroll, which will be given to John (Rev 10,10) and recorded in Revelation, and the Torah tablets given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. It is fair, then, to refer to John's prophecy as a 'new Torah', and there are indications in his text that reinforce this terminology: like the Torah, Revelation is written in obedience to a command from the Lord (Rev 1,11.19; 21,5; cf. Ex 34,27-28; Dt 31,19.21.24-27); it was revealed by his angel (Rev 1,1-2; cf. Acts 7,38); it promises divine blessing to those who keep and observe its words (Rev 1,3; 22,7; cf. Lev 26,3-13; Dt 12,26-27; 28,1-14; 30,16) and it contains a solemn warning to whoever may wish to change the text (Rev 22,18-19; cf. Dt 4,2). In fact, in the Christian tradition, the acknowledgement of Jesus as Messiah and the representation of the Christian life as a *new* exodus leading to the formation of a *new* Israel by means of a *new* Covenant, all contributed to the expectation of a *new* Torah. Some modern scholars have argued that this expectation was fulfilled in the person of Jesus, or in the giving of his Spirit, but neither of these proposals agrees with the written character of that which has come to be known as the 'Torah' (or Pentateuch). Of all the writings in the NT, only Revelation can justly be regarded as Christ's new Torah (see also n. 6). The word for little scroll (βιβλαρίδιον) is a new word (*hapax*): it is the double diminutive of the word for scroll (βιβλος), and therefore means 'a very small scroll'. It reminds us of the scroll in Rev 5, but it is clearly not the same, because the final recipient of the little scroll is John and only one person was found worthy to receive the larger scroll, the Lamb (Rev 5,2-5). The difference between the larger and smaller scrolls is therefore confirmed by the exceptional 'worthiness' required of the one who receives the larger one. The role of the little scroll, and exactly how it is formed from the larger scroll, will be discussed later (see n. 237).

<sup>228</sup> The mighty angel is gigantic in size. With one foot on the land and the other on the sea, he expresses divine authority over these regions, which basically represent the whole earth. He has much greater authority than the angels in charge of the elements of fire (14,8), water (16,5) or wind (7,1).

<sup>229</sup> The mighty angel's voice is proportional to his size and similar to that of a roaring lion. This may be an allusion to the Lion of the tribe of Judah,

spoke.<sup>230</sup> <sup>4</sup>And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write and I heard a voice from heaven saying: Seal what the seven thunders spoke and do not write it.<sup>231</sup>

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the Messiah, whose angel he is (see n. 226). In the OT, God “roars like a lion” (Hos 11,10), but particularly relevant in this prophetic context is the passage from Amos: “Indeed, the Lord God does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants, the prophets. The lion roars—who will not be afraid! The Lord speaks—who will not prophesy” (Am 3,8). This allusion suggests that through his mighty angel, God’s mysterious plan is about to be revealed to his servants the prophets, who will then be inspired to prophesy.

<sup>230</sup> The angel’s announcement was followed by ‘the voices of the seven thunders’, which present themselves as a further sevenfold series of judgments, similar to those of the seals and the trumpets, whose purpose is to inspire repentance. It would represent another, final, attempt to procure repentance, in the wake of the failure of the previous series to achieve this (Rev 9,20-21). Elsewhere in the text, thunder is associated with the final manifestation of God in judgment (see n. 116). In Ps 29, God’s voice is compared to thunder, and in Jn 12,28-29, the crowd hears the heavenly voice as thunder. The sound of thunder has therefore traditionally been associated with the voice of God. So, if, as in this context, thunder has a voice which speaks and delivers a message, or rather seven messages, then there is little to stop us interpreting this voice as the voice of God. This may explain why ‘the seven thunders’ are introduced by the definite article—a grammatical indication that their voices were already familiar to John’s readers.

<sup>231</sup> Immediately after the seven thunders had spoken, John was about to write what they said in obedience to the divine command at 1,19. At this point there is a counter-command from heaven—a voice telling him to seal (i.e., not to disclose) what the 7 thunders spoke, by not recording it in writing. The verb ‘to seal’ refers to the ‘sealing’ of scrolls that are rolled up, to prevent their contents from being read. Here it is used metaphorically, as in Dn 12,4 (cf. Dn 12,9), to prevent people from knowing what was said. This counter-command appears to represent a change of plan: the seven thunders are being removed from the divine plan, possibly because they would be no more successful than the trumpet series in bringing about repentance (Rev 9,20-21). They would just be a waste of time and wasting time at this stage might even risk losing the elect (Mt 24,22 et par.). The plan must press on without the series of seven thunders.

<sup>5</sup>And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven <sup>6</sup>and swore by the One living for ever and ever, who created heaven and the things in it, and the earth and the things in it, and the sea and the things in it,<sup>232</sup> that there shall be no more time, <sup>7</sup>but in the days of the sound of the seventh angel, by the time he is going to blow, also will have been fulfilled the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets.<sup>233</sup>

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**232** So, John's attention returns to the large and mighty angel, the angel of the Lord, who bestrides the earth and the sea. He raises his right hand to heaven in the traditional manner for taking an oath (cf. Gn 14,22-23; Dt 32,40) and he swears by the Eternal God, the Creator of all, in a similar way to the linen-clad angel in Dn 12,7. Swearing by God is the most solemn type of oath, since it invokes the highest and most powerful authority in existence to witness and guarantee the contents of the oath. What is sworn is therefore most certainly going to happen.

**233** The momentous contents of the oath are now presented: whenever the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet is blown, the last of the trumpet series, so also will be fulfilled the entire plan of God for mankind—here referred to as the 'Mystery' (μυστήριον; רֵי נֵחִיָּה) of God. 'Mystery' was a technical term for divine secrets preserved in heaven and revealed only to God's prophets, especially those concerning the divine plan for the eschatological future of mankind (1En 71:3; 40:2; 46:2; 1QS 11.3-5; 4QInstr; Mk 4,11; Rom 11:25; 1Cor 15,33; 2Thess 2,7; Rev 1,20; 17,5-7; see also n. 5). For "the Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets" (Am 3,7). The use of the Greek verb εὐαγγελίζω (meaning 'preach the good news') for the divine 'announcement' of this plan to God's servants, the prophets (e.g., Is 52,7; 61,1), not only emphasizes the essential goodness of this plan, or 'mystery', but also links it to the salvific 'Good News' of the kingdom of God preached by Christ and his apostles (Mk 1,14-15; Lk 4,18-21; Rom 1,1-3.14-17), and finally recalled by the angel in Rev 14,6. The plan's fulfilment here refers to the complete realization of the kingdom of God and of his Messiah (Rev 11,15), the main events of which are listed in the liturgical chorus that follows the report of the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet (11,15-18). In this context, it is reassuring to see the rainbow over the head of the angel in 10,1, since this is a sign of the eternal covenant to which God swore he would never again destroy every living creature as he had done (Gn 8,21; 9,11-17). There is much discussion about whether 'no more time' (χρόνος οὐκέτι ἔσται) refers to the end of time and history, i.e., the 'end of the age', or to the end of the time of waiting for judgment (cf. Rev 6,11; n. 155), i.e., 'no more



<sup>8</sup>And the voice which I heard from heaven was again speaking to me and saying: Go, take the open scroll which is in the hand of the angel standing on the sea and on the land.<sup>234</sup> <sup>9</sup>And I went towards the angel telling him to give me the little scroll. And he says to me: Take and devour it; and it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.<sup>235</sup>

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delay'. Following immediately upon the cancellation of a further series of seven (10,4: the 7 thunders), the second of these options seems the most appropriate. There is a contrast here with the oath taken by the angel in Dn 12,7, to the effect that the end would be reached after 'a time, two times and half a time'—the time previously described as a time of unparalleled distress for God's people under the rule of the tyrannical Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes (cf. Dn 12,1). Instead, here in Revelation, the oath affirms there will be no more time after the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet is sounded.

<sup>234</sup> This is the voice that had previously told him to seal what the seven thunders said (Rev 10,4). The voice is not identified, but his task is clearly to organize the change of plan caused by the cancellation of the seven thunders. The next event is going to be related in some way to the little open scroll that the heavenly voice is telling the author to take from the hand of the mighty angel standing on the land and the sea.

<sup>235</sup> John obeys the voice from heaven by going and telling the angel to give him the little scroll. This angel then adds a further instruction coupled with a warning: John must 'devour' the little scroll; it will be sweet in his mouth, but bitter in his stomach. There is a strong parallel here with the prophetic vocation of Ezekiel (Ez 2,8–3,3), when the Lord God told him to eat an unrolled scroll inscribed with the words "Lamentation and Wailing and Woe" (Ez 2,10) and with writing front and back (cf. Rev 5,1). This scroll was as sweet as honey in Ezekiel's mouth but left him 'bitter in the heat of my spirit' (מר בחמת רוחי, Ez 3,14). In a similar way, John takes and eats the little open scroll just before the third and last of the three woes (Rev 8,13) and it, too, is as sweet as honey in his mouth, but bitter inside him. Sweetness in the mouth is a familiar description of the Word of God (cf. Ps 110,103; Jer 15,16); bitterness comes from the knowledge of the Day of the Lord and the horrors that it will bring (cf. Zeph 1,14-15; Am 5,18-20). Devouring the scroll is a metaphor for the thorough assimilation of its contents by the author. Perhaps the word 'devour' is used, rather than 'eat', in order to emphasize the need for John to ingest the script in its entirety, with no fragments left over, since this would only disrupt its continuity and make it unintelligible.



<sup>10</sup>And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and devoured it, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey, and when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter.<sup>236</sup>

<sup>11</sup>And they say to me: You must prophesy again about many races and nations and tongues and rulers.<sup>237</sup>

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**236** This verse simply confirms that John did what he was told, and that the warnings he was given were true.

**237** So, the purpose of swallowing the little scroll is to prepare John to prophesy, not just about the House of Israel as in the case of Ezekiel (Ez 3,4), but about “many races, nations, tongues and rulers”, i.e., most of the inhabited earth. Here the Greek word for ‘about’ (ἐπί + dative) can also mean ‘against’, with their resistance implied. “You *must* prophesy *again*” places John under an obligation (‘*must*’) and stresses the fact that this is a renewal of his prophetic activity (‘*again*’). The prophecy that issues from this renewal forms a ‘prophecy within the prophecy.’ The subject of the prophecy communicated to John at this point is indicated by the larger context of this renewal of his vocation: it follows the divine oath anticipating the imminent end-historical ‘consummation’ of God’s plan and precedes the announcement of this fulfilment at the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet (Rev 11,15-19). It is therefore implied that by eating the little scroll, John was prepared to prophesy about the final, which is to say the eschatological, period of history—the ‘end-time’. The precise form and content of this prophecy will become apparent later (see nn. 246, 277). In the meantime, it is enough to note the central importance of this section of the text. Not only is this renewal of John’s prophetic mission recounted at the centre of the text, which in ancient documents was the part reserved for the most important information (cf. Lev 16), but through its correspondence with the opening verses (Rev 1,1-2; see n. 226) it prepares us to enter the heart of the book’s message. The central importance of the little open scroll raises questions about its relationship to the larger scroll taken by the Lamb (5,6-7) and later called the ‘the Lamb’s Scroll of Life’ (13,8). They cannot be identical, as some suggest, because the larger scroll has a vital role at the final judgment (20,12.15), sometime after the little scroll has been swallowed and digested by John. Instead, their relationship reflects their function: the little scroll is a prophecy of the *outer* form of the final judgment, whereas the larger scroll records its *inner* content (see n. 190). The fact that the scrolls are complementary, and that their relationship can be expressed in terms of *outside* and *inside*, suggests that the little scroll sent to John represents the writing on the *outside* of the larger scroll (5,1).

XI <sup>1</sup>And a cane similar to a rod was given to me *while* saying:<sup>238</sup>

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In its visionary context, between the breaking of the seventh seal and the opening of the large scroll (8,1; cf. n.171), we propose the little scroll is formed by detaching and then enrolling a strip from the leading edge of the outermost turn of the large scroll, which is precisely the part that had writing on its *outer* surface. Understood in this way, the ‘little scroll’ would contain the text previously seen on the back of the large scroll (5,1). It is indeed a part of the Scroll of Life—the part that is given to the Church to know how the judgment will take place. Its role can be identified with that of the Scroll (or Tablets) of Destiny known to ancient tradition (see nn. 5 and 6). For a full exposition, see [link 16](#).

<sup>238</sup> It is not specified who speaks, but it is probably the same angelic figure that told John he must prophesy again. The context of 11,1-2 is entirely prophetic: it is sandwiched between the account of the renewal of John’s prophetic mission (10,8-11) and the account of the prophetic mission of the two witnesses (11,3-13). The present passage (11,1-2) forms a bridge between these two prophetic missions. In 10,11, John was told he ‘must prophesy again’ and in 11,1-2 he is given a measuring cane with the command to do some measuring in the temple area. In its entirely prophetic context, this command is best understood as the command to ‘prophesy again’ set in the metaphorical language of measuring the temple. What he is being asked to do is analogous to the work of a surveyor on a construction site, measuring the various parts of the temple so that they fit together perfectly. This is certainly not the only instance of a metaphorical command in the NT: another example is when Jesus commanded the Apostle Peter to “Feed my sheep” (Jn 21,17). Just as neither Jesus nor Peter was a sheep farmer, we must not assume that John is here being told to go and work on a building site. We can only start to make sense of these commands when we realize they are metaphorical, and as such they convey a deeper, more spiritual meaning than would be possible with ordinary speech. As Peter received his pastoral role in a metaphorical way, so here John is being given a prophetic role in metaphorical terms that convey its spiritual purpose and significance. Interpreting the passage on this principle, the cane (κάλαμος) that John is given (Rev 11,1) is the prophecy itself—the prophecy that issues from the renewal of John’s vocation. Canes were indeed used as instruments for measuring. More interesting is that the word for this object in Hebrew (קנה) is related to the word ‘canon’ (κανών), which is the term given to that ‘rule of faith’ that Christ’s faithful should follow in order to be of one mind (Phil 3,16 TR). In its metaphorical context, then, the measuring cane given to John represents the prophecy as a rule of faith for the faithful, enabling them to

Get up<sup>239</sup> and measure<sup>240</sup> the Sanctuary of God and the altar and those who are worshipping in it.<sup>241</sup>

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be of one mind (cf. Acts 4,32; Phil 1,17). But why should the cane be like a rod (ῥάβδος)? As John's prophetic renewal recalls the prophetic ministry of Moses (see n. 227), the mention of the rod here evokes the 'rod of God' with which Moses performed his miracles (Ex 4,17.20). Elsewhere in the text, the rod refers to the instrument with which the Messiah will 'shepherd' (rule over) the nations (Rev 2,27; 12,5; 19,15) and as such it can be understood as a symbol of the prophetic Word of God (like the sword is a symbol of the judgmental Word of God, see n. 27). Its use here emphasises the metaphorical aspect of the command, the identification of the cane with the prophecy given to John, and last, but not least, the divine strength and purpose of this prophecy.

**239** The command that follows is in two parts, the first part (11,1b) is positive ("Get up and measure...") and the second part (11,2a) is negative ("Reject... and do not measure...").

**240** In the first part of the command, John is asked to do some measuring with the measuring cane that was given to him. Taking this measuring cane to be the prophecy given to John (see n. 238), the act of measuring is simply the act of witnessing the prophecy. John witnesses the prophecy given to him by writing it in a book (1,19) and sending it to the seven churches. His task will continue for as long as the prophetic words of his book are witnessed in and by the Church, and will finish only when there is no longer a need to witness them—with the realization of the prophecy itself. Given that the prophecy concerns events in the eschatological period (see n. 237), it is clear that the task entrusted to John will continue up until the end of history, well beyond his mortal lifespan. So even though he is no longer present physically, he continues to perform his task as long as his prophecy is witnessed in and by the Church. This spiritual presence of the author precisely recalls the enigmatic passage in the Fourth Gospel about the future of the beloved disciple, whom the risen Jesus wants "to remain until I come" (Jn 21,20-24). So, the lasting presence of John in the Church not only fulfils Jesus' prophecy about the beloved disciple, but also identifies John, the author of Revelation, with the same beloved disciple. On this purely internal evidence, and beyond all questions of literary style, it identifies John, the author of Revelation, with the author of the Fourth Gospel (see n. 9).

**241** This act of witnessing is directed at the inner court of the temple complex, identified by its main elements: the Sanctuary (ναός), the altar and those worshipping there (cf. Ez 40,47). But just as the cane and the act

<sup>2</sup>And reject the court which is outside the Sanctuary and do not measure it, because it was given to the nations,<sup>242</sup>

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of measuring are metaphors, so also is the temple. In fact, the temple was totally destroyed in 70 AD, more than 20 years before John received this revelation, so the command cannot be understood to refer literally to an existing temple. As in other parts of the NT, the temple is a metaphor for the Church (1Cor 3,16-17; 2Cor 6,16; Eph 2,19-22; 1Pet 2,4-10; Heb 12,22-24; Rev 3,12) and the inner court of the temple represents the inner parts of the Church. Just as the temple was perceived as having grades of holiness, with the structures in the inner court being the most holy, so the inner part of the Church refers to its most holy and faithful members. John must witness the prophecy he was given for the sake of the faithful in the Church. The model is Ez 40–48, when the prophet reported a prospective vision of the restored post-exilic temple, in which an angel does the measuring and Ezekiel records his measurements. These then form a plan for the rebuilding of the temple at a future time (Ez 43,10-12). The plan was not used after the exile because of discrepancies with the Torah of Moses, which the Messiah was expected to resolve when he came. Here, precisely, the Messiah is resolving those discrepancies through his Revelation: John himself has the measuring rod and was asked to perform what Ezekiel only recorded in writing. In this way, John brings to fulfilment the plan of temple restoration given to Ezekiel, with the Church as the restored temple—a spiritual temple formed by the community of believers. The measuring rod is the prophecy, and rule of faith, which John witnesses in his book in order to inform, guide and prepare the faithful for the events it prophesies—the events immediately preceding the final trumpet at the end of time. In a spiritual sense, the faithful who receive this prophecy and follow its guidance are those who are measured for, and ‘formed into’, the eschatological temple of God. Of the three elements mentioned, only the first is readily identifiable at this point in the text: it is the Sanctuary or dwelling place of God which corresponds to the entire inner court of the ancient temple and is described in the introductory vision (Rev 1,9-20; see n. 34). For the other two elements, the altar and those worshipping there, see nn. 324, 349.

<sup>242</sup> In the second part of the command, John is asked to forcefully reject (lit. to ‘throw out’: ἐκβάλλειν) the “court which is outside the Sanctuary” and not to measure it. Interpreting the metaphorical terms here, John is asked to make a separation (a judgment) between the inner part of the temple which he is helping to build up, and the outer part which he must now reject. In the opening vision, we noted that the God’s Sanctuary

and they will trample the Holy City<sup>243</sup>

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includes a part on earth that corresponds to the inner court of the ancient Jerusalem temple (see n. 34). So, the “court which is outside the Sanctuary” corresponds to the outer court of that temple—the court that used to be called ‘the court of the gentiles’—and not to the inner court, because this is now included in the Sanctuary. However, though less holy than the inner court, even the outer court was considered a part of the temple, which we interpret to be the Church. It can therefore be understood as the outer part of the Church—the part which comes into continual contact with non-Christians, just as Jews mixed with non-Jews in the outer court of the ancient temple before it. Indeed, the reason why the outer court must be rejected is because ‘it was given to the nations’. In a biblical context, the ‘nations’ (ἔθνη) is a term that is almost always used in a pejorative sense, or with pejorative undertones, to refer to the impure and idolatrous people who do not worship the true God and are elsewhere called the ‘nations’, ‘pagans’ or ‘gentiles’ (גוים). When it is stated that this outer part of the Church has ‘been given to the nations’, it therefore means that it has become worldly and apostate. The apostasy of large numbers of Christians, ‘the great apostasy’, is indeed a fixed element in the eschatological expectation of the Christian tradition (cf. 2Thess 2,3; Mt 24,10). The outer court is therefore composed of baptised Christians who have not kept their faith, but are Christians in name only. John is not to measure this part, which is to say, the prophecy that acts as a rule of faith for the faithful is not intended for these unfaithful Christians. There is no need to suppose that John will separate the inner and outer courts by his own judgment, but rather that the apostate Christians will reject themselves by rejecting John, his prophecy and all those who witness it in his name. So, it is actually the witnessing of the prophecy to the faithful that will bring about the self-separation of the apostate Christians. Since the witnessing of the prophecy determines, in this way, who is a member of the faithful Church, the prophecy itself functions as a canon within the Canon of the NT, and this has important ecumenical implications. This negative aspect of the command to reject apostate Christians, along with the nations (11,2), recalls the injunction to exclude the nations completely from Ezekiel’s plan for the restored temple (Ez 44,5-9).

<sup>243</sup> The second part of the command concludes with the outcome of the task entrusted to John. When the outer court of the temple is handed over to the nations through the ‘great apostasy’, the nations, together with the unfaithful Christians who have been added to their numbers, will then “trample the Holy City for 42 months”. The verb ‘to trample’ (πατεῖν) is used frequently in Scripture to mean the submission and profanation of

for forty-two months.<sup>244</sup> <sup>3</sup>And I will give to my two witnesses<sup>245</sup> and they

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the ancient temple by pagan nations (Is 63,18; Dn 7,23; 8,13; 1Macc 3,45.51; 4,60; 2Macc 8,2). With the difference that, in this command, it refers to the Holy City (cf. Zech 12,3 LXX), and not to the temple, it clearly has the same significance here. The outcome of the task given to John is therefore expected to be a limited period of time in which the non-believing peoples will have a strong physical presence in the Holy City and behave without respect for the holy character of this place. Which place? In this biblical and prophetic context, the 'Holy City' is a clear reference to the historical city of Jerusalem. It cannot be the New Jerusalem, because nothing impure will enter her, so she cannot be 'trampled' (Rev 21,27). It should be noted that the wording of this part of the command carefully distinguishes the fate of the outer court of the temple from that of the Holy City: the outer court is simply given to the 'nations' for an unspecified period of time, whilst the Holy City will be trampled by them for a specific period of time. The wording attests to the difference between this temple and the ancient temple in Jerusalem. The temple referred to in this command is no longer a material edifice that can be physically trampled, but a spiritual temple, the Church, which has now spread throughout the world. For further reading, see [link 18](#).

<sup>244</sup> The text specifies that the period of time in which Jerusalem will be profaned in this way will last for 42 months, which is three and a half years (solar calendar). At this point, it is sufficient to note that the same period of time is mentioned again in Rev 13,5, where it is the time in which 'the beast from the sea' is given authority over all the world, and is allowed to make war against the saints and conquer them (13,5-7). Furthermore, since the beast's reign is brought to an end by the Second Coming of Christ (19,19-21), the period of 42 months clearly occurs at the very end of history, the time immediately preceding the Second Coming and final judgment. So, this period of 42 months associates the trampling of the Holy City with the end-historical reign of the beast. It is a clue to the content of the prophecy that John was given to 'prophecy again'—the prophecy that he is just about to record in writing. See [link 19](#).

<sup>245</sup> The metaphorical command telling John to 'prophecy again' has finished, so we must assume that the actual prophecy that John was given begins here. What follows is, in fact, an unusually straightforward piece of narrative prophecy, without any visionary or auditory material, and it starts with the Lord speaking. It is not stated, but is understood, that what the Lord 'will give' to the two witnesses is power and authority. The fact that he will give to *his* two witnesses implies that they have been chosen beforehand and will be divinely empowered at the appropriate time. The

will prophesy<sup>246</sup>

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text will tell us what these two witnesses do, but not who they are. The short answer is that no two historical or biblical figures from the past fit the description of these two. As a result, scholars are divided into those who say they are two eschatological prophets who will appear in the future, and those who say they are symbolic representatives of the prophetic mission of the Church. In the next verse (11,4) the two witnesses are symbolized by “the two olive trees and the two lampstands”, which confirms that they are two actual persons, as they cannot be symbols of symbols. To claim they are symbols is to confuse the symbol with the symbolized. Why two? Two is the minimum number of witnesses legally required to give evidence in a trial (Dt 17,6; 19,15; Mt 18,16; Jn 8,17; 2Cor 13,1; 1Tim 5,19; Heb 10,28), and a partnership of two is more effective than one person alone (Eccl 4,9-12), especially because “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18,20; cf. *m. Pirke Avot* 3:3). For further discussion on these two, see [link 20](#).

<sup>246</sup> The two witnesses will prophesy—this is their main mission. The context is the main guide to the subject of their prophesying: John was given a little scroll to swallow, which prepared him to prophesy again (Rev 10,7-11). He was then commanded to prophesy in terms representing this as an act of measuring and rearrangement within the temple (11,1-2). John begins this task by writing the prophecy in the book he was told to send to the seven churches. His prophecy begins with an account of the prophetic ministry of the two witnesses. Though not explicitly stated, the context implies that their main task is to witness and publicly announce the prophecy given to John. So, the two witnesses not only continue the task given to John by witnessing his prophecy, but their mission is the first event recorded in that prophecy. As we noted before (n. 240), the task entrusted to John will cease when the prophecy is realized. Since the performance of the mission of the two witnesses initiates the realization of John’s prophecy, we can safely say that the prophetic activity of the two witnesses brings to completion the task of measuring entrusted to John. If John’s act of writing the prophecy in a book is the start of his task of measuring, then the public announcement of the prophecy, by the two witnesses, brings it to an end. But what precisely is the content of their prophecy? Since John’s task involved him in the construction of the new messianic temple (see n. 241), this task will cease with the completion of the temple, which is indicated in the prophecy itself by the filling of the Sanctuary with smoke (15,5-8). In the OT, this was the sign of the divine consecration of the tabernacle when Moses had finished building it (Ex



for one thousand two hundred and sixty days<sup>247</sup> dressed in sackcloth.<sup>248</sup>

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40,34-35). To conclude, the prophecy issuing from the little scroll that John swallowed, which he then started writing at Rev 11,3, continues up until 15,5-8 and occupies the central part of the text. This is therefore the part that the two witnesses will publicly announce and it focuses mainly on the 42-month reign of the 'beast from the sea' (Rev 13).

<sup>247</sup> The duration of the prophetic mission of the two witnesses is 1,260 days, which is 14 days short of 42 months, according to the sectarian (Essene) solar calendar, and 21 days more than 42 months according to the Hebrew luni-solar calendar. The author would have known that 1,260 days is not exactly the same as the period of 42 months, whichever calendar was used. This is important because most commentators assume that they are the same. More significantly, they cannot be the same because they are identified with mutually exclusive protagonists: the 1,260 days are known for the two witnesses, who have the power to kill anyone who wishes to harm them (11,5) and the 42 months are dominated by the reign of the beast who has power to combat and overcome the saints (13,7). If these two periods were the same, the two witnesses and the beast would have the power to destroy each other, but this is not what is described. The beast is only allowed to overcome the two witnesses at the end of the 1,260 days, when they have finished their witnessing (11,7). This suggests that the 1,260-day mission of the two witnesses is followed by the future 42-month rule of the beast, and that the two consecutive periods together constitute a final seven-year period—a final 'week of years' reminiscent of the last week in Daniel's prophecy of 'seventy weeks' of years (Dn 9,24-27). This sequence (the mission of the two witnesses followed by the reign of the beast) is consistent with the observation that the main focus of the prophecy of the two witnesses is the reign of the 'beast from the sea' (see n. 246). It is clear that the mission of the two witnesses must precede the main event they are prophesying. For further details see [link 19](#).

<sup>248</sup> In ancient Israelite society, sackcloth was worn (1) as a sign of individual mourning or national distress, (2) or as an indication of submission when supplicating people or offering prayers to God, (3) or as a penitential practice, (4) or as the garb appropriate for prophets. Although it was by no means the uniform typical of prophets, sackcloth was often used by them in ancient times to evoke mourning and contrition for sin, and combine this with an appeal for repentance, an attitude of humility before God and supplication for forgiveness. The employment of sackcloth by the prophets thus brings together its whole range of uses in ancient Israelite society and a similar significance can be ascribed to its use by the two witnesses. With its emphasis on repentance, the mission of the two



<sup>4</sup>These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the Lord of the earth.<sup>249</sup> <sup>5</sup>And if anyone wishes to harm them, fire comes out of

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witnesses reproduces the 'sign of Jonah', which was the only sign that Jesus promised to give the Scribes and Pharisees, when they asked for one (Mt 12,38-42; 16,1-4; Lk 11,29-32). Furthermore, the use of sackcloth by the two witnesses, to signify their appeal for repentance, agrees fully with the conclusion stated above, that their prophetic mission takes place just before the 42-month reign of the beast. The text makes it clear that this period, immediately preceding the end of history, will be one of uncompromising severity: on the one hand the beast will persecute and kill Christ's followers for not worshipping his image or receiving his mark, and the martyred saints will be received immediately into heaven (Rev 7,7-17; 15,2); on the other hand the beast and his followers will bring eternal condemnation upon themselves (14,9-11; 19,20). Those who are alive during this final period will be forced to decide between Christ and the beast, the true and the false messiah. Their decision will determine their eternal destiny and there will be no possibility for further repentance. It is clearly a time of 'eternal judgment'. As precursors of this final judgment, the two witnesses alert the earth's inhabitants to the coming reign of the beast, and to its grave importance for the eternal destiny of every soul. Their use of sackcloth perfectly reflects this function, since their message is one of dire warning combined with a final appeal for repentance.

<sup>249</sup> The significance of this symbolical description can be grasped from Zechariah's vision of two olive trees standing on either side of a single lampstand (Zech 4,1-14), which bears the light of witness to the divine presence, and especially from the association of this vision with the completion of the second temple. This vision offered divine assurance that the second temple would be completed, in spite of all the difficulties, through the leadership of the two 'sons of oil'. These two leaders are understood to be Zerubbabel, the governor of the community at that time, and Joshua, the high priest. Through their service and cooperation, these two leaders would establish and maintain the divine presence among the community, by successfully rebuilding the temple institution after the Babylonian exile. A similar significance extends to the two witnesses: through their prophetic mission they will help to bring to completion the true temple of God, the Church, in whose construction the author John has been participating by measuring its inner parts (Rev 11,1-2). This agrees with what was noted previously (n. 246), that the mission of the two witnesses initiates the realization of the prophecy given to the author to 'prophecy again'—a prophecy which includes an allusion to the

their mouth and consumes their enemies; and if anyone should wish to harm them, he is bound to be killed in this way.<sup>250</sup> These have the authority to shut the sky, so that no rain may fall during the days of their prophecy,<sup>251</sup> and they have authority over the waters to turn them into blood<sup>252</sup> and to strike the earth with every kind of plague<sup>253</sup> as often as they wish.<sup>254</sup>

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completion and consecration of the true temple (cf. 15,5-8; 11,19). The true temple of God, the Church, cannot be completed without the fulfilment of the author's prophecy, which begins with its public announcement by the two witnesses. The emphasis on the role of the two witnesses, in the completion of the true temple, awakens the suspicion that they are contending against the construction of a false temple (see n. 316). For further explanation, see [link 20](#).

<sup>250</sup> There is unanimous agreement among scholars that the signs that the two witnesses perform evoke those of Moses and Elijah: the fire from their mouth that consumes their enemies recalls the power given to Elijah (2Kgs 1,1-14; cf. Sir 48,1; and esp. Jer 5,14). In the NT, the death of Ananias and his wife Sapphira (Acts 5,1-11) can also be understood as an expression of this power.

<sup>251</sup> Their authority to shut the sky also recalls Elijah (1Kgs 17,1). It is of interest to note that in NT times the tradition was already well established that Elijah's miracle of withholding the rain had continued for three and a half years (cf. Lk 4,25; Jas 5,17), exactly the same time as the 1,260-day ministry of the two witnesses (Rev 11,3).

<sup>252</sup> Their authority to turn the waters into blood evokes the miraculous power given to Moses (Ex 7,14-21).

<sup>253</sup> Their power to strike the earth with every kind of plague also evokes the powers given to Moses (Ex 9,13-14).

<sup>254</sup> So, there are important differences between these two witnesses and Moses and Elijah. The separate powers granted to Moses and Elijah are combined in the two witnesses, such that these two persons are entirely equal to each other in authority and action. Furthermore, in their ability to call down every kind of plague whenever they wish (Rev 11,6), the authority of the two witnesses appears to exceed that of the ancient prophets, whose actions were generally performed under a direct command from God. These differences dispel the claim that the two witnesses are Moses and Elijah *redivivi*, but nevertheless indicate the author's wish that their mission be understood in the light of the traditions of Moses and Elijah: it is well known that, according to OT prophecy, Elijah was expected to return as a forerunner to the Messiah, to restore all things and turn the hearts of the fathers to their sons (Mal 3,1.22-24). Jesus makes

<sup>7</sup>And whenever they finish their witnessing,<sup>255</sup> the beast that is coming up out of the Abyss<sup>256</sup> will make war against them and overcome

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clear reference to this expectation, when he identifies Elijah with John the Baptist (Mk 9,12; Mt 11,7-15; 17,11-13) “for those willing to accept it” (Mt 11,14). Elsewhere, the Gospels describe the Baptist as a prophet acting in the spirit and power of Elijah (Lk 1,13-17; cf. Mk 1,2-8; Mt 3,4), although identification on a personal level is denied (Jn 1,27). The fact is that the religious leadership of the Jewish people at the time, and up to this day, was *unwilling to accept* the fulfilment of Elijah’s return by John the Baptist. This rejection of the Elijah-like mission of the Baptist also contributed to their rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, since the two expectations were inextricably linked. As a result, the Jews are still awaiting a forerunner like Elijah, and a messiah like Moses, who will usher in the messianic age they have been awaiting for so long. So, evoking the powers of Moses and Elijah, the mission of the two witnesses inserts itself fittingly into the context of the still unfulfilled messianic expectation of the Jews. However, although the mission of the two witnesses is clearly adapted to this expectation, it should be stressed that they themselves do not claim to be its fulfilment. Instead, the powerful signs they perform simply confirm the prophecy announced by them and endorse its testimony to the divinity and sovereignty of Jesus Christ.

<sup>255</sup> I.e., at the end of the 1,260 days during which they have divine authority to complete their mission.

<sup>256</sup> The use of the definite article here, for the beast, implies that the reader is already acquainted with it. In fact, although this is the first time he is mentioned in the text, there are fuller accounts later: in Rev 17, the same beast is described as the one that ‘is about to come up out of the Abyss’ (Rev 17,8). Then the same beast that is described in Rev 17 is also reported in Rev 13 as ‘a beast coming up out of the sea’ (13,1). Furthermore, in Rev 17, the prostitute who is sitting on ‘many waters’ (17,1) is at the same time also sitting on the same beast (17,3), indicating that the beast lies submerged under the waters. Since the beast is the same in each context, his place of origin—variously named the Abyss, the sea or the many waters—must also be synonymous. Later, an angel reveals that the waters represent the ‘races and crowds and nations and tongues’ (17,15), which is a recurring expression in the text referring to the people *on whom* the prostitute sits (17,15), *about whom* the prophet John must prophesy (10,11), *to whom* the two witnesses appear rising from the dead (11,9), *over whom* the beast will rule (13,7) and *from whom* countless numbers of people are being redeemed by the blood of Christ (5,9; 7,9). In

them and kill them.<sup>257</sup> <sup>8</sup>And their corpses *lie* on the street of the great city which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where indeed their Lord was crucified.<sup>258</sup> <sup>9</sup>And *people* from *many* races and tribes and tongues and

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brief, this expression, representing the Abyss, the sea and the waters, refers to the masses of unredeemed humanity. Similarly, for St. Augustine, the Abyss symbolizes “the countless number of godless men whose bitter hatred of God’s Church comes from the abysmal depths of their hearts” (*City of God*, XX. 7). So, this beast, whose identity will be revealed later, is a member of unredeemed human society, from which he emerges here and shows himself to be a fierce antagonist of Christ’s witnesses and their prophetic message. For good reason he is described metaphorically as ‘a beast’, but in fact he is a man (cf. Rev 13,18).

<sup>257</sup> The reference to warfare is a strange way to say that the beast has the two witnesses put to death. However, the wording alludes to a very similar expression in 13,5: “and he [the beast] was allowed to make war against the saints and to overcome them” (cf. also 12,17), implying that the two witnesses are to be counted among those saints whom the beast is allowed to combat and overcome during his 42-month reign (13,5). In fact, since the 42-month reign of the beast is about to start, just as the 1,260-day mission of the two witnesses is ending (see n. 247), it would be true to say that they are the first of God’s people to be put to death in the great tribulation caused by the beast and his accomplice (7,14; 13,5-7.15-16; see n. 184).

<sup>258</sup> What happens after their death is now described with unusual detail. First, we are told that they are killed in “the great city, spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where indeed their Lord was crucified”. The last part of the description leaves no doubt that they are indeed Christian prophets and that they are killed in the place where Christ was crucified, i.e., historical Jerusalem. These straightforward conclusions reflect the biblical view that “it is impossible that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem” (Lk 13,33). The rest of the description presents no problem if we understand it as a series of names for historical Jerusalem at the time of the death of the two witnesses. Great confusion has arisen because, elsewhere in the text, the ‘great city’ is the title for Babylon, the wealthy and powerful city that is supported by the beast at first, but is finally destroyed by him (Rev 14,8; 16,19; 17,7.18; 18,10). The confusion resolves if the title ‘great city’ is understood as referring not just to Babylon, but to any city intimately supported by the beast. The fact that it is here applied to Jerusalem means that the beast has transferred his support from Babylon to this city, before turning against Babylon and destroying her

nations look at their corpses for three days and a half, and they do not allow their corpses to be placed in a tomb.<sup>259</sup>

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(17,16-18). At the death of the two witnesses, Jerusalem becomes the centre of the beast's world empire—the 'throne of the beast' (cf. 16,10)—a move that coincides precisely with the 'trampling' (profanation) of the Holy City by the nations (11,2; see n. 243). This interpretation also helps to understand the spiritual renaming of Jerusalem as 'Sodom and Egypt': before the beast establishes himself in Jerusalem, this city was spiritually called Zion, but now she is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, not only because of their association with immorality and oppression respectively, but also because they are both places from which God's people had to depart in a hurry. So, the spiritual renaming of Jerusalem implies the total departure of Zion from Jerusalem—the complete separation of God's holy presence from the historical city of Jerusalem—and raises the question as to Zion's whereabouts during the 42-month period of the beast's reign. The answer to this question is to be found in the vision of Mount Zion in Rev 14,1-5, where the 144,000 are assembled with the Lamb. The important point at present is that this Mount Zion is no longer to be found in the historical city of Jerusalem. Even in archaeological circles, Mount Zion "has been something of a moveable mountain" (Bargil Pixner, *Biblical Archeological Review*, May-June 1990, 20). See also [link 18](#).

<sup>259</sup> The lifeless corpses of the two witnesses lie on a broad street, or public square, in Jerusalem for 3½ days, because people from the unredeemed masses (see n. 256) do not allow them to be taken away and buried. Instead, these people just look at the corpses. This is a very odd situation, unless one recalls that Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the third day and that, as his witnesses, these two are here witnessing to his Resurrection (11,11-12). It is not just to insult them that the spectators deny them burial, but to stage a refutation of their witness to Christ's Resurrection, and thereby indirectly disprove the Resurrection of Christ. They leave them for half a day longer than the three days of Christ's Resurrection, to avoid being accused of stopping too soon. Their position is like that of the sceptics who announced that the apostles had come to remove Christ's body from the tomb and then claim he had resurrected (Mt 28,11-15). In arguments against a literal interpretation, it is often said that it is impossible that so many people from different parts of the world could be watching the corpses of the two witnesses. Since the invention of television and live streaming video, this objection can be easily dismissed.

<sup>10</sup>And the inhabitants of the earth rejoice over them and are glad, and they send gifts to one another,<sup>260</sup> because these two prophets tormented the inhabitants of the earth.<sup>261</sup>

<sup>11</sup>And after the three days and a half, the Spirit of life from God entered into them and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell on those watching them.<sup>262</sup> <sup>12</sup>And they heard a great voice from heaven saying to

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**260** In Revelation, the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ is another expression, like the variations on ‘every tribe and tongue and race and nation’, for the rebellious and unredeemed (Rev 6,18; 8,13; 11,10; 13,8.12.14; 14,6; 17,2.8; n. 155). Here, these expressions are used in parallel, showing that they have virtually the same meaning. These people celebrate the death of the two witnesses by sending gifts to one another in a way that recalls the victory of the Jews over their enemies, and the origin of the feast of Purim, related in the book of Esther (esp. Esth 9,19). By analogy, the two witnesses are being compared to Haman and his household, who were hanged outside the gates of Susa for conspiring to exterminate the Jewish people under their rule. Incredibly, they are ranked among those plotting a genocide of the Jews.

**261** There is a great celebration because, now they are dead, the two witnesses will no longer be able to torment the inhabitants of the earth with their plagues and warnings. Implied is a public recognition of the miraculous power with which the two witnesses were endowed. Even the faithful may be driven to ask why these powers were used to bring torment and not healing. The short answer is that they need to do this to demonstrate the fulfilment of the Jewish expectation for a messiah like Moses and a prophet like Elijah (see n. 254). Furthermore, they do actually find themselves in a similar situation to that of Moses and Elijah, who brought plagues in order to reveal the power of God and communicate his will to peoples who did not want either to listen or to believe. Nowadays, the people who refuse the Gospel are no less hard and stubborn than the adversaries of Moses and Elijah, so a demonstration of the same severity is needed in order to recall them to repentance.

**262** At the very end of the period during which burial was refused (11,9), the staged repudiation of the Resurrection turns into the opposite—a staged proof of the resurrection of the two witnesses, and also a strong witness to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The corpses return to life and stand on their feet. The great fear (φόβος μέγας), which then falls on the spectators, is a reverential fear (awe) which prepares many of them to repent, believe and “give glory to the God of heaven” (Rev 11,13). The

them: Come up here.<sup>263</sup> And they went up to heaven in the cloud, and their enemies watched them.<sup>264</sup> <sup>13</sup>And in that hour a great earthquake occurred, and a tenth of the city fell and seven thousand names of men were killed in the earthquake,<sup>265</sup>

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wording of the expression “the Spirit of life from God entered into them and they stood on their feet” alludes to Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones, which prophesies the eschatological restoration of the people of Israel (Ez 37,1-14): “I prophesied as he told me, and the spirit came into them; they came alive and stood upright, a vast army” (Ez 37,10). The implication is that, through their resurrection, the two witnesses link Ezekiel’s vision of the restoration of the House of Israel as a faithful nation, to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Church’s living faith in this. This interpretation is clearly consistent with the view that the mission of the two witnesses terminates in Jerusalem (see n. 258) and is directed principally to the Jews (see n. 254), in the context of their national restoration at the end of history. The restoration has taken place in stages, as depicted in Ezekiel’s vision: first the bones coming together, then the flesh, then the skin, and finally the breath of life and the return to being living witnesses of God in their own land (Ez 37,14). The two witnesses, with their eschatological witness to Christ’s Resurrection, bring this process of national restoration to completion with the return of many of their former enemies to true faith in God (Rev 11,13; but see n. 266). This indeed accords with the fulfilment of Paul’s wish for the reacceptance of his fellow countrymen: “For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?” (Rom 11,15).

<sup>263</sup> The two witnesses ascend to heaven in obedience to a command, in a similar way to John, the author, in Rev 4,1.

<sup>264</sup> They ascend to heaven on ‘the cloud’. The use of the definite article here implies that the reader is already familiar with this cloud. The only other mention of a cloud in the NT, in this context, is in Acts 1,9, when the risen Jesus was lifted up with his disciples watching “and a cloud took him out of their sight”. The cloud is the means by which Christ and the two witnesses move from the visible and immanent reality to the invisible and transcendent. By way of contrast with the Ascension of Jesus, in front of his friends, the two ascending witnesses are watched by their enemies.

<sup>265</sup> Shortly after the ascension of the two witnesses, a large earthquake shakes the same city where these events took place, historical Jerusalem: a tenth of this city falls and 7,000 people are killed. The part most vulnerable to earthquake damage is the Old City, which has a high



and the rest became terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.<sup>266</sup>

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population density as well as the greatest concentration of ancient sites sacred to all three monotheistic religions. Extensive damage to this area would be a catastrophe for these religions, and for the people living there, so some context is needed to interpret this destructive earthquake. We suggested above (n. 249) that the mission of the two witnesses takes place while a false temple is being built. The details are furnished in Rev 13,13-17, which indicates the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple by the beast and his followers (n. 316), who by now have established themselves in this city (n. 258). By this time, at the end of the 1,260 days, the Islamic shrines on the Temple Mount will have been removed, most probably as a result of religious rivalry and conflict, and the construction of the third temple will be nearing completion. In this context, then, the earthquake would certainly be interpreted as a powerful sign of divine disapproval for the rebuilding of the temple, and a ringing endorsement of the warnings of the two witnesses at the completion of their mission.

<sup>266</sup> The 'rest' refers to the survivors of the earthquake. They are primarily residents of Jerusalem and should not be understood as unbelievers elsewhere in the world. After the resurrection of the two witnesses, *great fear* (φόβος μέγας) fell on those who watched them, including those in Jerusalem who *become terrified* (ἐγένοντο ἐμφοβοί) a few minutes later, on account of the earthquake. The combination of these fearful experiences leads the survivors in Jerusalem to 'give glory to the God of heaven'. The fear induced by these events is probably a genuine and holy 'fear of God' and the resulting act of 'giving glory to God' implies giving God the worship that is due to him, in a way that suggests true repentance. This interpretation of 'glorifying God' is indeed consistent with its use elsewhere in the text of Revelation, and in other parts of Scripture, as an idiom for true conversion (Rev 14,7; 15,4; 16,9; Jer 13,16; *1Ezra* 9,8; cf. Acts 13,48; 1Pet 2,12). However, if all the survivors truly and permanently convert to God, it must be asked how this city could then promptly become the seat of the beast and the centre of his brutally antichristian empire. Indeed, elsewhere in the OT, 'giving glory to God' may also be the response of unbelievers who for one reason or another are forced to acknowledge the reality of God's sovereignty (e.g., Josh 7,19; 1Sam 6,5; Dn 4,37 *Theod.*; Dn 2,46-47; cf. 1Pet. 2,12; Jn 9,24; Prov 1,24-32; Acts 12,23). In both Dn 2,46-47 and 4,34-37, King Nebuchadnezzar's recognition of God's sovereignty simply results in the addition of another god to the pagan pantheon, rather than conversion to covenantal faith. So, although the survivors certainly do turn to God following the earthquake in Rev 11,13,



*Baseline Prophetic Narrative resumed – the Seventh Trumpet*

<sup>14</sup>The second Woe passed; behold, the third Woe is coming quickly.<sup>267</sup> <sup>15</sup>And the seventh angel blew, and there were loud voices in heaven saying:

The kingdom of the world  
has become our Lord's and his Christ's,  
and he shall reign for ever and ever.<sup>268</sup>

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there must be doubts about the quality and duration of their conversion. That it may be only very temporary, and susceptible to diabolical manipulation, is supported by the use of the title '*God of heaven*' in only one other part of the text: "And the fifth poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was darkened and they bit their tongues from the pain and they blasphemed the *God of heaven* from their pains and for their sores, and they did not repent of their deeds" (Rev 16,10-11). The use of this title serves to identify those who blaspheme the *God of heaven* with those who earlier gave him glory (11,13). Hence the act of acknowledging the true God in 11,13 is not a guarantee against blaspheming the same God at a later stage, and therefore does not necessarily represent an enduring conversion to the Faith. This act should rather be understood as a transient acknowledgment of the power of God, which can either turn towards enduring faith and salvation, or be turned into blasphemy and enduring loss. It is in the context of this acknowledgement of God that we can more fully understand the lengths to which the beast and his false prophet must subsequently go, in order to deceive these 'inhabitants of the earth' (Rev 13). It is indeed in this context that the temple, rebuilt under the direction of the beast (see n. 265), is exploited by the false prophet in a way that totally deceives the 'inhabitants of the earth' (13,13-14; n. 316). This context also helps to explain the moral gravity of their blasphemy against God, by revealing that they had previously come to know him and acknowledge his power.

<sup>267</sup> The interruption that started at 10,1 ends with the ascension of the two witnesses at 11,13. Now we re-join the baseline narrative at the end of the second woe, which is the 6<sup>th</sup> and penultimate trumpet-plague (see n. 217), and must prepare for the third woe, which describes the events launched by the sounding of the 7<sup>th</sup> and last trumpet. For the contents of the 'third woe', see n. 274.

<sup>268</sup> The 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet sounds and there is an exclamation from heaven, like a shout of victory: the Lord God and his Christ have become sovereign over the entire world, indicating the end of the prophesied 42-month reign of

<sup>16</sup>And the twenty-four elders, sitting on their thrones before God, fell down on their faces and worshipped God <sup>17</sup>saying:

We thank you Lord God Almighty,  
the One who is and who was,  
because you have taken up your great power  
and have come to reign.<sup>269</sup>

<sup>18</sup>And the nations were angry, and your anger has come,<sup>270</sup>

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the beast and the end of history. This kingdom will last eternally. It is the fulfilment of the 'Mystery of God' promised with a solemn oath in 10,5-7 (see n. 233). It is the complete granting of the petition "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 7,10) in the Lord's prayer, and it is the realization of the 'blessed hope' of Christians of all times and places. Comparing this heavenly liturgical scene with Rev 7,9-10 and 19,1, the loud voices are probably those of the innumerable host of martyrs standing before the throne. Their exclamation tells us how we are to understand the overused and poorly understood expression the 'End of the World': this simply means the end of the kingdom of the world, which is to say, the end of the world as a system in many ways separate from God.

<sup>269</sup> The 24 elders follow the martyrs' exclamation with prostrations and an acclamation of thanksgiving for the coming of the Godhead in his fullness to rule over the world. The divine name has changed from "The One who is, who was and who is to come" (Rev 1,4.8; 4,8) to "The One who is and who was" (11,17; 16,5), for now the Lord Almighty has come, and is no longer coming. The acclamation of the 24 elders goes on to list four main elements of the final consummation signaled by the last trumpet, confirming that the text is speaking of the final outcome. These are all aspects of the final eschatological transformation of life on this planet, and are more fully described in the concluding parts of the text (cf. 19,6ff). So, although this passage (11,15-19) refers briefly to events in the very last days, the actual prophecy for these events is recounted later in the text. We should therefore expect to be taken back over these events in the text that follows (Rev 12-22). As an aside, this brief list will be useful in the interpretation of the thousand-year reign of Christ (the 'millennium' described in Rev 20,4-6). Here, suffice it to note that there is no place for a thousand-year interval between the sound of the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet, the coming of the Godhead in fullness and the consummation of all things including the final judgment (see n. 448).

<sup>270</sup> The anger of the nations refers to the assembly of armies for the final battle (16,12-14; 17,14; 19,19; 20,7-9) and the coming of the Lord's anger

also the time for the dead to be judged,<sup>271</sup>  
and to give the reward to your servants the prophets  
and to the saints  
and to them that fear your name,  
to the small and to the great,<sup>272</sup>  
and to destroy those who are destroying the earth.<sup>273</sup>

<sup>19</sup>And the Sanctuary of God in heaven was opened,<sup>274</sup> and the ark of his

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refers to their total defeat by the arrival of the Lord and his armies (17,14; 19,19-21; 20,7-10)—a theme taken from the messianic Psalm 2,1-5.

**271** The time for the dead to be judged points to the time of the final judgment, when the dead will rise and appear before the great white throne (Rev 20,11-15).

**272** The reward of the prophets, the saints, and those who fear God's name, meaning those of every religion who believe in the true God, is the right to enter the Holy City, the New Jerusalem (22,14), which is described in Rev 21–22. The time for the realization of this promise is following the final judgment.

**273** The destruction of those destroying the earth is another aspect of the final judgment. It is not described more fully later, but its mention here is further evidence, if it is needed (see n. 233), that God does not wish the destruction of planet earth. The transformation outlined in this passage does not involve the planet's destruction or the transfer of life to another part of the universe. If God wanted to destroy this planet, those who are already destroying it would not be punished, for they would merely be doing God's will. There is no indication in the text that the planet 'earth' will be any the less pleasing to God in the future than it was when he created it (Gn 1,9-10).

**274** The opening of the heavenly part of the Sanctuary does not just refer to the opening of a door, since the door has already been opened (Rev 4,1). Instead, it refers to the removal of the existing separation between the inside of the heavenly Sanctuary and the surrounding area—the separation that corresponds to the curtain that used to hang at the entrance of the Tent (Ex 26,36; 40,28) and subsequently of the Sanctuary modelled on it, in the first and second temples in Jerusalem (cf. 1Macc 4,51). This curtain was opened at the start of the great feasts, so that the pilgrims standing in the inner courts could see inside the Sanctuary, right up to the veil that impeded the view of the 'Holy of holies' (cf. *Enc. Jud.*, 1971, vol 14, "Sacrifice", col 610; vol 15, "Temple", col 978). By analogy, the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary, here, indicates the start of a great feast:

covenant was seen in his Sanctuary,<sup>275</sup> and there were lightnings and noises and thunders, an earthquake and a great hail.<sup>276</sup>

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“blessed are they who are invited to the wedding banquet of the Lamb” (Rev 19,9). But in contrast to the earthly Sanctuary, there is no veil dividing the heavenly Sanctuary (see n. 43), so the view of the interior includes the revelation of God on his heavenly throne. This beatific vision is seen by those, on earth, who are closest to the heavenly Sanctuary, in this case the 144,000 (see n. 324). On the literary level, it is important to note that the event of ‘the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary’ is also described at 15,5. It is fair to assume that the ‘opening of the heavenly Sanctuary’ is a unique event, and that the second mention is a ‘doublet’, or repetition, indicating (1) that the text between these two references (12,1–15,4) is an ‘inclusion’, otherwise known as an ‘interpolation’ or intercalation; (2) that the narrative continuity is broken by this ‘inclusion’ and is resumed with the second reference to ‘opening’ at 15,5; (3) that the ‘inclusion’ refers back to events prior to the ‘opening’ (as if it were in a parenthesis). In fact, the references to the periods of 1,260 days (12,6) and 42 months (13,5-7) in this section of text show that it refers back to, and overlaps with, chapter 11, at the start of which the same time periods are mentioned for the first time (11,3 and 11,2). The baseline narrative of the text therefore jumps from 11,19 to 15,5—the passage which describes the preparations for the bowl-plagues in Rev 16. The bowl-plagues, then, are the contents of the ‘third woe’ announced by the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet (11,14).

<sup>275</sup> In the OT, the ark was held to be the inferior part of the heavenly throne, ‘the footstool’ of our God (1Chr 28,2; Ps 99,5; 132,7; Lam 2,1, Ez 43,7). Since it contained the tablets of God’s Law—the tablets of the testimony—the ark also served as a testimony against those who had transgressed the Law and rebelled against God (cf. Dt 31,24-27). The revelation of the ark will therefore serve as a testimony against those inhabitants of the earth who continue to rebel against God shortly before his judgments come down on top of them, in the form of the bowls of God’s anger (Rev 15,5–16,21). Perhaps more significantly, the revelation of the ark (11,19) and the tabernacle (15,5) at the time when “the glory of the Lord will be seen in the cloud” (2Macc 2,8; cf. Rev 15,8), and after “God gathers his people together again and shows them mercy” (Rev 7), are all elements of an ancient prophecy, attributed to the prophet Jeremiah, concerning the return of God’s presence among his people (2Macc 2,4-18, esp. 5-8; *Par. Jer.* 3:7-8; *2Bar* 6:5-7; 80:2; *Qu’ran* 17:8,104).

<sup>276</sup> The traditional accompaniments of theophany, see n. 116.

*The Third Interruption (12,1–15,4): Seven Prophetic Visions* **277**

XII <sup>1</sup>And a great sign was seen in heaven,<sup>278</sup> a woman clothed with the sun and the moon beneath her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars,

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**277** As noted above (n. 274), the passage from Rev 12,1–15,4 is an ‘inclusion’, which is to say that although it is included between 11,19 and 15,5, it does not actually belong there: the repetition of the two time periods (1,260 days at 11,3 and 12,6; 42 months at 11,2 and 13,5) shows that it runs parallel to the preceding chapter, specifically to the passage (11,1-13) that we have identified with the prophecy that was given to John to ‘prophesy again’ (10,11). Together, 11,1-13 and 12,1–15,4 overlap to form a prophecy of events that take place immediately prior to the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet blast at the end of history (11,14-15). We will refer to it as the ‘central prophecy’. The first part of this prophecy (11,3-13) concerns the way it will be publicly announced (the mission of the two witnesses) and the second part (12,1–15,4) concerns the content of the prophecy itself, up to the sign of the completion of the new temple, for which the prophecy acts metaphorically as a measuring rod (15,5-8; see n. 238). A cursory glance at this ‘central prophecy’ shows that it is composed of seven prophetic visions introduced by a verb of seeing: 12,1-18; 13,1-10; 13,11-18; 14,1-5; 14,6-13; 14,14-20; 15,1-4). Further verbal-thematic links associate this section with the first (7,1-17) and fourth (17,1–19,5) interruptions (see n. 108).

**278** The first of the seven visions (12,1-18) unfolds from the appearance of two signs in heaven, which form the subjects of the entire vision. The first of the two signs is described as ‘great’. In the biblical tradition, the function of a sign is at least as important, if not more so, than the form of the sign itself. So, a ‘great sign’ is one that is great in its effects. A sign has been defined as an object, an occurrence or an event through which a person is to recognize, learn, remember or perceive the credibility of something. Directly or indirectly, the author of a sign is almost always God, although the devil can also produce signs, usually with the intention of deceiving (Rev 13,13-14; 16,14; 19,20; Mt 24,24; Mk 13,22; 2Thess 2,9). Those who witness the sign may experience one or several of the following effects: the gift of new knowledge or understanding, the increase of faith, the assurance of protection, the recollection of an agreement or covenant, or the confirmation of a divine calling or mission (from Helfmeyer’s analysis of ‘sign’: “אֹת” in *TDOT*, 1:170-188). When applied to the great sign in Rev 12,1, this definition serves to halt the rush to identify it and to focus attention, instead, on the way it affects those who see it. The author supports this approach by using the passive past tense of the Greek verb

and she is pregnant and cries out with the pains of labour and the distress of giving birth.<sup>279</sup>

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'to see' (ὥφθη: *was seen*), here, in contrast to his use of the first person active past tense (εἶδον: *I saw*) elsewhere in the text. This form of the verb is, in fact, only used in the context of the three signs seen in heaven (12,1; 12,3 and 11,19, which is linked to 15,1), and it implies that these signs are not only seen by the author, but also by certain other people. The event of seeing the signs in heaven causes those who see them 'to recognize, learn, remember or perceive the credibility' of the thing to which the signs refer, namely to the exodus of the woman to the desert, where she will be protected from the dragon and his furious attacks on 'the rest of her descendants' (12,6.14-17).

<sup>279</sup> The first sign is a pregnant woman, suffering the pains of childbirth. This is reminiscent of Is 7,14: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." However, whereas Isaiah was referring to the real birth of an ideal king on earth, which the Church has consistently taken to be Jesus Christ (after Mt 1,23), the woman in this vision is seen in heaven and the birth she is about to undergo is a heavenly, or spiritual, birth. Her labour pains represent the 'birth pains of the Messiah'—an expression referring to the suffering that is expected to accompany the coming of the Messiah. The heavenly character of the woman is symbolized by her majestic dress: she is clothed with the sun, with the moon beneath her feet and a crown of 12 stars on her head: or in other words, she is the queen of heaven whom the heavenly bodies are pleased to serve as adornment and support. The service rendered by the heavenly bodies recalls Joseph's dream (Gn 37,9-11) of the sun and the moon and 11 stars bowing down before him, giving him honour. The sun and moon are Joseph's father, Jacob, and mother, Rachel, and the 11 stars are his 11 brothers (Gn 37,10). In the present context, the sun, the moon and the 12 stars that serve and adorn the pregnant woman represent, by analogy, the Patriarchal family of the House of Israel honouring this pregnant female descendant of theirs. Her identity is revealed by the fact she gives birth to the Messiah (Rev 12,5; see n. 283), so this great sign represents the Messiah's mother. However, she does not represent an individual, since she is also the mother of all those who keep the Commandments of God and have the Witness of Jesus (12,17). Instead, she represents the collective people of God straining, and eventually succeeding, to produce its ideal king Messiah, Jesus Christ, and his faithful followers. In the OT, this community is called Zion and, in the NT, she is called the Church. She is Mary, the mother of Jesus, in so far as Mary

<sup>3</sup>And another sign was seen in heaven and behold, a great fiery-red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and with seven diadems on his heads,<sup>280</sup> <sup>4</sup>and his tail drags a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth.<sup>281</sup>

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epitomizes Zion by individually representing faithful Israel in history and then spiritually representing the Church.

<sup>280</sup> The second sign is a great fiery-red dragon, with 7 crowned heads and 10 horns. Its crowns and horns represent great authority and power (cf. 13,2). Its identity is given in 12,9: “the great dragon... the ancient serpent called the devil and Satan; the one deceiving the whole world”. As a sign, though, we must first decide whether *the devil is just a sign*, or whether this is *just a sign of the devil*. The first option is a reductionist view that considers the devil to be just the sign of, or another name for, the postulated ‘evil instinct’ in every human, which can be overcome by the individual’s decision to favour the complementary ‘good instinct’, principally by observing the Torah. This may represent the Jewish view of evil, but it hardly fits the cosmic scale of the mythical monster depicted here as *a sign of the devil*. This sign matches the NT Christian view, which ultimately derives from 1*Enoch* (Book of Watchers) and sees the devil as a powerful spirit, the leader of the rebel angels, and the root cause of pan-historical, human wickedness. But what exactly is this ‘sign of the devil’ doing in heaven? The most basic ‘sign of the devil’ is ‘Sin’ and the ‘sign of the devil *in heaven*’ is sin that has reached up to heaven (cf. 18,5)—sin that has a spiritual quality. Called ‘spiritual pride’, it is an impenitent form of corruption that deceitfully presents itself as holy and approved by God. This ‘spiritual sin’, or ‘sinful spirit’ is not only extremely corrupting to unsuspecting persons, but is also a scandal for the faith, precisely because it dresses itself in piety and holiness and operates in places where one least expects to find it. Nevertheless, it should still be distinguished from the devil itself, the origin of all evil, the defeated enemy of Jesus Christ presently locked and chained in the Abyss (Rev 20,2-3; see nn. 216, 450). Precisely how the devil, which is presently locked and chained in the Abyss, can continue to have a powerful influence in heaven, through this ‘spiritual sin’, is a mystery. It is a mystery that opposes the Mystery of God (cf. 10,7) and is therefore very aptly called the ‘mystery of iniquity’ (cf. 2Thess 2,7). This mystery will be fully revealed and explained later in the text (Rev 17–19,5).

<sup>281</sup> The devil’s sign in heaven, ‘spiritual sin’, causes the ‘fall’ of a third of the stars, which are angels (cf. Rev 1,20). This is an enormous number, which proves the power and persistence of the devil’s sinful influence in



And the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth so that he might devour her child whenever she gives birth.<sup>282</sup> <sup>5</sup>And she gave birth to a son, a male, who is to shepherd all the nations with a rod of iron. And her child was caught up to God and to his throne.<sup>283</sup>

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heaven. The fall of these angels essentially denotes their corruption and lack of fidelity to the service of God. The fraction of angels affected (a third) aligns with the trumpet-plagues (8,6-9,20), which are mostly caused by 'fallen' heavenly bodies and bring damage to a third part of their targets on earth. We must not forget that this prophecy describes eschatological events, and so it would be incorrect to understand this vision as referring to the primordial fall of the angels (e.g., Gn 6,1-4; 1En 86). More relevant is the passage in Daniel that speaks about a part of the army and the stars of heaven that are cast down to earth and trampled by a king, who is called the 'little horn' (Dn 8,9-14). As the stars in Daniel refer to the righteous (cf. Dn 12,3), this curious passage seems to refer to the apostasy of many high-ranking officials and soldiers among the Jews in the days of the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes, offering this as an explanation for the cessation of sacrifice and the trampling (profanation) of the temple at that time (167-164 BC). Applying the same rationale to this passage, the fall of the stars represents the apostasy of many Christians, even high-ranking Church leaders, leading to the rejection of this worldly part of the Church (the outer court of the temple that was given to the nations) and the trampling (profanation) of the Holy City for 42 months (Rev 11,2; see n. 242).

<sup>282</sup> The dragon's primary intention is to devour the child that the woman is labouring to deliver. He has taken up position and awaits his victim. The antagonism of the 'ancient serpent' for the male child, the woman and her offspring recalls the Creator's judgment on the ancient serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers" (Gn 3,15; cf. Rev 12,17). We should note that the dragon's desire to 'devour' the child represents a desire not only to kill the child, but to make him disappear completely, as if he had never come into existence.

<sup>283</sup> The male child who is to shepherd (rule over) all the nations with an iron rod is the long-awaited Messiah, anticipated in Ps 2,9 and finally manifested in Rev 19,15 (cf. 2,27). The child escapes the jaws of the dragon by being immediately 'seized up' to God's throne. The meaning of the birth and rapture of the male child has been the focus of endless exegetical endeavour down the centuries. No one denies that it strongly evokes the historical birth and Ascension of Jesus Christ, representing his life, mission, death and Resurrection in a highly condensed way. But here the birth of the Messiah is not described as a historical event in the past, but as a



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spiritual event in a prophecy for the end of history (see [link 10](#)), taking place in a part of heaven that is inferior to the throne of God (the 'second heaven', see n. 16). The birth rapidly follows the seeing of the two signs (12,1.3) and implies that those who see the signs also witness the heavenly birth. Our interpretation of this passage is guided by the ancient Christian tradition of the mystical birth of Christ in the soul, thoroughly documented by Hugo Rahner ("Die Gottesburt", *Symbole der Kirche*, Salzburg, 1964). The seeing of the signs 'in heaven' can then be understood as the soul's immediate preparation—the means by which it is raised to the heights of contemplation—for a mystical experience (i.e., 'rapture' or 'ecstasy', as described in the 6<sup>th</sup> Mansion in St. Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*, cf. n. 172) in which Jesus Christ is fully and directly revealed to it. Even though the soul's immediate experience of this divine life is transient, it creates in the soul a fervent and enduring desire to flee from the things of this world and re-unite itself with the source of this divine life, who has now been seized up to the throne of God in heaven. So, we propose that the individuals who are inwardly given the vision of these signs rapidly 'give birth' to a revelation of Jesus Christ from within the depths of their own soul, just as the woman gives birth to the male child in the vision. In this way, through the personal experience of this 'heavenly birth', the one who sees the signs comes to identify himself with Zion, the woman in the vision. So complete is this identification that, like the woman in the vision, he then flees to a place that has been prepared in the desert (12,6.14), where he is united with all those who have had a similar experience (cf. 14,1-5). So, in answer to the crucial question about the identity of the male child, it is no other than Jesus Christ born spiritually from the depths of the purified and faithful soul, revealing his eternal and divine life in a way that also recalls his historical humanity. One important corollary to the mystical interpretation of Rev 12 is that, as a sign, the woman in the vision not only represents Zion, the mother community which produced the Messiah. She also represents the holy and blessed soul raised to the heights of contemplation and granted a revelation of Jesus Christ from within. Confusion between these two aspects of the 'great sign', brought into identity through the mystical experience of 'heavenly birth', has fuelled the long debate between the collective and individual interpretations of this passage. Similarly, as a sign in this vision, the dragon primarily represents the sinful spirit that opposes the revelation of Jesus Christ to the contemplative soul (the 'heavenly birth'). The dragon's desire to devour the male child at birth (12,4) represents the sinful spirit's attempt to destroy the soul's experience of Eternal Life, and eradicate its desire for union with the 'throne of God' in heaven. So whenever 'woman' or 'dragon'

<sup>6</sup>And the woman fled into the desert, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there they might nourish her<sup>284</sup> for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.<sup>285</sup>

<sup>7</sup>And a war took place in heaven—Michael and his angels fighting with the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought <sup>8</sup>and did not prevail, and no longer was any place to be found for them in heaven.<sup>286</sup>

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is mentioned in the following vision narrative, we should remember to what they refer in this particular context. For a full presentation of this 'mystical interpretation', see [link 21](#).

<sup>284</sup> After the heavenly birth, the woman escapes from the dragon by fleeing to a place in the desert prepared for her by God. This is the first of two references to the 'exodus' of the woman (12,6.14). In the second reference (12,14), it is stated that she is given 'the two wings of the great eagle' to fly to the desert, which is an expression taken from an OT account of the Israelites' exodus to the Sinai desert to escape their captivity in Egypt (Ex 19,4; 32,11; cf. Is 40,31). So, God helps the woman to escape to the desert, for he has prepared a place of refuge there, where he arranges for her to be 'nourished' and protected. In brief, God cares for her with a concern that recalls the sojourn of the ancient Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai (e.g., Ex 16,1-15). The use of the definite article with the word 'desert' implies that the reader knows which desert is referred to. The OT Exodus allusion immediately makes us think of the desert of Sinai. As noted above, the woman refers to Zion, the faithful community now represented by those who have seen her sign in heaven and come to identify with her through the 'heavenly birth' of Christ in their soul. These are the people who now flee to the place in the desert. From the mention of the mountain of the same name, Mt. Zion, these people can be identified with the 144,000 males in Rev 14,1-5.

<sup>285</sup> These men go to their place in the desert for 1,260 days, which coincides exactly with the duration of the mission of the two witnesses (Rev 11,3). Since the cause of their exodus to the desert is their experience of the revelation of Jesus Christ (see n. 283), it is this 'heavenly birth' that determines the start of the period of 1,260 days, at the beginning of the final week of years (see nn. 198, 247).

<sup>286</sup> In heaven, the dragon has failed to achieve his main aims: the male child was seized to heaven and the woman fled to the desert on the wings of the great eagle. However, he has corrupted a third of God's angels, so now the archangel Michael, the defender of God's people (Dn 12,1; 1En 90:14) is leading an army against him and his angels. In the war that

<sup>9</sup>And the great dragon was thrown, the ancient serpent called the devil and Satan; the one deceiving the whole world was thrown to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.<sup>287</sup>

<sup>10</sup>And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying:<sup>288</sup>

Now is come the salvation and the power  
and the kingdom of our God

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follows, the dragon and his angels are defeated and expelled from heaven. It is difficult to avoid relating this vision to the times of Christ, when Christ ascended to heaven, Satan was cast down from heaven (Lk 10,18; Jn 12,31, n.131) and the Christians fled to Pella in Transjordan. They do indeed vividly recall those first-century events, but we must remind ourselves again that this vision is a prophecy for the end of history, the period immediately preceding Christ's Second Coming, and that it all unfolds from the seeing of the two signs in heaven (see also [link 10](#)). The expulsion of the dragon and his angels from heaven represents the defeat of the sinful spirit that tried to stifle Christ's self-revelation at its birth (Rev 12,4)—a defeat that makes way for the acknowledgement of the truth of John's prophecy and especially of the 'heavenly birth' as the spiritual event that initiates the final and most testing period of history (see n. 284).

<sup>287</sup> The momentous defeat of the dragon and his angels is repeated for emphasis. The dragon's various names bring together several strands of ancient tradition: the great 'dragon', or chaos monster, of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology (Tiamat, Seth-Typhon, Leviathan, Tannin, Tan), the 'ancient serpent' of the Garden of Eden (Gn 3), the 'devil' (Διάβολος) or 'slanderer', which is the Septuagint translation for 'Satan', who was the angelic adversary, prosecutor and accuser of mankind in the heavenly court (cf. Nm 22,22; 1Sam 29,4, 1Kgs 5,4; 11,14,23; Job 1,6-11; Zech 3,1-10; Rev 12,10), and 'deceiver of the whole world' (cf. Jn 8,44; Rev 20,8). He has several other names which are not included in this list (e.g., Shemihazah, Asael, Azazel, Belial, Beliar, Beelzebul, Lucifer, and see n. 216 for Abaddon/Apollyon/Destroyer, the angel of the Abyss). As the leader of an army of angels, like the archangel Michael, the devil is here represented as an archangel. The angels that fight for him are surely recruited from the third of the angels whom the devil casts down to the earth with his tail.

<sup>288</sup> The unidentified loud voice is probably that of the martyrs, for later in this verse they refer to the dragon's victims as 'our brothers' (as in 6,10; 7,10; 11,15; 19,1). It is unlikely to be an angel, because, when speaking to the human author, the angel describes himself as a 'fellow servant of yours and of your brothers', but not 'our brothers' (19,10; 22,9).

and the authority of his Christ,  
because the accuser of our brothers was thrown,  
the one accusing them before our God, day and night.<sup>289</sup>  
<sup>11</sup>And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb  
and because of the word of their witness,  
and they loved not their life up to death.<sup>290</sup>  
<sup>12</sup>Therefore be glad heavens and those who are dwelling there.  
Woe to the earth and the sea,  
because the devil has come down to you with great passion  
knowing that his time is short.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> The martyrs tell us that the removal of the 'spirit of sin' from heaven has brought about a situation in which the salvation and power and kingdom of God, and the authority of Christ, are plainly experienced and enjoyed. Their full expression on earth had previously been impeded by the presence of the sinful spirit in heaven, and especially by its accusations against Christians. Its accusations would certainly have the effect of dampening the faith of Christ's followers and in this way inhibit those authentic acts of divine power and authority that were so effective in the mission of the early Church. With little or no faith, these miracles cannot happen. So, the martyrs are here celebrating a return to the faith and works of the early Church. As noted before, this corresponds to the completion of the instruction to John (11,1-2) and especially to the separation of the inner and outer courts of the temple, which refers to a judgment within the Church (see nn. 242, 281).

<sup>290</sup> The victory over the presence of the sinful spirit in heaven was won by the blood of Christ on the Cross, combined with the witness and martyrdom of his followers. The mention of the witness of the martyrs 'up to death' shows that this victory over the devil's sinful influence in heaven is not here related to the mission or passion of Christ alone (as in Lk 10,18; Jn 12,31), but on filling up "what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ" (Col 1,24) by the witness of his followers. It is a situation that looks back on the history of the Church and may even include an allusion to the mission of the two witnesses, which is in progress at this time.

<sup>291</sup> This is an exhortation to be joyful, like those in Is 44,23; 49,13 and Ps 96,10-13. However, unlike those OT passages, this invitation to be glad is only for the heavens and those who dwell there in God's presence (cf. Rev 13,6). The earth and sea are warned they are going to suffer woefully from the passionate anger of the defeated dragon, because it knows it has only

<sup>13</sup>And when the dragon saw that he was thrown to the earth, he pursued the woman who gave birth to the male. <sup>14</sup>And the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman to fly to the desert,<sup>292</sup> to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half-a-time away from the face of the serpent.<sup>293</sup> <sup>15</sup>And out of his mouth the serpent threw water like

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a short time to act, before the final judgment and its eternal condemnation. The 'short time' reminds us of the 'short time' the martyrs in heaven must wait until their plea for final judgment is answered (6,11). It also recalls the Gospels, where it is written "And if those days had not been shortened, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, they will be shortened" (Mt 24,22 et par.). We can therefore expect an unprecedented time of persecution launched by the dragon (the sinful spirit) and its helpers. The 'Woe' in this passage is not the third woe announced in Rev 11,14, for that was the last of a series of three plagues aimed to bring mankind to repentance (cf. 9,20-21). This woe is the diabolical counterpart to the third woe, for it has a totally contrary aim: it will cause men to worship the dragon and his appointed leaders, and result in a global persecution of those saintly people who refuse (cf. Rev 13).

<sup>292</sup> There is no doubt that the wording used here recalls the metaphorical language of the original Exodus account (cf. Ex 19,4; Dt 32,11), but, as illustrated in the following passage by St. Teresa of Avila, it also has a mystical significance related to the experience of ecstasy/rapture: "But with rapture... you see and feel this cloud, or this powerful eagle, rising and bearing you up with it on its wings. You realize, I repeat, and indeed see, that you are being carried away, you know not whither" (*Life*, ch. XX).

<sup>293</sup> In Rev 12,6, before the battle in heaven, we were told that the woman fled into the desert for 1,260 days and there is no reason to doubt that she went. But here in 12,14, after that battle, the dragon is still pursuing her and she needs help to get to her place in the desert. She is therefore transported rapidly out of harm's way to her place in the desert, for 'a time, times and half a time'. How are we to reconcile these two passages? The first point to note is that the time periods are not the same: 1,260 days is the time of the two witnesses, the first half of the final 'week of years' (see n. 247). The expression 'a time, times and half a time' derives from Daniel (Dn 7,23-25; 12,7), where it signifies the period of the saints' persecution under the tyrant called the 'little horn'. In Revelation, the analogous period of persecution is the 42-month reign of the 'beast from the sea' (Rev 13,5-7). This 42-month period constitutes the second half of the final 'week of years' (n. 247). The two statements on the flight of the woman are

a river after the woman, to cause her to be taken by the current.<sup>294</sup> <sup>16</sup>And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river which the dragon threw out of his mouth.<sup>295</sup>

<sup>17</sup>And the dragon was furious with the woman and went away to make war against the rest of her seed, those who keep the Commandments of God and have the Witness of Jesus.<sup>296</sup>

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therefore not simple repetitions separated by an inclusion: the first (12,6) refers to the flight of the woman at the start of the period of 1,260 days, and the second (12,14) refers, with some urgency, to the flight of the woman at the end of that period, just before the final 42-month period is about to begin—the time when the most severe persecution breaks out against God's people. Of course, the woman is not an individual, but a group made up of all those who have seen her sign in heaven and come to identify with her (see n. 283). These are the 144,000 men seen at their place in 14,1-5 (see n. 284). In conclusion, the first of this group make their 'exodus' and arrive at their place in the desert at the beginning of the 1,260 days; the rest continue to arrive until the end of this period and all remain there for the subsequent 42-month period of persecution. In total, their sojourn at this place is about seven years—the final seven years ('week of years') of history.

<sup>294</sup> Unable to get closer to the woman, the dragon employs a different strategy: he spews waters from his mouth to sweep her away, as in a flash flood. The waters are later identified with people from many 'races and crowds and nations and tongues' (Rev 17,15), who, even though they do not have a vocation, presume to be called to go out to the desert like the 144,000 men (cf. Mt 24,24-26). On account of their immorality and sin, these people by no means represent 'Zion', but the Abyss (see n. 256). These people from the Abyss are sent to dislodge the woman from her refuge in the desert.

<sup>295</sup> Instead, it appears that the crowds of people sent by the dragon will not be able to survive the harsh and ascetic life in the desert. They die in the attempt to imitate the 144,000 and so the earth opens up and buries them, recalling what happened to Korah and his company of Levites, when they presumed to be as holy as Moses and Aaron (Nm 16).

<sup>296</sup> The dragon is furious because he has failed yet again to harm the woman. So, he gives up for the time being (cf. Rev 20,7-9) and, instead, turns 'to make war against the rest of her seed'. These are the ones keeping the 'Commandments of God and having the Witness of Jesus', so they are therefore faithful Christians. The expression 'make war against' is strongly

<sup>18</sup>And he stood on the sand of the sea.<sup>297</sup>

XIII <sup>1</sup>And I saw a beast coming up out of the sea,<sup>298</sup> with ten horns and seven heads and with ten diadems on his horns and blasphemous titles on his heads.<sup>299</sup> <sup>2</sup>And the beast that I saw was like a leopard and his feet were

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reminiscent of the beast's murderous attack on the two witnesses (11,7; see n. 257), his persecution of the saints (13,5-7), and finally his campaign against the 'Lord of lords and King of kings' and his armies (17,14; 19,19; 20,7). The use of the same expression in these passages implies that it is the same war that is being described in all its different phases. More interesting is the phrase 'the rest of her seed', referring to the woman. This confirms that the woman is identified especially with the part of her offspring that are now protected, for the dragon goes off to attack 'the rest of them', i.e., the other part. There are therefore two groups: the first group is identified with the woman and remains protected in the desert, while the second group will now be exposed to the fury of the 'sinful spirit'. This situation is strongly reminiscent of the two groups of faithful identified in Rev 7: the 144,000 sealed on earth and the martyrs who go through the 'great tribulation' and attain heaven (see n. 177).

<sup>297</sup> This statement is directed towards the events of the next chapter, Rev 13. Standing on the seashore, the dragon calls his main agent, the 'beast from the sea', from among the mass of unredeemed humanity (the sea) and orders him now to reveal himself openly. The second vision of the central prophecy (13,1-10), to be publicly announced by the two witnesses, continues with a vision of this 'beast from the sea'.

<sup>298</sup> This 'beast from the sea' is the same beast that rises from the Abyss and promptly kills the two witnesses (11,7), since the sea, the Abyss and the waters (17,15) are all synonyms referring to the same psychic environment, identified further as the mass of unredeemed humanity (see n. 256). Its 'coming up' out of this sea, where it was previously submerged while secretly supporting Babylon (17,7), refers to its self-manifestation at the start of its 42-month rule (13,5-7).

<sup>299</sup> In the biblical tradition, this description of the 'beast from the sea' evokes Leviathan (sometimes called Rahab), the mythical female monster that came to symbolize oppressive foreign power (Ps 74,14; 87,4; Is 30,7; Ez 29,3; 32,2-3; Jer 51,34). In this form, the beast is strikingly similar to the fiery-red dragon that has 10 horns and 7 heads with diadems on its heads (Rev 12,3): the only difference is that the beast's diadems are on his horns and not on his heads. This image suggests a family likeness, like that of a

like a bear's, and his mouth was like a lion's mouth.<sup>300</sup> And the dragon gave to him his power and his throne and great authority;<sup>301</sup> <sup>3</sup>and one of his heads was like one that had been slain to death, and his fatal wound had been cured.<sup>302</sup> And all the earth followed the beast with wonder, <sup>4</sup>and they

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son to his father. The blasphemous titles on its heads refer to titles claiming a divine status worthy of worship and adoration, falsely imitating God (cf. 13,4; 2Thess 2,4; Dn 11,36-37).

<sup>300</sup> The beast is like a leopard with bear's feet and a lion's mouth (Rev 13,2). Together with its 7 heads and 10 horns, it is a monstrous hybrid of all four beasts described in Dn 7,2-8, which represented four empires in the ancient world (Babylonian, Median, Persian and Hellenistic). All the beastly forces seen by Daniel, in that vision, are here embodied in this uniquely grotesque 'beast from the sea', which manifests itself to rule for a short period just before the end of history (Rev 13,5-7).

<sup>301</sup> Recalling the enthronement of Christ the Lamb in heaven (Rev 5), the dragon on the seashore now bestows upon the beast his power, his throne and great authority (13,2).

<sup>302</sup> One of the seven heads of the beast had been fatally wounded, in what could have been a political assassination, but it was then brought back to life and healed with prompt medical treatment, no doubt. Later in the text we learn that the head wound had threatened the life of the entire beast, for the entire beast, and not just the head, was brought back to life (13,14). This is one of several aspects of the beast's rule that seem to emulate the Passion, Resurrection, Ascension and Glorification of Jesus Christ following his enthronement in heaven (cf. Rev 5,9-14): the beast is fatally wounded, but his recovery (13,3.12.14) precedes his ascension from the Abyss (11,7; 13,1), the full manifestation of its power in the world (13,2-8) and his blasphemous solicitation of worship (13,1.4.8.12). On the other hand, he acts decisively against Christ and his followers: he kills the two witnesses (11,7), he persecutes and massacres the saints (Rev 13,7) and goes off to make war against the Lamb (Rev 17,14). This combination of murderous hostility to Christ and his followers, together with his emulation of the true Messiah, leads to the conclusion that this 'beast' is the last and most powerful manifestation of the antichristian spirit—the false messiah known in Christian tradition as the Antichrist (for a profile, see [link 22](#)). This is confirmed by his position in a hierarchy of three evil figures (the devil, the beast and the false prophet) which the author contrasts with God, his Christ and their prophet, John (Rev 13; 16,13; 20,10).



worshipped the dragon because he had given the authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast saying: Who is like the beast, and who can make war against him?<sup>303</sup>

<sup>5</sup>And he was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies,<sup>304</sup> and authority was given to him to exercise for forty-two months.<sup>305</sup> <sup>6</sup>And he opened his mouth in blasphemies against God, to

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**303** The beast's power and authority are so impressive that all the inhabitants of the earth are in a state of wonder and awe, and they worship the devil for empowering the beast in this way (13,2). They also worship the beast because of his immense military strength. They worship him with words that resemble the ancient worship of God— "who is like God?" (cf. Ps 113,5; 89,7.9; 86.8; 35,10; Ex 15,11). Because of the beast's astonishing power, men worship both the devil and the beast, and this worship recalls the worship and status that was once given to God. In fact, once again, this pattern of worship looks like a false imitation of the worship of God, the Father, and Christ, the Son, to whom he entrusted all his authority (cf. Jn 3,35; 17,2; Mt 28,18).

**304** Receiving the worship that is due to God, the beast usurps God's position in the lives and hearts of his followers, to become a false god. He helps this process along by uttering blasphemies against God and his people (Rev 13,6; cf. Dn 7,25; 11,36). His followers come to exhibit the same blasphemous mentality (Rev 16,9.11.21). It should be remembered that blasphemy against God and against his Holy Spirit is, according to the NT, an eternal sin because it cannot be forgiven (Mk 3,29; Mt 12,32; 1Jn 5,16-17; Heb 6,4-6; 10,26-31). Being an impenitent rebellion against the spiritual source of forgiveness, it is therefore eternally unforgiveable. The wording of the expression 'a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies' evokes Daniel's vision of the 'little horn', which had 'a mouth speaking arrogantly' (Dn 7,8.20). With the details given so far, there is no doubt that the 'little horn' representing the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes is the closest OT model for this verbal portrait of the 'beast from the sea'.

**305** God will permit the blasphemous reign of this beast to last for 42 months, about 3½ years (for the reason, see n. 208), elsewhere called 'time, times and half a time' (Rev 12,14). This is a final brief period of history between the end of the mission of the two witnesses (11,7) and the Second Coming of Christ (19,19-21). It is associated with the trampling of the Holy City (11,2), the persecution of the saints called the 'great tribulation' (7,14; 13,7) and the protection of the 144,000 faithful in the

blaspheme his name and his dwelling—those who are dwelling in heaven.<sup>306</sup> <sup>7</sup>And he was allowed to make war against the saints and to overcome them,<sup>307</sup> and he was given authority over every tribe and race and tongue and nation.<sup>308</sup> <sup>8</sup>And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship

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desert (12,14). The brevity of this period of time again reminds us of the ‘short time’ of the dragon’s fury, shortened for the sake of the elect (see n. 291).

<sup>306</sup> For the third time, the narration returns again to the beast’s blasphemy—clearly blasphemy is presented as the keynote of his rule (see n. 304). Here it is confirmed that the beast’s blaspheming is directed against God, his name and his dwelling in heaven. Interestingly, God’s heavenly dwelling, or Sanctuary, is defined further as those who are dwelling in heaven, i.e., all those described in Rev 4–5; 7,9-17; 11,15-18; 15,2-3; 19,1-8.

<sup>307</sup> Closely related to the beast’s blasphemy is his war against the people of God. It was for the sake of waging this ‘war’ that the dragon called the beast from the Abyss and empowered him with his power, throne and great authority (12,17). It is a war which the beast is allowed to win during his reign of 42 months, for the people of God do not fight back during this period (13,7). The beast’s war against them develops into a gruelling persecution, a ‘great tribulation’ (7,14) in which an innumerable number of martyrs will be added to those already waiting in heaven (6,9-11; 7,9-17). The particular form this persecution will take is explained later in this chapter (13,15-17). Nevertheless, the beast’s victims are the real winners (15,2) for their ultimate victory over the beast and his followers is divinely assured, bringing the reign of the beast and all history to an end (19,14-21). Once again, the beast is following in the steps of the ‘little horn’ in his hatred and persecution of the people of God and, in the same way, there will be a sudden reversal when the victims will become the victors (Dn 7,21-22; 7,25-27; 8,24-25).

<sup>308</sup> It looks like this particular detail belongs at the end of Rev 13,5, where we are told that the beast will have authority for only 42 months. Here, though, we may be shocked to learn that his authority is truly global, over every tribe, race, tongue and nation. His reign may have been shortened, for the sake of the elect (cf. Mt 24,22 et par.), but, except for the 144,000 men of faith, the people of God will find nowhere to shelter during this period. For those who continue to identify the beast with the ancient Roman Empire, the truly global extent of its reign should persuade them otherwise. Indeed, it is only with the international ‘globalization’ of the

him, everyone whose name is not written in the Scroll of Life from the foundation of the world, of the Lamb that was slain.<sup>309</sup>

<sup>9</sup>If anyone has an ear let him hear.<sup>310</sup> <sup>10</sup>If anyone is for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be killed by a sword, by a sword he is to be killed. Here is the endurance and the faith of the saints.<sup>311</sup>

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world, in recent years, that a one-world government of the kind that would permit the reign of the 'beast from the sea' has become a real possibility.

<sup>309</sup> This verse repeats the previous statement that all the world will worship the beast (Rev 13,4), but it then indirectly mentions the exceptions: those inscribed in the Scroll of Life from the foundation of the world, of the Lamb that was slain. Please note the change of word order, for the original 'construct' says "in the Book of Life of the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world". The change is required (1) because the Lamb was not slain before the world was founded, (2) because the Scroll of Life is indeed a register of the names of all who have lived since 'the foundation of the world'. After its seven seals have been broken (8,1), the Lamb to whom it has been given (Rev 5) is able to erase names from the scroll (3,5) and in doing so he is conducting the final judgment (n. 190). Are the names removed before or after they worship the beast, or accept his markings (13,8; 17,8)? The wording of the text here suggests that this act of judgment takes place before the person identifies himself with the beast in this way. It is therefore implied that the risen Christ, who searches hearts and minds (2,23), is able to discern the people who are not his own, and remove their names, even before their loyalties are made manifest through their public veneration of the beast. Whether before or after, the result is eternal condemnation in the lake of fire (14, 9-11; 20,15; 2Thess 2,9-12). All those who do not belong to the Lamb, or at least recognize him as the true Messiah, Saviour and Judge, will become worshippers of the beast and have their names erased from the Scroll of Life (13,8; 17,8). Only those who remain faithful to the Lamb will be able to resist, up to death, if necessary, the deceit and coercion that will be employed to induce people to follow the beast (Rev 13,11-17).

<sup>310</sup> The hearing formula: see n. 47.

<sup>311</sup> There follows an exhortation for the faithful, those who will suffer and be killed for refusing to worship the beast: they must accept what is coming to them and endure it with faith. The exhortation bears a superficial resemblance to the severe words spoken by God to Jeremiah concerning the fate of his rebellious people (Jer 15,2). The context, though,

<sup>11</sup>And I saw another beast coming up out of the land,<sup>312</sup> and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke as a dragon.<sup>313</sup> <sup>12</sup>And he exercises all the

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could not be more different, for here the Lord is exhorting his faithful people to remain firm in the face of fierce persecution.

<sup>312</sup> In the third vision of the central prophecy (Rev 13,11-18), John describes a second beast, a 'beast from the land', which recalls the mythical male monster, Behemoth, who, according to Jewish tradition, lived in the desert to the east of Eden. Although there is no problem in understanding why the first beast arises from the sea, or Abyss, since this is conceived as the home of evil spirits and other agents of destruction, there is no consensus on why the second beast should arise from the land or earth (ἐκ τῆς γῆς). More than one meaning appears to be intended. Firstly, as the land is complementary to the sea, it is implied that, in a finite sense, the two beasts together represent the entire globe. Secondly, with his origin in the earth, it is very appropriate that the role of the second beast is specifically directed to the 'inhabitants of the earth'. Thirdly, as the earth is often contrasted with heaven, the beast that arises from the land cannot truly identify himself with the prophet Elijah who, in some circles, is still expected to return from heaven (see n. 316). Finally, the phrase 'from the land' can be understood as a reference to a specific region. In the Jewish tradition, 'the land' could only refer to the Land of Israel (הארץ) and this is probably the most significant aspect of its meaning in the present context. Later in the text, this second beast is called the 'false prophet' (19,20), indicating that this figure is a man with prophetic pretensions.

<sup>313</sup> The 'beast from the land' has two horns like a lamb and speaks like a dragon. The next verse explains why he speaks like a dragon: he receives authority from the 'beast from the sea' (13,12), who in turn had received it from the dragon, Satan (13,2). This enigmatic description needs unpacking in stages: (1) the gentle outward appearance of this 'false prophet' does not match the voracious inner reality, but recalls the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing (cf. Mt 7,15). (2) The wording portrays a living creature that is not actually a lamb, but is 'like a lamb' with two horns (indicating an age of about one year old). The animal that most closely resembles a lamb is a young goat. (3) In the liturgy of the second temple, male yearling lambs were regularly sacrificed as the daily whole offering (the *tamid*) and as sin offerings. The sacrificial role of these animals underlies the symbolical identification of Jesus Christ as the Lamb (see n. 131), "who freed us from our sins with his blood" (Rev 1,5). In the context of the heavenly liturgy, the likeness of the 'beast from the land', or false prophet, to a yearling lamb with two horns suggests that its role in some way rivals

authority of the first beast in front of him,<sup>314</sup> and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, the one whose fatal wound had been

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the role of Christ, the seven-horned Lamb, who is the central sin offering for the expiation of sins. In fact, the description of this beast, as a live animal with two horns and having a role comparable to that of a sin offering is reminiscent of the scapegoat sent to Azazel in the ancient rite of expiation on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev 16; *m.Yoma* 3:8-9; 4:1; 6:1-6). Although this second beast receives authority from the first beast to serve Satan, and not God, there is a functional resemblance to the scapegoat that cannot be overlooked: just as the scapegoat removed unexpiated sin from the community in the ancient rite and returned it to Azazel, so also at the conclusion of the heavenly liturgy, the false prophet causes the removal of sin, not through expiation, but the opposite—by making it incapable of expiation and so provoking the eternal destruction of both the sinner and his sin. As we will see in the next few verses, he does this by deceiving or compelling people to identify themselves with the first beast, who fully represents Satan (13,2-4), by worshipping him through an image, or by receiving his mark (13,12-17). The act of worshipping the beast or its image, or of receiving his mark, has the tragic consequence of identifying the person with irredeemable (eternal) sin, and from that time onwards he is liable to eternal condemnation in the lake of fire (14,9-11). This role of the false prophet is indeed a diabolical counterpart to the expiatory role of Christ, the seven-horned Lamb.

<sup>314</sup> The 'beast from the sea' makes the 'beast from the land' a full partner in the governance of his global empire. The cooperation between these two beasts, one resembling Leviathan and the other Behemoth, recalls an ancient Hassidic (Jewish) tradition concerning these two monsters. According to this tradition, the two monsters symbolize two complementary aspects of 'spiritual service': since the sea represents the hidden depths of the spiritual world, the sea monster, Leviathan, symbolizes those religious individuals who aspire to profound spiritual knowledge. Since the land represents the lower, visible world, the land monster, Behemoth, symbolizes those individuals whose religious activity is focused on preparing the lower, physical world for the spiritual revelations of the former class of service. In Revelation, there is one radical and essential difference: the 'sea', or 'Abyss', represents the *unredeemed* spiritual world, with the result that whereas, in the Hassidic tradition, the service symbolized by the two monsters is directed towards Hashem (God), the two beasts that represent these monsters in Revelation are servants of Satan (cf. Rev 2,24).

cured.<sup>315</sup> <sup>13</sup>And he performs great signs, such that he even makes fire come down from heaven on to the earth in the sight of men;<sup>316</sup> <sup>14</sup>and he deceives

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**315** The main task of the 'beast from the land', the false prophet, is to make the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast. Just as the dragon is worshipped on account of the beast's actions (13,2), now the 'beast from the sea' is worshipped on account of the false prophet's actions. Inspired by the devil, the false prophet (the second beast) promotes the personality cult of the false messiah (the first beast) in a way that seeks to abolish and replace the traditional worship of God (2Thess 2,4). The personality cult may also be intended to function like a loyalty oath in societies that are riven by extreme anarchy, lawlessness and social fragmentation. Modern interpretation of the idolatrous activity described in this passage identifies it with the imperial cult—a form of pagan idolatry practised in the first century AD, which made the image of the Emperor an object of worship. Very few commentators seem to notice the messianic overtones in this passage, or the allusions to OT prophetic and ceremonial traditions. These will be stressed in the comments that follow.

**316** The great signs performed by the false prophet recall NT warnings on the last days (Mt 24,24; 2Thess 2,10). His greatest sign, bringing down fire from heaven, evokes the divine power given to the prophet Elijah (2Kgs 1,9-14; 1Kgs 18,30-40), and the imitation of this sign by the false prophet suggests that he desires to identify himself with Elijah. Secondly, in the history of the ancient sacrificial cult, this sign frequently appeared at the consecration of a new altar, indicating divine confirmation (Lev 9,24; 1Chr 21,26; 2Chr 7,1; 2Macc 1,18-36). Its imitation by the false prophet therefore implies his participation in the dedication of a new altar connected to the ancient Israelite cult. In view of the central importance of the temple in Jerusalem for the performance of the ancient cult, the dedication of a new altar by the false prophet, in this impressive but inauthentic way (no doubt using advanced technology), certainly implies the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore, it is clear from the text that the renewed cult is not directed to the worship of God, but rather to the false messiah and his patron, the devil, even though it is based on the site of the ancient temple in Jerusalem (cf. 2Thess 2,4; Mt 24,15; Mk 13,14). The precise character of the false religion deceitfully established and enforced by the false prophet is therefore discernible: it is an idolatrous form of the ancient Israelite cult, directed towards the worship of a false messiah and the source of his authority, the devil. There is only one religion into which the religious activity described in this passage fits, and that is Judaism—especially those branches of Orthodox Judaism which

the inhabitants of the earth by the signs which he was allowed to perform in front of the beast,<sup>317</sup> telling the inhabitants of the earth to make an image to the beast that has the wound of the sword and lived.<sup>318</sup>

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actively maintain OT traditions whilst awaiting the coming of a prophet representing Elijah (Mal 3,23-24) and a 'political' messiah. Furthermore, the single most important Halachic criteria for identifying this messiah is his supervision of the rebuilding of the temple *in its place* (cf. Maimonides, *The Code*, 14; treatise 5: Judges; Kings and Wars, 11–12). The reign of the beast and his false prophet in the Book of Revelation can readily be explained as the realization of this false messianic expectation of Orthodox Judaism.

<sup>317</sup> The other signs performed by the false prophet are not described, but can only be guessed: they would be signs that would, in some sense, give glory to the false messiah. These signs may include instances of individual healing or the healing of divisions within and between societies and religions. Some justification for this can be found in the expectation that Elijah, when he comes, is to “turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers” (Mal 3,24).

<sup>318</sup> The aim of the false prophet's signs is to deceive people into producing an image of the first beast, the false messiah, which will then become an object of compulsory worship (Rev 13,15) and the focus of his personality cult. This idolatrous image conforms to the “abomination of desolation (τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως; ממש ירקש) spoken through the prophet Daniel standing in the holy place” (Mt 24,15; Mk 13,14; cf. Dn 11,31). Discussion of the meaning of this expression includes two important points of view: (a) a relatively late tradition that identifies ‘the abomination’ as an image or idol of one of the pagan gods, erected by king Antiochus Epiphanes (this was the opinion of St. Jerome in his commentary on Dn 11,31, and also the view expressed by the rabbinical tradition in *b.T. Ta’anith* 28c). (b) The opinion of modern scholars, based on the books of Maccabees and the writings of Josephus, that ‘the abomination’ refers to a pagan altar constructed above the altar of holocausts in the ancient temple. The sacrifices performed on this altar were then considered ‘abominable’ by the Jews. In Revelation, it is clearly the worshiping of the beast's image that leads to ‘desolation’—to eternal desolation and condemnation in this case—and not the sacrifices on the altar, which are never mentioned in the text (cf. Rev 14,9-11).



<sup>15</sup>And he was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak,<sup>319</sup> and cause to be killed everyone who would not worship the image of the beast.<sup>320</sup> <sup>16</sup>And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free-men and the servants, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead,<sup>17</sup>so that no one can buy or sell except the one who has the mark – the name of the beast or the number of his name.<sup>321</sup>

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**319** In the ancient classical world, the ability to make images move or speak was the task of a specific kind of magician (a ‘theurgist’). Nowadays, however, it is impossible to read this passage without thinking of televised images displayed on huge screens in public places and at mass gatherings or ceremonial events.

**320** The false prophet is watching those who worship the image of the first beast and inflicts the death penalty on those who refuse. Measures of this severity may reflect an attempt to unite societies riven by anarchy, lawlessness and social fragmentation (see n. 317). But for those who worship the Godhead alone, worshipping the false messiah or his image is an invitation to apostasy. Only those with a strong commitment to the truth will be able to resist coercion of this kind; as the text implies, only those who are inscribed in the Lamb’s Scroll of Life (13,8; 17,8; see n. 309). Their refusal to worship the image will be met with a violent persecution (13,7), in which countless numbers of faithful will be put to death in the ‘great tribulation’ (7,9-17; 15,2-4). Here is the origin of that final trial which “the Church must pass through, a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers” (CCC 675, see also n.184).

**321** The false prophet then forces everyone, from every stratum of society, to receive, on their forehead or right hand, a mark of loyalty to the beast. All those people who do not have this mark will be unable to buy or sell and will thereby be prevented from participating in the commercial and economic life of the society. It hardly needs to be said that this Orwellian scenario becomes ever more attainable with the computerization of societies around the world, internet connectivity, social media and centralized data collection, not to mention digital ID, vaccine passports and central-bank digital currency, all linked to facial-recognition technology and a social-credit scoring system. The mark represents the name of the beast, or the number of his name, and can be seen as a parody of the seal of God placed on the forehead of his servants (Rev 7,3; 9,4; 14,1; 22,4). The ‘number of his name’ refers to the numerical system called Gematria, in which every letter of the alphabet has a numerical value. The number of



<sup>18</sup>Here is the wisdom. Let the one with intelligence calculate the number of the beast, for it is a number of a man, and his number is six hundred and sixty-six.<sup>322</sup>

XIV <sup>1</sup>And I looked and behold,<sup>323</sup> the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand having his name and the

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the name is therefore the sum of the numerical value of each of its letters. In classical antiquity, the practice of marking people in connection with commercial activity was unknown. R.H. Charles suggested that the practice could be modelled on the Jewish custom of wearing 'tefillin' (i.e. phylacteries, cf. Dt 6,8; 11,18; Ex 13,9.16; Mt 23,5) during prayer.

<sup>322</sup> For the one with wisdom and intelligence, here is a clue to the identity of the false messiah. Firstly, the number represents the name of a certain man, confirming that this full and final manifestation of the beast is represented by a single person. Secondly, the number of his name in the numerical system called Gematria adds up to 666 (616 in one textual witness—the 5<sup>th</sup> cent. uncial manuscript C). Up to this day, Gematria continues to be an important element in Jewish mystical speculation (*Kabbalah*) and so Hebrew is one of the few modern languages that continues to use the alphabet as a numerical system. Since this person is the object of an idolatrous cult based at a restored temple in Jerusalem (see nn. 315, 316), it is reasonable to suppose that his name will be translated into Hebrew, and the number of his name will be the sum of the numerical value of its individual Hebrew letters. More information on the 'beast from the Abyss' is described in Rev 17.

<sup>323</sup> The fourth vision of the central prophecy (Rev 14,1-5) describes the 144,000 assembled on Mt. Zion, in the presence of the Lamb. We have met this group before: firstly in 7,1-8, where they formed a messianic army sealed with the 'seal of the living God'; secondly in Rev 12, where they are the ones who, after seeing the great sign of Zion (12,1), witness the heavenly birth of Christ from within their souls (12,5), bonding them so strongly with Zion that, like her, they flee to the desert, in an exodus that recalls the flight of the Israelites from Egypt (12,6.14, see nn. 283, 284). After describing how the dragon went off to make war on the rest of Zion's offspring (12,17) in Rev 13, it is now quite logical that the author should return to those offspring who identified so firmly with their mother, Zion, that they fled to a place prepared for them in the desert (12,6.14), which is here described as a mountain called Mt. Zion (for the actual location, see n. 327).

name of his Father written on their foreheads.<sup>324</sup>

<sup>2</sup>And I heard a sound from heaven like the sound of many waters, and like the sound of loud thunder, and the sound which I heard was like harpists playing their harps. <sup>3</sup>And they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders, and no one was able to learn the song except the hundred and forty-four thousand,<sup>325</sup> those that

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**324** As the name of the mount suggests, this assembly is 'Zion', the eschatological gathering of God's people (cf. Heb 12,22-24). Given that 'Mt. Zion' refers especially to the place of God's temple, its appearance in this vision suggests that the assembly of 144,000 in the presence of the Lamb represents the new temple of God, in whose construction John was instructed to participate (Rev 11,1-2; see n. 238). Confirmation of this is the fact that the 144,000 have the name of God on their foreheads (for the origin of names of the Lamb and of God on their foreheads, see n. 172). Just as the ancient temple in Jerusalem was considered the place that God had chosen 'as a dwelling for his name' (Dt 12,11), so also the 144,000, individually and as a community, constitute a home for the name of the living God—the site of his new temple on earth. In this vision of Zion and of the new temple, the Lamb represents the presence of God in the midst of the community, just as the Messiah, or anointed king, represented the presence of God in the midst of Zion, in ancient times (Pss 2; 110). However, even though the Lamb stands at the centre of the throne as the Messiah of God (Rev 5,6; 7,17), neither the throne nor its radiant glory (4,2-3) are revealed or described in this vision. Since the throne is situated within the heavenly Sanctuary, it is implied that the inside of this Sanctuary, though present in a mysterious way, is not visible in this vision of the new temple. This mysterious situation recalls the introductory vision (1,10-20) in which the author, John, found himself near the heavenly Sanctuary, but just outside it, in a visionary space that corresponds to the inner court of the temple (see n. 34). For the same reason, the 144,000 can be understood as 'those worshipping in it', in the command to the author to measure the inner court of temple (see n. 241). To them will be revealed the inner part of the Sanctuary at the time of its opening (11,19; 15,5). They therefore correspond to the Israelites who attended the liturgy of the ancient temple and saw inside the Sanctuary when the curtain was opened at the great feasts (see n. 274).

**325** The sounds of a multitude singing a new song, accompanied by the playing of harps, in front of the throne in heaven, identifies this liturgical scene with the vision, described in Rev 15,2-4, of the martyrs singing and

were bought from the earth. <sup>4</sup>These are the ones who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins;<sup>326</sup>

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holding harps in the heavenly Sanctuary (see n. 350). The fact that only the 144,000 are able to learn this song, confirms their proximity to the heavenly Sanctuary (see n. 324). It also confirms that they are made of flesh and blood and are still living on earth, because only souls united to their bodies have the faculty and the need to learn. The Greek verb for 'learn' (μανθάνειν) could refer to learning or instruction in the ordinary sense, but the context suggests it is more likely to denote the mystical infusion of a higher type of knowledge (cf. 2Cor 12,4). The mysterious communication between the martyrs in heaven and the 144,000 on earth perfectly describes the "communion of saints" (CCC 954-9). Furthermore, the constant presence of the Lamb in their midst (14,1) implies their attainment of a more or less constant state of union—one which mystics often refer to as spiritual 'union' or 'betrothal'. Teresa of Avila calls it the 'spiritual union' preceding the consummation of 'spiritual marriage' and places this state in the 7<sup>th</sup> Mansions of her *Interior Castle* (for the other stages in the spiritual preparation of the 144,000, see n. 172 [5<sup>th</sup> Mansions], and n. 283 [6<sup>th</sup> Mansions]).

<sup>326</sup> First of all, this verse tells us that the 144,000 are men, and secondly that they are men who are absolutely pure in their relations with women. Among the ancient Israelites, even lawful sexual relations were believed to be a cause of impurity for both partners (Lev 15,18). Finding himself in this temporary state of impurity, a man had to excuse himself from his duties in the temple (Lev 15,31; 22,37) or from his military service (Dt 23,10-12; 1Sam 21,56). In the NT, the cause of the impurity is not the sexual act in itself, but the disordered and selfish desires associated with this act (Mk 7,20-23), which then give birth to sin (Mt 5,27-28). So in the NT, those "who have not defiled themselves with women" refers to men whose heart has never been corrupted by disordered sexual desires for women, that is to say, they are perfect in the virtue of chastity. The addition of the statement "they are virgins" indicates that these men are not only perfectly chaste, but are also virgins, i.e., they are not married and have never had sexual relations. Given that sexual conduct is that aspect of human nature most affected by original sin (Gn 3,7), such purity can be understood as a sign of the most perfect reconciliation with God. Their sexual purity also recalls Paul's reminder to the Church in Corinth, that he had promised her in marriage to Christ "so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him" (2Cor 11,2). The 144,000 would amply fulfil the role of a community being prepared for marriage to Christ as a pure virgin (cf. Rev 19,7-9; 21,9).

these follow the Lamb wherever he may go.<sup>327</sup> These were bought from among men,<sup>328</sup> first-fruits to God and to the Lamb,<sup>329</sup> and no lie was found

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**327** Their love for the Lamb is so perfect that they follow him wherever he may go. This raises the question about their location, on Mt. Zion, in this vision. Although this is not openly stated in the text, two points are clear: (a) it is not in the historical city of Jerusalem (see n. 258). (b) It is a mountain in a desert that corresponds to the one through which God led the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt (Rev 12,6.14; see n. 323). Only two mountains are held to be 'holy' according to the OT: Mt. Zion, which is the place of the dwelling or Sanctuary of God, and Mt. Sinai (Horeb), which is the place of the revelation of God. In the Book of Revelation, Mt. Zion is a mountain which reunites both of these landmarks in the faith of ancient Israel, since it is the site of the revelation of the Sanctuary of God (11,19; 15,5).

**328** For 'buying' as a metaphor for the personal redemption achieved by the Lamb's sacrifice, see n. 139. The fact that the 144,000 were 'bought' from the world is repeated twice in this passage (here and at 14,3). The emphasis on their redemption here is significant and difficult to explain, except as a way of reassuring the reader that there is nothing innately different about these men. Just like every other follower of Christ (cf. 5,9), these have also been redeemed by his blood. Their difference lies in the depth of their love for the redeemer and the totality of their response (14,4).

**329** The description of the 144,000 men as 'first-fruits to God' not only identifies them as the first of the produce from the eschatological harvest (14,14-20), but also recalls two eternal laws of the OT concerning the first fruits of the grain harvest (Lev 23,9-21). According to these laws, a sheaf of the first fruits of the grain harvest (barley) had to be brought to the temple on the day after the Passover Feast, in order to be 'waved' by the priests before the Lord. After seven weeks, a second offering of the first fruits (wheat, this time) had to be presented to God in the temple, and waved as part of the liturgical celebration on the annual Feast of Weeks ('Shavuot'), which, up to the present day, is held at the beginning of the summer and commemorates the giving of the Torah to Israel on Mt. Sinai (Ex 23,19; 34,26; Dt 16,9-12; 26,1-11). So, following their exodus to the desert, the 144,000 present themselves in the place that represents the temple of God, in a way analogous to the presentation of the first fruits of the grain harvest, i.e. they are the first of the offerings to be presented to God in his Sanctuary, at the culmination of the liturgy that is being performed there.

in their mouth—they are immaculate.<sup>330</sup>

<sup>6</sup>And I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven<sup>331</sup> with an eternal gospel to announce to the inhabitants of the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and race, <sup>7</sup>saying with a loud voice: Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship the One who made heaven and earth and sea and springs of water.<sup>332</sup>

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**330** Although straightforward in meaning, this description of the 144,000 as free from lies and immaculate (ἄμωμοί: without blemish) has a number of important resonances in the OT and NT. In Zephaniah, the same expression describes the state of the purified remnant of God's people that will survive his judgment, to celebrate his presence in their midst (Zeph 3,11-20, esp. 3,13)—a situation that readily finds its fulfilment in this vision of the 144,000. In the NT, Christ is also said to have “no deceit in his mouth” (1Pet 2,22), in a quotation from the description of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 (Is 53,9)—the 144,000 are therefore Christ-like in their moral purity. Finally, in the NT, Paul uses the term immaculate, or without blemish, to refer to the state of the Church that will be presented to Christ, as a bride, at the end of history, after being cleansed and sanctified by his blood (Eph 5,27; Col 1,22). The impression is given again (see nn. 325, 326) that the 144,000 are the promised Bride of Christ (cf. Rev 21,9) who awaits and prepares for the day of her marriage (cf. 19,7-9; 21,9).

**331** The fifth vision of the central prophecy (14,6-13) contains three very important announcements for the inhabitants of the earth, from three different angels flying in mid-heaven (the ‘zenith’—the highest point in the sky reached by the sun). These are then followed by an exhortation for the saints from heaven itself. For the content of the announcements to be relevant, they must coincide with the beginning of the 42-month reign of the beast. It is strange that the verse starts with “*another* angel flying in mid-heaven” for in the standard Critical Text of Revelation there is no previous mention of an angel flying in mid-heaven, only ‘an eagle’ flying in mid-heaven (8,13). We have therefore followed Andreas of Caesarea in correcting the eagle in 8,13 to an angel, so that the angel in this verse really is *another* angel flying in mid-heaven (n. 207).

**332** The angel's message is ‘an eternal gospel’. Without the definite article, and with the adjective ‘eternal’, this reference appears to point beyond the Gospel announced by the NT. Furthermore, the contents of the angel's announcement differ strikingly from the Gospel of Salvation in Jesus Christ. This angel invites all the inhabitants of the earth to fear, give glory and

<sup>8</sup>And another angel, a second, followed saying: She fell, *down* fell Babylon the great, who caused all the nations to drink from the wine of the passion of her fornicating.<sup>333</sup>

<sup>9</sup>And another angel, a third, followed them saying with a loud voice: If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand,<sup>334</sup> <sup>10</sup>also he shall drink the wine of the passion

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worship the Creator, because the hour of his judgment has arrived. These very basic actions are common to all religions of every age, since time immemorial. The context is important for understanding this announcement. With the judgments, there will be a great wave of blasphemy against God because of the suffering they cause (cf. 16,9.11.21). This blasphemy is an eternal sin, leading to eternal condemnation (see n. 304). So, the ‘eternal gospel’, here, contrasts with ‘eternal condemnation’ and appears to be a final appeal to all peoples to perform the very minimum actions necessary to avoid the eternal punishment awaiting those who blaspheme God at the imminent judgment (Rev 16). At this critical moment in time, it is truly a gospel of eternal salvation.

<sup>333</sup> The second angel’s message is also, in a real sense, good news: the corrupt city called Babylon the great has fallen. The complete account of this event is given in Rev 17–18 (cf. 18,2); at this point suffice it to say that her downfall is an expression of God’s judgment on her (16,19), because she was corrupting the nations with the wine of the passion of her fornicating (19,2), which, as we will see, is a metaphor for her idolatrous behaviour and lifestyle. Given that this announcement takes place at the start of the beast’s reign (see n. 331), it becomes clear that Babylon’s judgment precedes the main body of God’s judgments on the world as listed in Rev 16, even though it is not described until after those judgments (16,19; Rev 17–18). Regarding the use of the words ‘fornication’ and ‘fornicating’, instead of ‘prostitution’, for πορνεία and its derivatives in some contexts: this is because ‘prostitution’ has no active verbal form in English and only the reflexive form can be used (‘to prostitute oneself’). In neither Greek nor Hebrew does this deficiency exist, and the same verbal root can be used in all the different contexts.

<sup>334</sup> The final angel has a message of the gravest importance. Worshipping the beast (13,12) or his image (13,15) or receiving his mark on the forehead or hand (13,16-17) are actions promoted and enforced, under threat of death or severe hardship, by the second beast—the false prophet. The people who consent, willingly or unwillingly, to any of these actions are those whose names have been erased from the Lamb’s Scroll of Life

of God mixed undiluted in the cup of his anger,<sup>335</sup> and he will be tormented by fire and sulphur in front of holy angels and in front of the Lamb. <sup>11</sup>And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever, and they have no rest day or night, those who worship the beast and his image and whoever receives the mark of his name.<sup>336</sup>

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(13,8; 17,8): they will receive two very specific punishments, one temporal and the other eternal.

**335** The first punishment is temporal: it is to drink ‘the wine of the passion of God mixed undiluted in the cup of his anger’. This is a metaphor for God’s passionate anger, which is about to be expressed in the series of seven bowl-plagues (Rev 16). The fullness of this metaphor will be explained later (see n. 357). Here it is sufficient to note the contrast (‘antithetical parallelism’) between “the wine of the passion (θυμός) of God mixed undiluted in the cup of his anger (όργη)” as a metaphor for God’s anger and the “wine of the passion (θυμός) of her fornicating (πορνεία)” as a metaphor for Babylon’s idolatrous behaviour and lust for luxury (14,8). The juxtaposition of these contrasting metaphors suggests the operation of retaliatory justice (*ius talionis*): those who drink Babylon’s wine will also have to ingest God’s anger. Although the Greek word θυμός is usually translated as ‘wrath’ or ‘fury’, it is possible and preferable to translate it here as ‘passion’ or ‘heat’ (equivalent to the Hebrew word חמה), since it can be used in both expressions and helps to bring out the parallelism.

**336** The second punishment is the eternal torment of the soul with ‘fire and sulphur, in front of holy angels and the Lamb’. The description of this torment matches the fate of all those consigned to the ‘lake of fire’ at the final judgment, otherwise termed the ‘second death’ (see n. 56): the devil, the beast and the false prophet (19,20; 20,10), Babylon (19,3), death and Hades (20,13-14), all those whose names are not found in the Scroll of Life (20,14-15) and all unrepentant sinners (21,8). The ‘second death’ is a fate that is far worse than the death of the body (the ‘first death’) since it involves the eternal torment of the soul (cf. Mt 10,28). This is not the place to try to rationalize, explain or describe this fiery fate, so suffice it to say that it is entirely consistent with the traditional NT description of the final and eternal judgment prepared for the devil, his angels and all the wicked people who have chosen to follow and imitate them (cf. Mt 25,41.46). Most of the references in the NT are to be found in the sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, where the terms most frequently used for this destiny are Gehenna “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mk 9,42-48; Mt 5,22.29-30; 18,9; 23,15.33) and the “fiery furnace, where there



<sup>12</sup>Here is the endurance of the saints, those who keep the Commandments of God and faith in Jesus. <sup>13</sup>And I heard a voice from heaven saying: Write; blessed are the dead, they that die in the Lord from now. Yes, says the Spirit, so that they may rest from their labours, but their deeds go with them.<sup>337</sup>

<sup>14</sup>And I looked and behold,<sup>338</sup> a white cloud and sitting on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head and a sharp sickle

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will be wailing and grinding of teeth” (Mt 13,42.50; 8,12). Before entering the New Testament, the expectation of a fiery judgment can be traced to the intertestamental writings of *1Enoch*, where it is often clothed in the imagery of a fiery lake or abyss (*1En* 10:13; 18:9-16; 54:1-6; 56:1-4; 90:24-27; 100:7-9; 103:7-8; 108:4-7). Reflection on certain prophecies of Jeremiah, Isaiah and Daniel (Jer 7,30-34; 32:26-35; Is 66,24; Dn 12,2), regarding divine retribution for the infanticidal cult of Moloch (2Kgs 23,10; 2Chr 28,3; 33,6), then seems to have focused this judgmental imagery specifically on the Valley of Hinnom (*Ge-Hinnom*) in Jerusalem, codenamed ‘the accursed valley’ or ‘abyss’ (e.g., *1En* 26–27; 90:26-27, also see n. 344). By the first century AD, however, the vision of the fiery eschatological judgment had extended metaphysically to include the wicked in every time and place, though nevertheless retaining the Aramaic name of its original location, *Gehenna*.

<sup>337</sup> This is another exhortation aimed at the endurance of the faithful (cf. Rev 13,9-10). It takes the form of a beatitude (the second of seven in the text: 1,3; 14,13; 16,15; 19,9; 20,6; 22,7.14) for those who die in the Lord, effective from the time of writing (“from now on”). A contrast is implied: those who die in the Lord will certainly rest in heaven from their work, unlike those who follow the beast, whose torment in the lake of fire will give them no rest, day or night (14,11). The deeds of the saints go with them, which to say that they will have the satisfaction of seeing the fruit of all that they have sown. Later, it will be revealed that the deeds of the saints constitute the fine linen garments of the Lamb’s Bride (19,8)—their deeds will be the clothing and adornment of the purified Church at her marriage with Christ. The word ‘rest’ here is important: it is the same as the word used in 6,11, where it recalled the Sabbath rest—the theme underlying the millennial reign of Christ with his saints and martyrs (see n.157, 456).

<sup>338</sup> The sixth vision of the central prophecy (14,14-20) describes the harvest of two different kinds of produce: the grain and the grape. Again, this vision coincides with the beast’s reign, as all the visions between 13,1 and 19,11-21 (the defeat of the two beasts) concern this brief, 42-month



in his hand.<sup>339</sup> <sup>15</sup>And another angel came out of the Sanctuary crying out with a loud voice to the one sitting on the cloud: Swing your sickle and reap, because the hour has come to reap, for the harvest of the earth is dry.<sup>340</sup>

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period at the end of history. In the agricultural year, the grain is harvested first, at the beginning of the summer, and the grape at the end of the summer towards autumn. This would imply that the vision of the harvest takes place in two stages, with the harvest of the grain preceding that of the grape, and both during the 42-month reign of the beast.

<sup>339</sup> This is the second and final occurrence of the expression 'one like a son of man' (cf. 1,13). Sitting on a cloud, this figure recalls, even more vividly than at 1,13, Daniel's vision of the human being who comes on the clouds to receive universal and everlasting 'dominion, glory and kingship' from God (Dn 7,9-14). As noted, the first time this term was used (see n. 25), he is the angel who communicates the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John (Rev 1,1; 22,6,16), while representing the risen Lord in various ways in the text (1,13; 10,1; 14,14; 19,11). Here, the angel represents Christ, with sickle in hand, as the harvester of the grain harvest. If we regard this appearance of Christ on a cloud as the fulfilment of the expectation raised in 1,7, 'Behold he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him.... and all peoples of the earth will mourn over him', then those who mourn 'over him' are indeed of two types, those represented by the grain and those by the grape: respectively, those whose grief represents contrition and leads to salvation and those whose grief represents self-pity and leads to judgment (see n.12). The image of Christ coming to earth on the cloud of divine glory, wearing a crown of victory and sovereignty, evokes the anticipated manner of Christ's return at the end of the age (Mt 24,30; 26,64; Mk 14,62; Lk 21,27; Acts 1,9-11; Rev 1,7). In the OT, the harvest is an occasional metaphor for the time of God's judgment (cf. Jer 51,33; Joel 4,13; Hos 6,11), recurring in the NT to represent the separation of the good and bad at the end of the age (Mt 3,12; 13,24-30; Mk 4,29). In a slightly different sense, it also describes the gathering of God's people into his kingdom during the age of salvation (Mt 9,37-38; Mk 4,29; Lk 10,2; Jn 4,35-38). For the vision of the eschatological harvest described here (Rev 14,14-20), the closest OT parallel appears to be Joel 4,12-14, since it also alludes to the harvest of both grain and grape in the context of God's final judgment.

<sup>340</sup> With a loud voice, an angel from the heavenly Sanctuary gives the order to start the reaping of the grain, for the grain is ready and the hour has come to reap. It is often objected that the 'one like a son of man' cannot

<sup>16</sup>And the one sitting on the cloud threw his sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped. **341**

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represent Christ, because Christ would know when to begin reaping and would not need to be informed by another angel. The situation recalls Christ's warning: "But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mk 13,32; cf. Mt 24,36). Representing Christ, the 'one like a son of man' does not know the precise time, but must be informed by an angel coming out of the Sanctuary, conveying the instruction from the throne of the Almighty. The timing is evidently critical.

**341** In one sweep of his sickle, the 'one like a son of man' completes the grain harvest. It is fair to assume that the grain is really a metaphor for certain people, but for whom—for the faithful or for their opponents, for the good or for the wicked? There are two good reasons for identifying the grain with the faithful people of God, especially with the martyrs gathered in front of the throne in heaven. The first reason is that the 144,000 faithful followers of the Lamb are called the 'first-fruits to God' (Rev 14,4), which recalls the offering of the first-fruits of the grain harvest at the temple on the Feast of Weeks (see n. 329). The rest of the grain harvest should therefore refer to the rest of the faithful, against whom the dragon goes off to make war (12,17) by means of the beast (13,7.15-17). These are the martyrs who are seen in heaven, because they refuse to worship the beast's image or to receive its mark (15,2-4), and so they are killed in the 'great tribulation' (7,13-17; n. 349). The second reason is that the celebration of these martyrs in heaven recalls the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23,39-43; Ps 118,15-29, see nn. 179 and 180), which was, and still is, celebrated in the autumn, when the farmers have just finished gathering in the produce of the 'threshing floor and the winepress' (Ex 23,16; Dt 16,13). Their martyrdom in the great tribulation, and their gathering into the heavenly tent (Rev 7,9-17; 15,2-5), therefore correspond to the ingathering of the produce from the threshing floor, i.e., the grain. The association between the great 'tribulation' and the 'threshing' of the grain is evident in the classical languages, though not in English. In Latin, the word for tribulation (noun: *tribulatio*; verb: *tribulare*) is etymologically related to the name of the instrument that was used for threshing (*tribulum*), which in turn appears to be related to the Greek word for tribulation and affliction (noun: θλίψις; verb: θλίβειν). In brief, the grain represents the people of God, and their 'harvest' separates them from the world and grants them divine protection, as martyrs, in the heavenly

<sup>17</sup>And another angel came out of the Sanctuary in heaven, also having a sharp sickle. <sup>18</sup>And another angel came out from the altar, the one who is in charge of the fire, and spoke with a loud voice to the one with the sharp sickle, saying: Swing your sharp sickle and cut the bunches of the vine of the earth, because its grapes have ripened. <sup>342</sup>

<sup>19</sup>And the angel cast his sickle to the earth and cut down the fruit of the vine of the earth, and threw *it* into the great winepress of the passion of God. <sup>343</sup> <sup>20</sup>And the winepress was trodden outside the City, <sup>344</sup> and blood

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sanctuary, just as the first-fruits (the 144,000) receive divine protection at the place prepared for them in the desert (12,6.14).

<sup>342</sup> The harvest of the grape is not performed by the ‘one like a son of man’, who reaped the grain and is about to tread the grape (n. 343), but by an ordinary angel. He receives the order to begin the grape harvest from the angel in charge of the fire on the incense altar, before the throne (8,3-5; see n.193). It is not immediately clear why the angel of fire is involved in the decision to begin the grape harvest, but an explanation for this will become apparent later (see n. 346).

<sup>343</sup> Again, in one sweep of his sickle, the angel completes the harvest of the grape. But this angel then has another task: he throws the clusters of grapes into ‘the great winepress of the passion of God’. Elsewhere, this is called ‘the winepress for the wine of the passion of the anger of Almighty God’ (19,15), which will be trodden by the figure (19,11-13) identified with the ‘one like a son of man’ in 1,12-16, whose name is also ‘the Word of God’. He is the angel of the risen Lord (see n. 25). The act of being trodden in this winepress is so clearly a kind of punishment that we can be sure the grapes represent the wicked ‘inhabitants of the earth’, as in the OT background to this passage (Joel 4,13; cf. Is 63,1-6).

<sup>344</sup> In the expression ‘outside the city’, the use of the definite article with ‘city’ implies a specific place to which the reader has already been introduced. The most recently mentioned city is historical Jerusalem (Rev 11,2.8.13). Although ‘Babylon the great’ was mentioned briefly in 14,8, she was not referred to as a city. In this context, then, the author seems to be recalling the city mentioned shortly before, which we have identified with the historical city of Jerusalem (see n. 243). As the transfer of the title ‘great city’ to Jerusalem signifies the establishment of the beast’s throne in this city (see n. 258), it is not at all improbable that this city will become the focus of God’s wrathful judgment at the appropriate time, as described in this passage. The winepress ‘outside the city’ recalls the winepress of the ancient kings of Jerusalem, whose location is known to have been south of

came out of the winepress<sup>345</sup> up to the bridles of the horses, for one thousand six hundred stadia.<sup>346</sup>

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the city wall, in the vicinity of the Valley of Hinnom (*Ge-Hinnom*)—the valley that gave its name to the place of eternal punishment, *Gehenna*. The description of the treading of the grape harvest outside this city therefore alludes to a very ancient tradition that the final judgment of the nations will take place in the valleys to the East and South of the ancient city of Jerusalem (cf. Joel 4,2.12). This tradition is clearly expressed in *1Enoch* 26–27: after describing the lush garden of the king (the most likely location of the king’s winepress) and then Mounts Moriah, Olivet and Sion with the valleys separating them, Enoch focuses on the ‘accursed valley’ of Hinnom and is told: “This accursed valley is for those who are accursed for ever: Here shall all the accursed be gathered together who utter with their lips against the Lord unseemly words and of His glory speak hard things. Here shall they be gathered together, and here shall be their place of Judgement. In the last days there shall be upon them the spectacle of the righteous judgement in the presence of the righteous for ever: here shall the merciful bless the Lord of Glory, the Eternal King” (*1En* 27:2-3, trans R.H. Charles). Other ancient sources describe Jerusalem as the site of God’s judgment expressed in a final battle (*Zech* 14,2-4; *4Ezra* 13:33-35; *2Bar* 40:1). Further confirmation that the city, here, is historical Jerusalem comes from the impression that the treading, or trampling, of the grape in the winepress is an example of *ius talionis* (retaliatory justice): those who will ‘trample’ (πατήσουσιν) this Holy City (Rev 11,2) will end up being trampled (ἐπατήθη) outside the same city (14,20), by the one who ‘tramples’ (πατεῖ) the winepress of God’s passionate anger (19,15).

<sup>345</sup> A vast amount of blood flows out of the winepress, even though one would expect the ‘great winepress of the passion of God’ to yield the ‘wine of the passion of the anger of Almighty God’ (19,15), abbreviated to ‘wine of the passion of his anger’ (16,19), or just the ‘passion of God’ (15,1.7; 16,1). For the sake of consistency, we suggest that the ‘wine’ is the spiritual produce, the pure rage, of a crushing process whose physical end-product is blood. This wine will be considered in the next chapter, so suffice it to say that, from the winepress, it finds its way to the heavenly Sanctuary, into the hands of the four living creatures (15,7), reminding us that the ingathering of the produce of the ‘threshing floor and the winepress’ (Ex 23,16; Dt 16,13) marks the time of the Feast of Tabernacles which the martyrs are celebrating in heaven (Rev 7,9-17; see n. 341).

<sup>346</sup> The winepress also yields so much blood that it covers an area whose vast dimensions are given in the text. Its depth ‘up to the bridles of the

XV <sup>1</sup>And I saw<sup>347</sup> another sign in heaven, great and wonderful: seven angels with seven plagues – the last, because with them the passion of God was finished.<sup>348</sup>

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horses' recalls Enoch's description of the same gory event—the punishment of sinners at the last judgment: “And in those days in one place the fathers together with their sons shall be smitten and brothers one with another shall fall in death till the streams flow with their blood. For a man shall not withhold his hand from slaying his sons and his sons' sons. And the sinner shall not withhold his hand from his honoured brother: from dawn till sunset they shall slay one another. And the horse shall walk up to the breast in the blood of sinners, and the chariot shall be submerged to its height” (1En 100:1-3, trans. R.H. Charles). The length of the area covered with blood is 1600 stadia (about 300 kms), a measure that is significant for representing the length of the coastal border of Palestine (according to the *Itinerarium* of Antonius), which defines the modern State of Israel to this day. Since the length of the coastal border also approximates to the length of biblical Israel from Dan to Beersheba, the distance of 1600 stadia also represents the entire country inhabited by the House of Israel, whose capital was, and is, Jerusalem. One final point is that this area forms a veritable ‘lake of blood’. Unless one postulates a system of judgment involving two different lakes, the ‘lake of blood’ should be identified with the ‘lake of fire’, whose existence is tied to the final judgment (see n. 336). This ‘bloody conflagration’ would then explain why the angel that gives the order for the start of the grape harvest is the angel in charge of the fire (Rev 14,18), whose task in early Jewish tradition was to punish and torture God's enemies with fire.

<sup>347</sup> The seventh and last vision of the central prophecy (Rev 15,1-4) offers a glimpse inside the heavenly Sanctuary and reports some very important liturgical actions taking place there. The vision clearly coincides with the delivery of God's judgments at the end of the 42-month period, which leads up to the Second Coming and final judgment. This final vision in the series links up with the first vision through the description of another sign—the third.

<sup>348</sup> The vision opens with the author seeing a sign that is described as ‘great and wonderful’, recalling the way God's acts are often described in the OT (Rev 15,3; e.g., Ps 111,2-4; 139,14; Ex 34,10). He describes the sign as seven angels carrying bowls which contain the seven last plagues that conclude God's judgments on the world. As a sign, it represents the divine intervention that ends the conflict that arose out of the first two signs (Rev 12,1.3). More generally, it signifies the end of God's wrathful judgments

<sup>2</sup>And I saw *what was* like a glassy sea mixed with fire<sup>349</sup> and those who overcame the beast and his image, and the number of his name,

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and, above all, the imminent ending of history. This vision of the 'great and wonderful sign' is clearly not limited to 15,1, but overflows into the vision of the seven angels in 15,5-8 (after a digression at 15,2-4). Furthermore, the opening of the Sanctuary of God in heaven (11,19 and 15,5) connects this sign of the seven angels (15,1.5-8) with the earlier revelation of the Ark of the Covenant (11,19). In other words, the 'great and wonderful sign' of 15,1 follows the opening of the Sanctuary, as in 15,5, and includes the vision of 11,19, which in turn broadens its significance. This inclusive interpretation of the 'great and wonderful' sign is supported by the use of the verb of 'seeing' in its passive form (ὄφθη) in 11,19, to refer to the vision of the 'Ark of God's Covenant' within the heavenly Sanctuary. In this passive form, the verb is uniquely associated with the seeing of signs (cf. 12,1.3; see n. 278), confirming that the revelation of the Ark is also a part of this great and wonderful sign—the part that the author will share with many others, especially with the 144,000 (as in 12,1.3). For those inhabitants of the earth who continue to rebel against God, it is also a sign that God's judgments are about to come down on top of them, in the form of the bowls of God's anger (15,5–16,21, see n. 275).

<sup>349</sup> It is significant that the glassy sea, on which the martyrs in this vision are standing, is now mixed with fire (cf. 4,6; Ex 24,10). By analogy with the daily morning service in the former temple, this vision of the martyrs corresponds to that part of the daily service in which the offerings were presented to God on the main altar and then consumed in the fire (*m. Tamid* 7:3; *m. Yoma* 3:4). The glassy sea mixed with fire therefore corresponds to the hearth of the main altar, and the vision of the martyrs represents the blazing offerings being presented before God, after being transferred to the heavenly Sanctuary at the culmination of the liturgy. These offerings were originally kindled with the fire thrown to the earth from the incense altar (Rev 8,5), as a new Pentecost (see n.198). Representing the bulk of the grain harvest (see n. 341), these martyrs correspond to the cereal offering that was added to the whole burnt offering (the *Tamid*) in the ancient sacrificial ritual (Ex 29,38-42; Nm 28,4-5; Ez 46,13-15; *m. Tamid* 3:1; 4:3). The martyrs are so closely identified with the altar, that they are even called 'the altar' in Rev 16,7. They therefore represent the third element of the inner court of the temple which the author, John, was asked to measure in the instruction given to him: "measure the Sanctuary of God, the altar and those worshipping in it" (11,1-2; for the other elements, see nn. 241, 324).

standing on the glassy sea holding harps of God.<sup>350</sup> <sup>3</sup>And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb saying:<sup>351</sup>

Great and wonderful are your deeds, Lord God Almighty;  
just and true are your ways, King of the nations;

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**350** The martyrs, though victims of persecution, have conquered the beast, because they did not concede to worship him or his image or to receive the mark of his name or the number of his name. Victory simply consists in refusing to align oneself in any way with the beast. The singing of a 'new song' and playing on harps links this vision directly to what the author heard in the vision of the 144,000 on Mt. Zion—a vision representing the new temple of God in its visible (14,1.4-5) and normally invisible parts (14,2-3). The victorious martyrs can also be identified in other liturgical visions, celebrating their salvation (7,9-17) and singing songs of praise (19,1-8). There is a close correspondence between the musical activity of these martyrs and the ministry of the Levitical choirs and musicians of the former temple in Jerusalem, who used to accompany the liturgy with singing and instruments, as well as being organized in 24 divisions and supervised by 24 elders (1Chr 25), in the same way as the priests (1Chr 24).

**351** The new song the martyrs are singing (cf. n. 138) is called the song of Moses, the servant of God (a common title for Moses, cf. Ex 14,31; Josh 14,7; 1Chr 6,49; Dn 9,11) and the song of the Lamb, although it is only one song. Its name recalls the redemptive actions of Moses and Jesus Christ, in a setting that vividly evokes the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and their crossing of the Sea. In those days, they sang a song of praise for God's miraculous deliverance from Pharaoh's army, which has come to be known as the Song of Moses (Ex 15,1-18). Two particular features of this song make it appropriate in this setting: firstly, "Who is like you among the gods, O Lord? Who is like you, magnificent in holiness? O terrible in renown, worker of wonders" (Ex 15,11) not only resembles the mood and content of Rev 15,3-4, but also answers the fatefully erroneous praise of the beast as "Who is like the beast and who can make war against him" (Rev 13,4). The beast has been engaged in war, and will soon be defeated, by the Lord himself (19,11-21). Secondly, because of the typological similarity: just as the Israelites crossed the Reed Sea trusting in God's protection and were led to "the mountain of your inheritance, the place where you made your seat, O Lord, the Sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands established" (Ex 15,17), so also the martyrs followed the Lamb in a new exodus, crossing the crystal sea before the throne and entering the heavenly Sanctuary (Rev 15,2-4).



<sup>4</sup>Who will not fear and glorify your name, Lord?  
*It is because you alone are holy,*  
that all the nations will come and worship before you,  
for your acts of judgment were made manifest.<sup>352</sup>

*Baseline Prophetic Narrative resumed – the Seven Bowl-Plagues*<sup>353</sup>

<sup>5</sup>And after this I looked, and the Sanctuary of the Tent of Witness in heaven was opened,<sup>354</sup> <sup>6</sup>and out of the Sanctuary came the seven angels

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<sup>352</sup> The song itself is almost entirely made up of words and phrases from the OT, especially from the Psalms: “Great and wonderful are your deeds” (Ex 15,11; Ps 92,6; 111,2; 139,14); “Lord God Almighty” (Am 3,13; 4,13); “Just and true are your ways” (Dt 32,4; Ps 145,17); “King of the Nations” (Jer 10,7); “Who will not fear and glorify your name” (Jer 10,6-7; Ps 86,9); “The nations will come and worship before you” (Ps 86,8-10; Mal 1,11). Its overall message is that God is to be praised and glorified by all nations because of his holiness and the perfect justice of his deeds. Although the song can refer generally to God’s deeds throughout history, it seems to be particularly inspired by the divine interventions that are about to restore complete sovereignty to God and remove the rival claims of the beast and his followers. As with other liturgical passages in Revelation, this passage serves to convey the true significance of the events the author is about to describe (Rev 15-16; cf. 5,9-10; 11,16-18; 12,10-12; 19,7-8; 21,3-4).

<sup>353</sup> With this joyous vision of the martyrs in the heavenly Sanctuary, the central prophecy given to John, which is to be announced publicly by the two witnesses, closes and we re-join the baseline prophetic narrative in a section (15,5-8) that parallels the preparatory passages preceding the series of seven seals (Rev 5) and seven trumpets (8,1-5). This passage is replete with liturgical activity signifying the completion and consecration of the new temple, in whose construction the author John has been participating (11,1-2).

<sup>354</sup> The liturgical significance of the opening of the Sanctuary has been discussed in full, in n. 274. Although slightly different wording is used here, the event of the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary is the same as that described at 11,19, indicating that the text in between (12,1-15,4) is an ‘inclusion’ and that the baseline narrative has now been resumed. The “Sanctuary of God in heaven was opened” (11,19) has here become “the Sanctuary of the Tent of Witness in heaven was opened” (15,5), reminding us that the heavenly Sanctuary is the archetype for both the “Tent of Witness” and the Sanctuary of the ancient temple (cf. Ex 25,8-9.40; see n.



with the seven plagues, dressed in clean bright linen and bound around the breast with golden belts.<sup>355</sup> 7And one of the four living creatures had given to the seven angels<sup>356</sup> seven golden bowls full of the passion of God,<sup>357</sup> the

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34). The 'witness', or 'testimony' as it is frequently translated, refers principally to the stone tablets (Ex 31,18; 32,15; 34,29), on which the Decalogue was inscribed. As these 'tablets of the testimony' (לוחות העדות) were kept in the 'Ark of the Covenant' inside the 'Tent', or 'Tabernacle', both the Ark and the Tent came to be called the 'Ark of the Testimony' (Ex 25,22; 26,33; 40,21 : ארון העדות) and the 'Tent of the Testimony' (Nm 9,15; 17,22; 18,2 : אהל העדות, משכן העדות) respectively.

<sup>355</sup> We return to Rev 15,1 and to the seven angels with the seven last plagues coming out of the Sanctuary in heaven. The relation of this group of seven angels with the other groups of seven angels (1,20; 8,2) is discussed in nn. 35 and 192. Their clothing is emphasized in this passage: the ordinary linen garment, clean and bright, is the typical clothing of the angels (cf. Ez 9,2; Dn 10,5) and, because of this, it became the most sacred of the garments of the high priest, worn only on the Day of Atonement. The angels' high girding with a golden belt denotes priestly office, consistent with the observation elsewhere that the priestly functions in the heavenly Sanctuary are carried out by angels (see n. 193). It is also a prominent feature of the clothing of the 'one like a son of man' in Rev 1,13, whose role is that of the high priest (see n. 26).

<sup>356</sup> As the four living creatures remain inside the heavenly Sanctuary, the seven angels must have been given their golden bowls before they exited the Sanctuary and so the action in this verse (15,7) actually precedes the action in the previous verse (15,6). Therefore, the aorist 'gave' (ἔδωκεν) is here translated by the pluperfect 'had given'. The main function of the four living creatures is to guard and sustain the sovereignty of God (see n. 120). This may explain why one of them provides the seven angels with the seven golden bowls full of the passion of God, since the effect of these judgments is the global acknowledgment of God's supreme sovereignty (15,2-4).

<sup>357</sup> The word for 'bowl' (φιάλη) is the same that is used for the bowls that contained the incense representing the prayers of the saints (5,8). The fact that the same vessels are used for the judgment plagues indicates that it is by means of these judgments that the prayers of the saints (6,10) are answered. These golden bowls are clearly intended primarily for liturgical use, which can be identified in this context by their contents: in 15,1.6.8, the contents of the bowls are called 'plagues', while in 15,1.7 and 16,1 the contents are called the 'passion of God'. Since 'passion of God' is an

One living for ever and ever.<sup>358</sup> <sup>8</sup>And the Sanctuary was filled with the smoke of the glory of God and of his power,<sup>359</sup> and no one was able to enter the Sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.<sup>360</sup>

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abbreviation for the 'wine of the passion of God' and 'wine of the passion of his anger' (16,19; see n. 343), then we should understand their contents as the wine symbolizing God's passionate anger and expressing itself in a variety of plagues (Rev 16). In this sense, the liturgical action represented by the outpouring of the seven bowls corresponds to the pouring of the libation of wine at the base of the outer altar, after the presentation of the offerings in the fire on the same altar (see n. 349), at the culmination of the daily liturgy in the ancient temple (*m. Tamid* 7:3-4).

<sup>358</sup> For comments on the divine appellation 'living God', see n. 171.

<sup>359</sup> This phenomenon vividly recalls the way that God revealed himself to the Israelites on Mt. Sinai, when smoke and cloud appeared over the mountain (Ex 19,16-25). In the vision of the divine throne described both by Isaiah (Is 6,1-6) and here by John (Rev 15,8), the glory and power of God is represented by smoke. Moses had only just completed the tent that God wanted as his dwelling, when the Lord manifested his glory in a very similar way: "Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the dwelling. And Moses was not able to enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud remained above it, and the glory of the Lord filled the dwelling" (Ex 40,34-35). The same phenomenon occurred at the completion of the temple built by King Solomon, immediately after the Ark of the Covenant was installed there (1Kgs 8,10-13). Similarly, Ezekiel prophesies the glory of the Lord filling the Sanctuary on the completion of the renewed temple (Ez 43,7) in his final vision (Ez 43,1-12). In Revelation, therefore, the filling of the Sanctuary with the smoke of the glory and power of God signals the completion of the new temple, in whose construction John had been participating with the prophecy he was given (Rev 11,1-2). More importantly, since contact with the glory of God brought about the consecration of the place that God had chosen as his dwelling (Ex 29,43-45), the filling of the Sanctuary with the smoke of the glory and power of God, in this passage, can be understood as the divine act that brings about the consecration of the new temple.

<sup>360</sup> At this point nobody else will be able to enter the Sanctuary, until all the plagues have been delivered. Similarly, Moses was not able to enter the Tent of Meeting while it was filled with the glory of God (Ex 40,34-35), nor were the priests able to perform their duties when the cloud of God's glory filled the temple at its dedication by King Solomon (1Kgs 8,10-11). The manifestation of God's glory and power in this way brings all normal

XVI <sup>1</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the Sanctuary saying to the seven angels: Go and pour out the seven bowls<sup>361</sup> of the passion of God

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activities to a halt. In Revelation, the impossibility of entering the heavenly Sanctuary at this point implies that the great tribulation will have come to an end (Rev 7,9-17; 13,15-17) and no more martyrs will be added to the innumerable multitude already assembled before the throne in heaven. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify what is meant by 'the completion' of the new temple. One should not think that there is limited space in the heavenly Sanctuary for the martyrs who enter, as if it were made of earthly materials. Neither is it justifiable to believe that a predetermined number of witnesses of Jesus Christ must be killed before the new temple reaches completion (see n. 159). The fact that no one was able to count the number of the multitude of souls in the heavenly Sanctuary (7,9) confirms that the precise number is not important. Instead, the 'completion' of the new temple is determined by the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary and the outpouring of the bowls of God's passionate anger, at the hour of his judgment (cf. 14,7). The 'completion' is therefore destined to occur at a time that has been established by God (cf. Mk 13,20 et par.) and coincides with the end of the period of 42 months, during which the beast was permitted to reign (Rev 13,5.7). From this time onwards, it will no longer be possible to receive protection, in the heavenly Sanctuary (7,15-16), from those plagues of judgment which will fall during the hour of the test "that is to come upon the whole world, to test the inhabitants of the earth" (3,10).

<sup>361</sup> This is the third and final series of sevens in the text. Unlike the seal and trumpet series, which had interruptions between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of the series, the bowls move swiftly to their conclusion without a break. There are so many similarities with the trumpet series that the bowls are often seen as a deliberate repetition ('recapitulation') of the trumpets. However, there are also many differences: (1) the effects of the trumpet-plagues are partial (thirds), whereas the effects of the bowl-plagues are total; (2) the former are a call to repentance, whereas the latter are a sore punishment; (3) some previously unmentioned locations are struck. The close resemblance between the trumpet-plagues and the bowl-plagues reflects the liturgical use of the trumpets and libation bowls in the daily service of the ancient temple. The sounding of the trumpets led to the pouring of the libation, which was a sign to start the singing of the psalms. At every pause in the singing, the trumpets sounded and the people prostrated themselves (*m.Tamid* 7:3). The effects of the trumpets and the libations were

on the earth.<sup>362</sup>

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superimposed on each other and resulted in a great act of adoration and celebration involving the assembled people of Israel. So also, in the heavenly liturgy described in the text: the sounding of the trumpets leads to the pouring of the bowls, whose effects are superimposed on those of the trumpets and result in a great act of adoration and celebration involving the people of God. The two series are consecutive and by no means identical. At the basis of both these liturgical actions, helping to explain the similarity of their effects, is the same liturgical event that is announced by the trumpets and completed with the bowls. This event is the culmination of all the liturgical activity: the presentation of the sacrificial offerings before God. For the reason why the third woe (Rev 11,14) can be identified with the outpouring of the bowls, see n. 274.

<sup>362</sup> There is no indication here who it is, from within the Sanctuary, who gives the order to pour out the bowls, but it is most likely to be the same living creature who had provided the seven angels with the seven golden bowls (cf. 15,7; see n. 356). It is worth noting that virtually every liturgical action in this part of the text is commanded from the Sanctuary, giving the impression that timing and coordination are very important. We have already seen that the outpouring of the seven bowls corresponds to the pouring of the libation of wine at the base of the main altar, after the presentation of the offerings in the fire upon the same altar, at the culmination of the daily liturgy in the ancient temple (see n. 357). Here, in Revelation, the libation bowls will be poured out over the earth, implying, therefore, that the whole earth corresponds to the base of the main altar in the ancient temple. As indicated above, the glassy sea mixed with fire, which is also the 'floor' of the heavenly Sanctuary, constitutes the hearth of this altar (see n. 349). On this 'floor' stands the golden altar of incense (8,3), and at the feet of this incense altar, the first martyrs are waiting (6,9). They are joined after 'a short time' (6,11) by the innumerable multitude of martyrs who have come through the great tribulation (7,9-17; 15,2-4). The two altars are in fact united and of one piece: the golden incense altar is within the heavenly Sanctuary and stands on the hearth of the main altar, and the hearth is at the summit of the main altar, whose base is the entire earth. Over this base, the libations are about to be poured at the culmination of the heavenly liturgy. The cosmic symbolism of this altar was prefigured in Ezekiel's word for the hearth of the main altar of the renewed temple he described: הַהַרְאֵל—"the mountain of God" (Ez 43,15).

<sup>2</sup>And the first went away and poured out his bowl on the earth; and a foul and malignant ulcer developed on the people that have the mark of the beast and those who worship his image.<sup>363</sup>

<sup>3</sup>And the second poured out his bowl on the sea; and the sea became like the blood of a dead man, and every living soul in the sea died.<sup>364</sup>

<sup>4</sup>And the third poured out his bowl on the rivers and the springs of water and they became blood.<sup>365</sup> <sup>5</sup>And I heard the angel of the waters saying:<sup>366</sup>

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**363** The contents of the 1<sup>st</sup> bowl are poured out on the earth causing a 'bad and evil' ulcer (or sore) to erupt on the people who have the mark of the beast and those who worship his image. The tautological 'bad and evil' seems to point in the direction of malignancy, hence our translation 'foul and malignant'. This plague resembles the 6<sup>th</sup> plague of Egypt, when festering sores erupted on people and beasts throughout the land (Ex 9,9-11). In the Septuagint translation of this passage, the same Greek word is used for the sores (ἔλκος) as in Rev 16,2. The affliction caused by these sores is so great that it leads the people to blaspheme God (Rev 16,11). Although the 1<sup>st</sup> trumpet-plague struck the earth, it affected a third of the greenery, and not the people.

**364** The contents of the 2<sup>nd</sup> bowl are poured out on the sea, which becomes like the blood of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea dies. There is a direct relation here with the 2<sup>nd</sup> trumpet-plague, which caused a third of the sea to become blood and a third of the creatures died (8,8-9). The effect of the 2<sup>nd</sup> bowl-plague intensifies and completes the partial effect of the 2<sup>nd</sup> trumpet-plague. One cannot read 'like the blood of a dead man' without thinking of contamination with crude oil, in such large quantities that the sea water will no longer support life. There is an echo here of the 1<sup>st</sup> plague of Egypt, when all the waters were changed into blood, all the fish died and no one could drink the water (Ex 7,19-24).

**365** The contents of the 3<sup>rd</sup> bowl turn the rivers and fresh-water springs into blood, but it is not said how this will affect the life that depends on them. The same resources were struck by the 3<sup>rd</sup> trumpet-plague, when a third of them became toxic and many people died. There is also a strong echo here of the 1<sup>st</sup> plague of Egypt, when the water became blood, the fish died and people could not drink it (Ex 7,19-24). It is almost certain that this bowl-plague also causes considerable loss of human and aquatic life.

**366** This is the third time that an angel in charge of one of the elements is mentioned in Revelation (see n. 169). The comments of the angel of the waters are particularly appropriate as the 3<sup>rd</sup> bowl-plague strikes his area

So just are you, O Holy One, the One who is and who was,  
in how you have judged these things,  
because they shed blood of saints and of prophets,  
and blood you have given them to drink;  
they deserve it.<sup>367</sup>

<sup>7</sup>And I heard the altar saying:

Yes, Lord God Almighty,  
true and just are your judgments.<sup>368</sup>

<sup>8</sup>And the fourth poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. <sup>9</sup>And the people were scorched with a great heat and they blasphemed the name of God, the One who has power over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory.<sup>369</sup>

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of responsibility. As with the martyrs' canticle in Rev 15,2-4, the angel's interjection, here, gives the true meaning of the plague unleashed by the outpouring of the 3<sup>rd</sup> bowl. It is divine retribution.

<sup>367</sup> God is just in his judgments because the punishment delivered by this plague perfectly fits the crime, or as it is written "By what things people sin, by these things they are punished" (Wis 11,16). For other examples of this *ius talionis* (retaliatory justice), see nn. 335 and 344. As in Rev 11,17, God is addressed as "the One who is and who was", and no longer as 'the One who is and who was and who is to come' (1,4.8; 4,8), because his coming is no longer in the future: he has already come to rule the world and consummate his kingdom.

<sup>368</sup> The angel of the waters is endorsed by 'the altar', whose exclamation "true and just are your judgments" is an almost exact repetition of "just and true are your ways" sung by the martyrs in 15,2-4, and is repeated verbatim by the same martyrs in 19,2. The altar, in this context, is figurative language (metonymy) for the innumerable multitude of martyrs standing before the throne, on the glassy sea mixed with fire (the hearth of the altar), in the heavenly Sanctuary (see n. 349). There is no doubt that the martyrs, whose lives were cut short by worldly injustice, are now totally awed by the manifestations of divine justice they have so long awaited (6,9-11). The martyrs may have felt compelled to exclaim in this way and at this point, because this plague has directly answered their petition for judgment on those who shed their blood (6,10).

<sup>369</sup> The contents of the 4<sup>th</sup> bowl strike the sun, causing it to burn people with its heat. Although the 4<sup>th</sup> trumpet-plague also struck the sun, together

<sup>10</sup>And the fifth poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast; and his kingdom was darkened, and they bit their tongues from the pain, <sup>11</sup>and they blasphemed the God of heaven for their pains and for their sores, and they did not repent of their deeds.<sup>370</sup>

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with the moon and stars, its effect was different in that it caused a partial darkening of their light (8,12). There is no comparable 'scorching' plague in the Exodus account. Nevertheless, just like Pharaoh's reaction to the Egyptian plagues, the hearts of those afflicted by the scorching heat of the sun become even more hardened. They know the name of God, who is Almighty and has power to remove these plagues (e.g., Jon 3,1-10), but instead of repenting and turning to him, they blaspheme his name, and through this eternal sin they forever close the door to conversion and forgiveness (see n. 304). Their blasphemy is repeated again and again in response to the different bowl-plagues (Rev 16,9.11.21), cementing their hearts in hostility to the true God, and sealing their eternal condemnation (14,9-11).

<sup>370</sup> The contents of the 5<sup>th</sup> bowl are aimed at the throne of the beast and cause his kingdom to become 'darkened'. The subjects of this kingdom then suffer unbearable pain. Because of the pain and the sores, they again blaspheme the God of heaven and persist in their refusal to repent. There are clear points of contact with the effects of 5<sup>th</sup> trumpet-plague, which caused darkness due to the smoke emitted from the Abyss and pain like the 'sting of a scorpion' (9,1-11). Similarly, the 9<sup>th</sup> plague caused darkness among the Egyptians of Pharaoh's kingdom for three days, but no pain (Ex 10,21-29). Returning to the 5<sup>th</sup> bowl-plague, it is not clear whether the darkness causes the unbearable pain, or whether it just intensifies the pain due to the previous plague. As physical darkness cannot either cause or increase pain sensation, the author must here be referring to spiritual darkness, which in itself can both cause pain (spiritual pain) and intensify existing physical pain. Recalling that the beast was given only a limited time period to exercise authority in the world (42 months: 13,5-7), the spiritual 'darkness' of the 5<sup>th</sup> bowl-plague can be understood as the way in which this allotted period is brought to an end. For the identification of the throne of the beast with historical Jerusalem, see n. 258. The expression 'God of heaven' occurs in only one other place in the text, at Rev 11,13: following a major earthquake in the city of Jerusalem, the survivors become terrified and give glory to the 'God of heaven' (see n. 266). Here, the subjects of the beast's kingdom, which is centred on historical Jerusalem, blaspheme the 'God of heaven', implying that the same people who once gave him glory end up cursing him. Through their deceit and



<sup>12</sup>And the sixth poured out his bowl on the great River Euphrates; and its water dried up to prepare the way for the rulers from the East. <sup>13</sup>And from the mouth of the dragon and from the mouth of the beast and from the mouth of the false prophet, I saw three unclean spirits like frogs; <sup>14</sup>for they are spirits of demons performing signs, which go out to the rulers of the whole world to assemble them to the war of the great day of Almighty God. **371** <sup>15</sup>Behold, I am coming like a thief; blessed is he that is awake and keeping his clothes, so that he does not walk naked and they see his shame. **372**

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coercion, the beast and his false prophet succeeded in turning them away from the 'God of heaven' (Rev 13).

**371** The contents of the 6<sup>th</sup> bowl fell on to the River Euphrates which became dry and opened a way for the rulers and their armies to cross over from the East. The rest of this passage is a spiritual explanation of the manner in which these rulers of countries in the East, together with rulers from the whole world, are summoned to come to a particular location called Harmageddon (16,16; see n. 373), to take part in a final battle called the battle of the great day of Almighty God. The explanation speaks about three unclean spirits like frogs—demons that are able to perform signs—emerging from the global leadership (the devil and his two human agents, the beast and the false prophet), in order to incite the world's rulers to assemble their armies and fight, even though it is not stated who they are to fight against. But why are the unclean spirits like frogs? This may be related to the ancient Persian belief (from the Zoroastrian *Bundahišn*) that frogs are products of the Evil Spirit (Ahriman) and are therefore among the most evil of creatures. Apart from the mention of the River Euphrates, there is little connection with the 6<sup>th</sup> trumpet-plague (9,13-19). The mention of frogs allows some to see a connection with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Egyptian plague (Ex 8,1-15), although it is tenuous at best. In brief, evil spirits incite the rulers of the world to prepare and assemble for war in a place called Harmageddon, which is somewhere to the West of the River Euphrates. By drying up this river, the 6<sup>th</sup> bowl-plague removes one important obstacle to the participation of the armies from the East. In this way the 6<sup>th</sup> bowl-plague can be seen as a part of the preparation for the final battle between the forces of good and evil, which will be described in Rev 19,11-21.

**372** As in 13,9-10 and 14,12-13, this is a timely exhortation for the faithful who remain alive at this crucial point. It is also the third beatitude in a series of seven (1,3; 14,13; 16,15; 19,9; 20,6; 22,7.14). The identity of the



<sup>16</sup>And they assembled them in the place called, in Hebrew, Harmageddon.<sup>373</sup>

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speaker is Christ, who warns that his coming will be sudden and unexpected, like a thief. One is reminded of similar warnings in the NT (Mt 24,42-44; 1Thess 5,2) and previously in Revelation itself (Rev 3,3). The difference is that this warning interrupts the preparations for the final battle, implying that his coming will not only be sudden and unexpected, but is also imminent (cf. 22,7.12.20). The second part of the exhortation is curious: the faithful must not only be awake, but also keeping their clothes. Unless the faithful were in the habit of sleeping without clothes (doubtful), this can only mean that somebody is threatening to remove their clothes, leaving the wearer naked and ashamed. If the clothes represent baptismal garments (as in 3,3-4), then those trying to remove them can be identified with the evil forces working, through the cult of the beast, to eradicate the baptismal faith of the faithful (Rev 13). Christ is here exhorting the faithful to keep their baptismal faith and let no one take it away. There is an interesting parallel which may explain the origin of the curious exhortation: in temple times, the *Mishnah* reports that if one of the Levitical guards was found asleep during his night shift, his clothes would be taken away and burnt. He would then have to return home naked, exposing his 'shame' to the public (*m.Middoth* 1:2). 'Shame' (ἀσχημοσύνη) here appears to be a euphemism for genitalia and equivalent to the Latin '*pudenda*'.

<sup>373</sup> The demons assembled the world rulers and their armies for the final battle at a place called Harmageddon, which is a Hebrew name meaning 'Mount Megiddon'. This is somewhat surprising because OT tradition saw the Holy City of Jerusalem or its environs ('the mountains of Israel') as the location of the end-time battle (cf. Zech 12;14; Joel 3-4; Ez 39,4.17). Although Megiddo is mentioned several times in the Hebrew OT, Megiddon (with the final 'n') is mentioned only once, at Zech 12,11, which is an eschatological prophecy that John draws on frequently: in the end-times, the House of David and the residents of Jerusalem will mourn for the person they pierced (Zech 12,10; cf. Jn 19,37; Mt 24,30; Rev 1,7) and "the mourning in Jerusalem shall be as great as the mourning for Hadadrimmon in the plain of Megiddon" (Zech 12,11)—Hadadrimmon was an ancient pagan god and the 'mourning' refers to his fertility rite (cf. 1Kgs 18,28). So, the reference here to 'Mount Megiddon' (with the final 'n') points to the 'plain of Megiddon' in Zech 12,11, and not to the ancient city of Megiddo. In any case, the city of Megiddo was abandoned in 332 BC, and although it was situated on a 'Tell', this 'Tell' rises only 30 metres above the plain and

<sup>17</sup>And the seventh poured out his bowl on the air; and a loud voice came out of the Sanctuary, from the throne, saying: It is done.<sup>374</sup>

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cannot be called a mountain as in the 'Mount Megiddon' (Harmageddon) mentioned here. The plain of Megiddon stretches for many miles to the east of Tell Megiddo, and is elsewhere called the plain of Jezreel (Esdraelon in Greek). It is an entirely appropriate place for the final battle, since for the last 3,500 years this plain has been the site of many historical battles, some of which are described in the OT (e.g., Jdg 5,19; 2 Kgs 9,27; 2Kgs 23,29-30; 2Chr 35,22). The mountain that dominates the plain of Megiddon is, in fact, Mount Carmel, which can therefore be identified as the 'Mount Megiddon' (Harmageddon) mentioned in the text. It is called 'Mount Megiddon', and not 'Mount Carmel', because the author wishes to invoke the significance of Zech 12,11, which, as we have seen, concerns the mourning for the person who was pierced, Jesus Christ without doubt, and implies the fulfilment of the author's universalized version of this text in Rev 1,7: "Behold, he comes with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn over him". So, as a result of this final battle at the foot of Harmageddon, all the peoples of the earth, not just those in Jerusalem, will mourn over Jesus Christ as they used to weep and mourn for their false gods (see n. 12). Furthermore, Mount Megiddon (Harmageddon) is presented in contrast to Mount Zion (Rev 14,1), from where 'the Lord will send out the rod of his strength' (Ps 110,2; 2,6-9). Seen in this way, Mount Megiddon represents the place where the false messiah (the beast) will seek to demonstrate his military strength after his throne has been struck with darkness by the 5<sup>th</sup> bowl-plague (Rev 16,10-11). It is in this context, therefore, that there will be a gathering of forces for the final battle. However, in a way that recalls the decisive event in the conflict between Elijah and the false prophets of Baal (1Kgs 18) on Mt. Carmel, Christ comes with his armies and defeats his enemies (Rev 19,19-21; see n. 447).

<sup>374</sup> The contents of the 7<sup>th</sup> bowl fall on the air and a voice from the throne says 'it is done', confirming that the seven plagues exhaust the passion of God (Rev 15,1). This is unlikely to be God speaking, since the author tends to specify this (cf. 21,5). There is a loud voice 'from the throne' that speaks about God in the third person (cf. 21,3) and apart from the Godhead the only beings at the throne are the four living creatures. It would be particularly apt, on this occasion, to attribute the loud voice from the throne as the voice of one of the four living creatures, for one of them has, from the start, been closely involved with the delivery of the bowl-plagues (15,7; 16,1).

<sup>18</sup>And there were lightnings and noises and thunders and a great earthquake occurred, such as never had happened since man was on the earth, such an earthquake—so great.<sup>375</sup>

<sup>19</sup>And the great city came to be in three parts and the cities of the nations fell. And Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup with the wine of the passion of his anger.<sup>376</sup> <sup>20</sup>And every island

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**375** It has been suggested that this battery of natural phenomena is the same as described at 11,19, but this is unlikely as it would break the pattern of intensification that was seen between the seal and trumpet series, especially since further intensification is evident here with the greatest earthquake of all time and the lethal size of the hailstones, see n. 116.

**376** As at Rev 11,8, there is a debate about whether the 'great city' refers to historical Jerusalem or to Babylon. Although Babylon is mentioned previously, at 14,8, she is not called a city in that verse, so the author appears to be directing the reader to identify the 'great city' in this context with the city having this title in 11,8: there we argued that this city is the historical Jerusalem after inheriting the title 'great city' from Babylon (see n. 258). This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that the fate of this 'great city' is distinguished from the fate of the cities of the nations, in a way that evokes the biblical distinction between Jerusalem and the gentile world. Furthermore, the splitting of this city into three parts by the earthquake recalls Zechariah's prophecy regarding the Lord's eschatological appearance in Jerusalem, when the Mount of Olives will be split into two parts, which are separated from the rest of Jerusalem (the third part) by a valley (Zech 14,4-5). Further evidence that the 'great city' here refers to Jerusalem, and not to Babylon, is to be found in the next sentence describing Babylon's fate. This would be redundant and repetitive if the 'great city' in the previous sentence referred to Babylon. Furthermore, this sentence follows the mention of the 'fall' of the cities of the nations and recalls the 'fall' of Babylon the great announced in Rev 14,8 (cf. 18,2), associating the fate of Babylon with that of the cities of the nations. Babylon's particular destiny is then described (the cup of the wine of God's passionate anger; also Rev 17-18) and differs considerably from that of the 'great city' mentioned in the previous sentence (split into three parts), so the two cities must be considered different, irrespective of whether Babylon was also called the 'great city'. Although Babylon is called the 'great city' later in the text (17,18; 18,10.16.18.19.21), it undoubtedly refers to the status of Babylon at an earlier time, before her abandonment

fled and mountains were not found.<sup>377</sup> <sup>21</sup>And a great hail, as a talent in weight, comes down from heaven on the people and the people blasphemed God from the plague of hail, because this plague is exceedingly great.<sup>378</sup>

*The Fourth Interruption (17,1–19,5): Babylon and the Mystery of Iniquity* <sup>379</sup>

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and destruction by the beast and his allies (14,8; 17,16-17; see also [link 18](#)).

<sup>377</sup> Even for the worst earthquake ever known, the disappearance of islands and mountains seems far-fetched. This imagery, though, recalls the scene of cosmic collapse that followed the opening of the 6<sup>th</sup> seal, when there was an earthquake and “every mountain and island was moved from its place” (6,14). There, the cosmic changes were delayed in order to allow for repentance and salvation (see n.164). The recurrence of this imagery at the end of the bowl-plagues is telling us that the vision of cosmic upheaval prematurely described in 6,12-14 is finally being realized. Not until the final judgment does this transformation of the ‘first heaven and the first earth’ reach its conclusion, when “the earth and heaven fled” from the face of the One sitting on the throne “and no place was found for them” (20,11).

<sup>378</sup> In the ancient world, a talent is a measure of weight that varied at different times and places between 26 and 59 kilograms. Needless to say, hailstones in this range would be extremely destructive for life on earth. So, it is not surprising that this plague elicits the same response from the earth’s inhabitants as the two previous bowl-plagues: again they blaspheme God (16,9.11.21). In the OT, it is not unknown for hail to be described as a divine punishment for the enemies of God’s people (Josh 10,11; Ez 38,18-22).

<sup>379</sup> This is the fourth and final interruption to the baseline prophetic narrative. It has been called the Babylon Appendix by some scholars (after Austin Farrer and Adela Yarbro Collins), because it deals exclusively with the sin and judgment of Babylon, whose fall was announced earlier, at Rev 14,8, in the third interruption (Rev 12,1–15,4). Through this link, it is united with all the other interruptions, which together form the central prophecy given to John to prophesy again (see n. 277). There are also structural links to the vision of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21,9–22,9), comparing and indeed contrasting the two cities (cf. 17,1-2 with 21,9; 17,3 with 21,10; 19,10 with 22,8-9) in such a way as to imply that Babylon must be judged and destroyed before the New Jerusalem can be realized.

XVII <sup>1</sup>And one of the seven angels that had the seven bowls came and spoke to me saying:<sup>380</sup> Come, I will show you the condemnation of the great prostitute<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> The report begins with one of the seven bowl-angels taking up the role of revealer and interpreter for the author (cf. 21,9). This establishes a clear connection between the bowl-plagues of divine judgment and the subject of the angel's revelation, Babylon. This connection was also evident at 16,19. Even though Babylon's judgment precedes the main series of seven bowl-plagues (cf. 14,8), it is clearly grouped together with those judgments.

<sup>381</sup> This is the first time we hear the epithet 'the great prostitute' (ἡ πόρνη ἡ μεγάλη), although the description that follows is so similar to the description of Babylon the great in 14,8 that there is little difficulty in identifying this prostitute as Babylon. Nowhere else in the NT is a city described as a prostitute. So when confronted with this description of Babylon here, the author is directing us to those parts of the OT, especially to the prophets Ezekiel (Ez 16; 23), Hosea (Hos 2,4-7; 4,10-19; 5,3-4; 6,10; 9,1) and Jeremiah (Jer 2,20; 3,1-10, 5,7), where the equivalent Hebrew term and its derivatives (זנה, זנאים, זנות, תזנות) are applied metaphorically to cities and peoples. The significance of the metaphor of prostitution is remarkably consistent throughout the OT: it is used, without exception, to signify idolatry *per se*, and/or the specific practices that came to be associated with idolatry, such as 'improper alliances with foreign rulers and nations' and cult prostitution. Although it is almost always applied to the people of God's Covenant, it was also used once for the local Canaanites (Ex 34,15), once for the maritime city of Tyre (Is 23,17) and once for the 'great city' of Nineveh (Nah 3,4.4.4). These exceptions are best explained by association: the idolatrous practices of the local Canaanites, of Tyre and of Nineveh were called 'prostitution' because they were identified with the idolatries most widely adopted by the Israelites, for whom the metaphor was principally reserved. In Revelation, the Greek word for 'prostitution' and its derivatives (πορνεία, πόρνη, πόρνος, πορνεύειν) are used in the literal sense of sexual immorality only in the context of the vice lists (Rev 9,21; 21,8; 22,15). In all the other 15 occurrences, they are used in the metaphorical sense familiar from the OT and referring to idolatrous behaviour. In this sense, there are two main areas of use: the first is in the letters to the churches, in relation to the teaching and practices of the Nicolaitans, of whom Jezebel, the false prophetess, was evidently a prominent member (2,14.20.21). In this context, the metaphor of prostitution signifies ungodly compromise with the pagan world, through

sitting on many waters,<sup>382</sup>

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participation in idolatrous customs taught and practiced by members of the Christian household. It does not refer to the Romans or to the local pagan population. A constant aspect to the use of this metaphor here, as in the OT, is its application to the religious infidelity of the people of God, who are now identified with the people in the churches addressed by the risen Christ. This background is of fundamental importance when considering the second instance of the use of this metaphor in the text of Revelation, the description of Babylon, for this metaphor and its elaboration define her very existence and identity. In all, the term ‘prostitute’ is used 5 times in relation to Babylon (17,1.5.15.16; 19,2). On three of these occasions, it is used to emphasize primacy in this trade: twice she is called ‘the great prostitute’ (17,1; 19,2) and once “the mother of the prostitutes and the abominations of the earth” (17,5). This last expression links up with other statements affirming that she has spread corruption throughout the world (19,2) in two main ways: by inviting the rulers of the earth to ‘fornicate’ with her (17,2; 18,3; 18,9) and by causing the nations to drink “the wine of the passion of her fornication” (14,8; 17,2; 18,2), which she distributes from “a golden cup full of the abominations and filth of her fornication” (17,4). Further examination of the text leaves no doubt that the primary element in Babylon’s prostitution is her idolatrous attachment to riches and wealth (cf. Rev 18,3.14), recognized in the NT as a pernicious form of idolatry in and of itself (cf. Mt 6,24; Lk 16,13; 1Tim 6,10; Heb 13,5). It is this form of idolatry that has separated the people of Babylon from their God and spread throughout the world. The ‘wine of the passion of Babylon’s fornication’ therefore refers to her inordinate desire for luxury and wealth—a desire that corrupts kings, nations and peoples with the same idolatrous love of wealth. For further reading please see [link 23](#).

<sup>382</sup> Babylon is sitting on many waters. Ancient Babylon did indeed “dwell by many waters” (Jer 51,13), referring to the River Euphrates and the network of canals carrying its water into the surrounding farmland. However, that is not the significance here because the angel informs us later that the waters where she sits are “races and crowds and nations and tongues” (Rev 17,15), which is a formula that recurs many times in the text denoting the masses of unredeemed people and synonymous with the Abyss and sea (see n. 256). She sits upon these crowds in a way that suggests she has an internationally recognized sovereignty, so it is no surprise that the angel then reveals that she is not just any city, but the “great city, she that has a kingdom over the rulers of the earth” (17,18; cf. 18,7).

<sup>2</sup>the one with whom the rulers of the earth fornicated,<sup>383</sup> and from the wine of her fornication the inhabitants of the earth became drunk.<sup>384</sup>

<sup>3</sup>And he carried me away in spirit into a desert.<sup>385</sup> And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that had seven heads and ten horns and

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**383** The rulers of the earth ‘fornicate’, or ‘prostitute themselves’, with Babylon. In the OT, alliances between God’s people and foreign rulers were indeed termed ‘prostitution’, but these alliances were always considered a by-product of their primary idolatry and infidelity to God. Here, however, there is a slight difference, in that it is not Babylon who goes out in search of the rulers, but the reverse: it is the rulers who are attracted to Babylon for her luxury and her strength (cf. 18,9-10). This is endorsed by the careful use of the word ‘fornicate’ in the context of the rulers: it is always the rulers who ‘fornicate’, or ‘prostitute themselves’ with Babylon (17,2; 18,3,9), and not, as one would expect, Babylon who fornicates, or prostitutes herself, with them. The application of this metaphor to the rulers suggests they have each become ‘fornicators’ by drinking ‘the wine of Babylon’s passion for fornication’. Drunk with this wine, the rulers are intoxicated by Babylon’s love of wealth and luxury (see n. 381), and admire her style of life. They are thus attracted to unite themselves intimately with her and, in this way, Babylon comes to have “a kingdom over the rulers of the earth” (17,18).

**384** Babylon makes all the nations drink her wine—the wine of the passion of her fornicating—and as a result, all the inhabitants become drunk (14,8; 17,2). This wine is a metaphor for the passion which excites and inflames its consumers to do the same thing as she does, which is to fornicate. Since Babylon’s fornication is a metaphor for her inordinate attachment to luxury and wealth (see n. 383), then it is the same idolatrous love of luxury and wealth that inflames and corrupts the rulers, nations and peoples who drink her wine. Her passion for luxury and wealth infects the whole world and unites its rulers around her. Since the people who get drunk are the subjects of her international ‘kingdom’, it appears that ‘the wine of the passion of her fornicating’ is the means by which the ‘great city’ holds her kingdom together. It may, in fact, be the most important part—the ‘potion’—of the sorcery of which she is later accused (18,23).

**385** This is the third time that John finds himself ‘in spirit’ for further revelations (1,10; 4,2; see n.16). He describes a similar journey at 21,10. The difference here is that he is carried by the angel ‘in spirit’, in a manner reminiscent of Ezekiel: “Then a spirit lifted me up...” (cf. Ez 3,12.14; 8,3; 9,24; 11,1; 43,5). This time, the angel transports John ‘in spirit’ to the desert in order to show him the prostitute. Since the prostitute is sitting on



was full of blasphemous titles.<sup>386</sup> <sup>4</sup>And the woman was clothed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls;<sup>387</sup> in her hand she was holding a golden cup full of abominations and the filth of her fornication,<sup>388</sup>

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many waters, one should not expect to find her in the desert, where there is no water. So, John is taken to the desert because it is only from the desert, purified of worldly desires, that the 'mystery' of Babylon can be clearly seen. We should not forget, either, that the desert is the place where Zion is being nourished and protected for a certain period of time (Rev 12,6.14).

<sup>386</sup> The angel told John about the prostitute sitting *on* many waters, but now, from the desert, he sees what lies *under* the water: he sees her sitting on a scarlet beast with seven heads, ten horns and full of blasphemous titles. Although this is the same beast that rises from the sea to rule the world for 42 months at the end of history (cf. 13,1-8), this vision clearly takes us back to the time he was still submerged under the water, before he comes to reign. Not only does this vision indicate that the waters, the sea and the Abyss all refer to the same netherworld 'region' (see n. 256), but it also reveals the history of the beast before he ascends from there: while remaining largely hidden from view under the waters of the Abyss, or sea, the beast is secretly supporting the prostitute (cf. 17,6). The beast's clandestine support helps to explain the historical success of the prostitute and is no doubt the reason why she is called the 'great city' (17,18). It is one of the main elements of the 'mystery' of the woman which the angel is now intent on revealing (cf. 17,7).

<sup>387</sup> The woman's dress is extremely lavish and costly: purple and scarlet clothes were made from very expensive dyes and came to be used mainly for royal garments, not to mention her adornment with gold, precious stones and pearls. This is the magnificent regalia of a 'queen' (cf. 18,7) and is by no means typical of a prostitute in the ordinary sense. It is relevant, perhaps, to note that this kind of attire is not acceptable for Christian women (1Tim 2,9) and contrasts strikingly with the 'fine linen bright and clean' that will be worn by the Bride of the Lamb (Rev 19,8).

<sup>388</sup> Babylon has a golden cup in her hand "full of the abominations and the filth of her fornication" (17,4), which is a shocking way of describing the 'wine of the passion of her fornicating' (see n. 384). The word for abominations (βδέλυγμα) translates a Hebrew word (תועבה) that refers to objects or actions that are ritually or ethically impure, often through association with idolatrous worship. It appears to have a particular reference to sexual sins (it occurs 5 times in Lev 18,19-30). The word for 'filth' (ἀκάθαρτον) translates another Hebrew term with a very similar



<sup>5</sup>and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: Babylon the great, the mother of the prostitutes and abominations of the earth.<sup>389</sup>

<sup>6</sup>And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus.<sup>390</sup> And seeing her I was struck with great

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meaning (טומאה), denoting especially those objects or actions that cause defilement (this term occurs 9 times in Lev 18,19-30). The full significance of the golden cup that contains this ‘abominable and defiling filth’ will become apparent in the next chapter (see n. 411).

<sup>389</sup> In Revelation, names on the forehead express the ultimate truth about the person: for the 144,000 it bears the name of God and the Lamb (Rev 7,3; 14,1; 22,4); for the devil’s disciples it bears the blasphemous name of the beast or the number of his name (13,16; 14,9); for Babylon it bears a title that is called a mystery, which is to say that it reveals a hidden meaning. Even the name ‘Babylon’ (14,8; 16,19; 17,5; 18,2.10.21) had a hidden meaning: this was a code-name for Rome among Jewish and Christian communities contemporary with the author of Revelation (cf. 1Pet 5,13; 2Bar 11:1; 33:2; 67:7; 79:1; 80,4; 4Ezra 3:2,31; *Sib. Or.* 5.140-43; *Midr. Rab.* Lev 6:6). The origin and use of this name relate to the events of 70 AD, when Rome repeated what Babylon had done in 586 BC by destroying the temple and exiling the Jewish people. Rome also resembled the ancient city of Babylon by becoming the political and religious capital of a vast empire (cf. Rev 17,18). It should be said, though, that there is no reason to believe that the author was referring specifically to the ancient imperial capital, and there are several reasons suggesting that he was not (see n. 416). Seeing that the city has been continuously inhabited since ancient times, the author’s designation could apply to Rome at any or every period in her long history, even up to the present day. This ‘Babylon’ is indeed great: she is not only a great prostitute, but she is the greatest, because she is the mother of all the prostitutes and abominations on the earth. So, Babylon is not alone. There are other cities or communities in the world, which owe their existence to Babylon and commit offenses similar to hers (see n. 396).

<sup>390</sup> Most commentators start from the assumption, based upon a single classical source (Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.* 14.22.28), that Babylon is drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus, because she killed them. However, this assumption is flawed because the saints generally die a natural death and are not killed for witnessing their faith like martyrs. Neither is there any convincing evidence in the text that Babylon persecutes or kills God’s people—a task that is clearly left to the beast and his false prophet (Rev 13). Furthermore, from a purely literary point of

wonder.<sup>391</sup> <sup>7</sup>And the angel said to me: Why do you wonder? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns

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view, being a murderer is not at all compatible with the practice of prostitution. So, another interpretation must be sought for Babylon's intoxication with blood, which, it should be noted, differs totally from the intoxication of those who drink her wine. At this point, it is significant that Babylon is not only drunk, but that she is also a prostitute, and that it appears that these two metaphors should be interpreted together: Babylon's drunkenness is related in some way to her prostitution. As we saw above, her prostitution is best understood as an idolatrous attachment to wealth and luxuries. To be drunk means to be in a state of elation and celebration combined with moral laxity and abandonment. Babylon experiences this state as a result of her assimilation of the lifeblood, which is to say the self-sacrifice, of the saints and martyrs of Jesus. So, Babylon's appropriation of the sacrifices of these holy followers of Jesus not only induces in her a state of elation, celebration and moral relaxation, but also helps her to acquire wealth and live a life of luxury. Unpacking the metaphors still further, Babylon "glorifies herself and lives luxuriously" (18,7) by exploiting the merits of the saints and martyrs of Jesus Christ. Allying herself in this way with the saints and martyrs of Jesus, Babylon cannot be anything else but Christian in origin. This agrees with the findings above, that the biblical metaphor of prostitution is used almost exclusively for the people of God (see n. 381). The practice by means of which Babylon exploits the merits of the saints and martyrs, in order to satisfy her passion for riches, coincides exactly with the 'cult of the saints and martyrs' around which, it must be admitted, many and various abuses, excesses and defects have occurred in the history of the Catholic Church, and have proved to be difficult to eradicate (cf. Conc. Vat. II, *Lumen Gentium*, 51). Although Babylon is not guilty of shedding the blood of the people of God, she profits financially from this crime through the 'cult of the saints and martyrs'. A particularly vivid historical illustration of this is given by St. Bernard of Clairvaux in his *Apology to Abbot William*, 12.28.

<sup>391</sup> The author's utter amazement (lit: he 'wondered with a great wonder') on seeing this particular part of his vision is difficult to explain: he had no such reaction to his visions of the devil, beast, false prophet and their persecution of the faithful. In this case, we suggest his amazement was caused by his realization that Babylon is essentially a Christian community.

that is supporting her.<sup>392</sup> <sup>8</sup>The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the Abyss and goes to destruction;<sup>393</sup> and the

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**392** The angel then goes some way to confirming the above suggestion. Before receiving John's answer to the question "Why do you wonder?", he assumes that the author's amazement was caused by 'the mystery of the woman and of the beast' and proceeds to tell him about it. This 'mystery' refers to the hidden liaison between the prostitute and the beast, which takes place secretly beneath the waters (see n. 386). Since the beast is a close associate of the devil (Rev 13,1-4), this mystery presents itself as a diabolical counterpart to the Mystery of God (10,7) and is rightly called the 'mystery of iniquity' or 'lawlessness'. It was first introduced to us by the Apostle Paul in 2Thess 2,7: "For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work...". It is this bowl-angel in Revelation, though, who gives us, in the following passage, the most complete picture of the historical expression of this mystery.

**393** The angel begins with the mystery of the beast, which he describes as "the beast that... was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and goes to destruction". By expressing this mystery as an imitation of God's name, "the One who was and is and is to come" (Rev 1,8), the angel seems to be saying that the beast thinks of himself as God, reinforcing an impression received elsewhere in the text, where we are told he is worshipped as God for his unrivalled power (13,4) and on account of this power, the devil is also worshipped (13,2.4; see n. 303). Furthermore, those who do not worship the beast, or his image, are put to death (13,12.15). The beast's diabolical pretension to be God (cf. 2Thess 2,4) invites us to understand him and the devil as a unity—the diabolical counterpart to the union of God and his Messiah. We can take this aspect of the mystery one step further: from the beast's unity with the devil, and from the fact that he is submerged in the Abyss, where the devil is said to be imprisoned (Rev 20,1-3), we can affirm that the beast is that part of the Abyss—that member of the unredeemed multitude of people (see n. 256)—in whom the devil is presently confined. In other words, the beast is nothing less than the historical embodiment of the devil. The mystery of iniquity comes into further focus when we recall that the beast is secretly engaged in supporting the city called Babylon (17,3), thus contributing to her success as an international authority (17,18) and sustaining her ability to corrupt the earth until 'her sins pile up to heaven' (18,5). Since the beast is the embodiment of the devil, and the presence of Babylon's sin in heaven accounts for the sign of the devil there (12,3), this 'mystery of the woman and the beast' in Revelation explains how the devil somehow continues to

inhabitants of the earth will wonder—everyone whose name is not written in the Scroll of Life from the foundation of the world—when they see the beast, because he was, and is not, and will have come.<sup>394</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Here is the intelligence with wisdom.<sup>395</sup> The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits,<sup>396</sup> and are seven rulers: <sup>10</sup>five have fallen,

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have a kind of ‘presence’—a ‘sign’—in heaven and in the world (12,3.13), while at the same time being chained in the Abyss (20,1-3: see n. 280).

<sup>394</sup> All those whose names have been scrubbed from the Lamb’s Scroll of Life will be amazed, and they will worship the beast (cf. 13,8), because the beast who had been submerged and hidden in the Abyss for so long (‘who was and is not’) has finally returned in the fullness of his power and authority (‘will have come’). In comparison with the previous statement (17,8a), this passage evidently reflects the situation after the ascension of the beast from the Abyss, or sea (11,7; 13,1) and should be completed with the warning that he goes off to his destruction. For the removal of names from the Scroll of Life, see n. 309.

<sup>395</sup> Wisdom and intelligence are needed to proceed with the ‘mystery of the woman and the beast’. This statement is very similar to the challenge in 13,18: “Here is the wisdom, let the one with intelligence calculate...”. In both instances the same aim is in view: the communication of the information needed to identify the beast that ‘is about to come out of the Abyss’ (17,8a).

<sup>396</sup> The ‘mystery of the woman and the beast’ remains a mystery because the identity of neither the woman nor the beast are evident or known. Here the author gives his last clues. He begins with the woman—Babylon, the great city (17,18): the seven heads of the beast she is sitting upon are seven hills. The city on seven hills, or mountains (ἑπτὰ ὄρη), was a universally known description for Rome at the time Revelation was written, at the end of the first century AD. This detail resonates with the observation that Babylon was also, at that time, a way of referring to Rome (see n. 389). But Babylon cannot be identified with ancient Rome, since her destruction is described as one of the eschatological judgments of God (the ‘bowl-plagues’: Rev 16,19), which have not yet taken place. Furthermore, her destruction will be eternal and complete (18,21; 19,3), whereas the ancient city of Rome was rebuilt and repopulated after her invasion in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. It would seem that Babylon represents an international authority (n. 382) that currently exists and is based in Rome. We have seen, furthermore, how the metaphor of prostitution, applied in her case, identifies her as a community of God’s people (n. 381), and we have argued

one is, the other has not yet come, and whenever he comes he must remain for *just* a short time. <sup>11</sup>And the beast which was and is not, even he is an eighth, is also of the seven, and goes to destruction.<sup>397</sup> <sup>12</sup>And the ten horns

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that her inebriation with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus means that she is essentially a Christian community (n. 390). Adding all this up, it is difficult to avoid the identification of Babylon, the great prostitute-city, with the historical centre of the Catholic Church at Rome. However, in spite of being identified with a specific location, it is evident from the text that Babylon's corrupting influence has spread far beyond Rome and now extends throughout the whole world (Rev 19,2). Adhering to the warnings of Christ (Mt 24,24; Mk 13,22), the early Church identified the workings of the mystery of iniquity with the activity of false teachers and false prophets within her growing communities (cf. 2Tim 4,3-4; 2Pet 2; Jude, 1Jn 2,18-23; 2Jn 7-11; Rev 2,2.14-15.20). Following the institution of Christianity as the religion of the Empire (4<sup>th</sup> cent. AD), and the formulation of the creeds and doctrines of the Church, the threat from false teaching receded. According to this vision of Babylon, however, the mystery of iniquity did not cease, but continued to operate by corrupting the leadership of the Church with riches and wealth. Tempted and corrupted by its desire for wealth and luxury, and associating intimately with the powers of this world, the Church leadership ceased to represent the humble millennial kingdom of Christ (see n. 456). Down the centuries, this corruption has scandalized the faithful (*corruptio optimi pessima est*), causing their separation from the Church and forming many of the historical divisions of Christianity. In the same way, however, the separated churches and communities fell for the same temptations to wealth and luxury, and have since become proud daughters of their mother Babylon (Rev 17,5). For further reading see [link 24](#).

<sup>397</sup> The angel moves on now to the identification of the beast: its seven heads are not only the seven hills, but are also seven consecutive rulers, of whom five are past, the sixth is ruling now and the seventh is to come to power for a short time. However, the seventh head is not the last because there will be an eighth, which is also one of the seven. The eighth head is "the beast that was and is not... and goes to destruction" or, as stated in 17,8: "the beast that... was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the Abyss and goes to destruction". From this description, the eighth head can be identified with the full and final manifestation of the beast rising up from the Abyss (11,7) or sea (13,1) to rule the world for 42 months at the end of history (13,5-7), the number of whose name is 666 (13,18; see n. 322). To which of the seven heads is the eighth identified? From the fact

which you saw are ten rulers who have not yet come to power, but receive authority to rule for one hour with the beast.

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that the whole beast was about to die when one of the heads was mortally wounded (13,14; n. 302), we can say that it was the last in the temporal sequence—for there were no heads left to take its place. The eighth head is therefore the continuation of the seventh and last head, but in a more manifest and powerful way (“on steroids”), since the eighth head represents the entire beast after it has risen up from the Abyss. The text, however, is unusually vague and enigmatic about this, perhaps in order to permit the eighth head to be identified also with the first head, which represented the ‘beast that was’, before it became submerged under the waters (i.e., the Abyss or sea) and became the ‘beast that is not’. If the first head is then taken to be the Roman Emperor Nero (54–68 AD), the eighth head could indeed be understood as an eschatological fulfilment of the Nero *Redux/Redivivus* legend, so popular in the Mediterranean region during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (*Sib. Or.* 3.63-74; 4.119-22,137-39; 5.137-54,214-27,361-70; 8.68-72,139-69). In this case, the eighth head could also be called ‘the first and the last’, in false imitation of the risen Christ (Rev 1,17; 2,8; 22,13). As in other contexts in Revelation, the number seven is symbolical and here represents the total number of heads of the beast, rather than the actual number. The information that ‘five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come’ (17,10) places the ‘now’ of the author’s vision during the reign of the sixth head, just before the last (seventh head) and greatest (eighth head) manifestations of the beast. This need not refer to the time of writing, as often proposed in the commentaries (it is even used as a basis for dating John’s book), but from the point of view of the renewal of his prophetic vocation, which is placed in the text between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet blasts (Rev 10,7-11). Since the sounding of the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet announces the time for the consummation of all things (10,7; 11,15-18), and since this passage forms the introduction to the mission of the two witnesses who publicly announce John’s prophecy (11,3-13), then the author’s present time is identified here with the time when the central prophecy (of which this is a part) becomes current with its public announcement by the two witnesses, a finding which suggests that the insights presented in the vision may be instrumental in precipitating the events it prophesies. This point would also explain the author’s puzzling emphasis on imminence discussed before (see n. 8): from this point of view the author is literally accurate in saying that the end is near and that the prophesied events will happen soon.

<sup>13</sup>These are of one mind, and they give their power and authority to the beast.<sup>398</sup> <sup>14</sup>These will make war against the Lamb and the Lamb will overcome them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> The 10 horns of the beast represent 10 rulers appointed by the beast to rule with him for a short time during his brief reign (cf. Dn 7,8.20.24). The union of 10 rulers with the beast and the false prophet would make a total of 12 leaders, which suggests a deliberate attempt to recreate the union of the 12 tribes of Israel, in fulfilment of this expectation at the start of the messianic age, by those who do not see that fulfilment in the Apostles and in the Church. Knowing that the beast, as false messiah, and his false prophet represent a false fulfilment of the messianic expectation of the Jews (see n. 316), one could say with some degree of certainty that the beast would be said to represent Judah, the false prophet Levi and the 10 rulers the heads of the 'lost' 10 tribes. The 10 rulers are not only allies of the beast, but also totally obedient to him, like vassals. They appear to be united mainly by their animosity towards the Lamb, the risen Christ, whose eschatological adversaries they become by joining forces with the beast.

<sup>399</sup> Recalling the vision of the Lamb on Mt. Zion (Rev 14,1; cf. Ps 2,6), this verse looks back to the preparations for the final battle of Harmageddon (Rev 16,12-16) and forward to the account of this battle (19,19-21; cf. Ps 2,9). The risen Christ and his armies will defeat the beast and his ten rulers and bring an end to their 42-month reign. The defeated beast and his false prophet then go off to their eternal destruction in the lake of fire (Rev 19,19-20) in accordance with the angel's description of them (17,8.11). The armies of Christ are here referred to as 'the called, the chosen and the faithful', implying they are the risen souls of those who followed Christ on earth—those who were not only called and chosen (cf. Rom 8,28; 1Cor 1,2; Col 3,22; Jude 1), but also remained faithful. In the context of Revelation, 'faithful' is an adjective applied especially to those, including Christ, who remain faithful up to death (cf. Rev 1,5; 2,13; 2,10-11). It is those who remain faithful to their call and election that finally come to participate in the victory of the Lamb. In the detailed account of this war later in the text, they are referred to as the 'armies of heaven... clothed in fine linen, white and clean' (19,14)—clothing which identifies them, above all, with the saints and martyrs (see n. 441). For the divine title 'Lord of lords and King of kings', see n. 444.

<sup>15</sup>And he says to me: The waters which you saw, where the prostitute sits, are races and crowds and nations and tongues.<sup>400</sup> <sup>16</sup>And the ten horns that you saw and the beast, these will hate the prostitute and will leave her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh, and will consume her with fire;<sup>401</sup> <sup>17</sup>for God put *it* into their hearts to serve his purpose and to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast until the words of God shall be fulfilled.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> See n. 382.

<sup>401</sup> Ten of the rulers that previously fornicated with Babylon, as well as the beast that used to support her, “will hate the prostitute and will leave her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will consume her with fire”. The closest OT parallel for Babylon’s fateful betrayal and destruction is provided by Ezekiel 16 and 23, when Jerusalem is told that her former lovers will betray her out of hatred, strip her naked and destroy her with fire (Ez 16,37-41; 23,22-30). This verbal parallel introduces other useful points of contact between the judgment of Babylon described in Rev 17 and the judgment of faithless Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16 and 23. The author’s evident desire to link the Babylon of Revelation with faithless Jerusalem, on the basis of Ezekiel’s prophecies, fundamentally determines the character of the city he is describing. It is not just a dominant and wealthy world power. It is primarily a religious centre that knows the God of Israel, but has reverted to her old idolatrous ways through her love of wealth and luxury. While this chapter (Rev 17), has much more affinity with Ezekiel 16 and 23, the next chapter (Rev 18) is clearly based on the OT prophetic oracles against ancient Babylon (mainly Jer 50–51) and Tyre (Ez 26-28; Is 23). It should not be doubted, though, that it is the fate of the same city that is being described in both Rev 17 and Rev 18.

<sup>402</sup> Of note here is the poetic way in which the author tells us that the beast and his allies are doing God’s will by destroying the prostitute. This is evidently one of the reasons why God permits them to rule over the nations for a brief period at the end of history. The role of the beast and his allies in the punishment of Babylon recalls the divine commissioning of foreign invaders to punish the sins of the people of God in ancient times. However, these agents of God’s anger tended to exceed the task assigned to them, so earning their own divine condemnation (Is 10,5-26; 14,4-21). In a similar way the beast fatally oversteps his limits by blaspheming God and persecuting the followers of Christ, and so goes on to receive eternal condemnation.



<sup>18</sup>And the woman whom you saw is the great city, she that has a kingdom over the rulers of the earth.<sup>403</sup>

XVIII <sup>1</sup>After this I saw another angel,<sup>404</sup> coming down from heaven with great authority, and the earth was enlightened by his glory.<sup>405</sup> <sup>2</sup>And he cried out with a strong voice saying: She fell, *down* fell Babylon the great, and became a home for demons and a refuge for every unclean spirit, and a

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<sup>403</sup> See n. 382.

<sup>404</sup> A different angel takes up the prophecy of judgment (17,16) and announces Babylon's fall as 'news'—as an event that happened in the recent past. It is similar, but not identical, to the announcement of the angel flying in mid-heaven in Rev 14,8 (cf. Is 21,9; Jer 51,8): all the information given by that angel is included here, with a few details added. It is possibly a repetition of the announcement in Rev 14,8 by the same angel, who is now on earth. Whatever the case, the announcement is again placed ahead of its time, since the text that follows reverts to the future tense when speaking about Babylon's destruction.

<sup>405</sup> One of the added details is that this is an angel with great authority who comes down from heaven and enlightens the earth with his glory. The angel's illumination of the earth with divine glory recalls Ezekiel's prophecy of the return of God's glory to the restored temple through the eastern gate (Ez 43,1-5). This is narrated in four stages, as follows: (a) the glory of God approaches from the East (Ez 43,1-2); (b) the earth shines with his glory (Ez 43,2); (c) the glory enters by the eastern gate of the new temple (Ez 43,4); (d) the glory of the Lord fills the Sanctuary (Ez 43,5). A similar sequence can be discerned in the text of Revelation, in the following passages: (a) the angel with the seal of the living God comes up from the East (Rev 7,2) in order to seal the 144,000 on their foreheads (n. 170); (b) the angel that proclaims the downfall of Babylon enlightens the earth with his glory (18,1-2); (c) the Sanctuary in heaven opens (11,19; 15,5); (d) the smoke of the glory of God and of his power fills the Sanctuary (15,8). This comparison is useful, not just because it confirms the fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy for the new temple in Revelation (see n. 241), but also because it affirms that Babylon's fall, announced in Rev 14,8 and again 18,2, takes place before the opening of the Sanctuary in 15,5, and therefore before the pouring of the bowl-plagues upon the earth. This agrees with the warning that her destruction will come during the reign of the beast and his allies (17,16-17), which is terminated by the bowl-plagues.

hiding-place for every unclean and detested bird,<sup>406</sup> <sup>3</sup>because all the nations drank from the wine of the passion of her fornicating, and the rulers of the earth fornicated with her, and the merchants of the earth became rich on the strength of her lust for luxury.<sup>407</sup>

<sup>4</sup>And I heard another voice from heaven saying:<sup>408</sup> Come out of her my people, so that you do not take part in her sins and so that you do not receive from her plagues,<sup>409</sup> <sup>5</sup>because her sins have piled up to heaven, and

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<sup>406</sup> Babylon has become unpopulated like a desert, for the desert was regarded as the home of demons and unclean spirits (cf. Jer 52,62). The description of Babylon's desolation recalls Isaiah's oracles against Babylon (Is 13,20-22) and Edom (Is 34,10-15).

<sup>407</sup> This verse reads like an indictment: Babylon is condemned for three reasons, two of which were indicated earlier (Rev 17,2; cf. 14,8): she corrupted the nations with her idolatrous desire for riches and wealth; she attracted, embraced and corrupted the rulers of the nations, and she made the merchants rich through the strength of her desire for luxury. The common theme here is her idolatrous love of luxury and wealth, which she had disseminated throughout the world, at all levels of society.

<sup>408</sup> John now hears another voice from heaven giving two important commands, whose content indicates that Babylon's destruction is imminent, or at least in the very near future. The first command is addressed to 'my people' (18,4) and the second command is addressed to the agents appointed to destroy Babylon (18,6), and both commands are provided with a reason (18,5; 18,7b-8). In both commands God is mentioned in the third person, so the speaker is not God himself, but is indicated by the possessive "my people". If the speaker is not God himself, it must be the risen Christ, for he is the only other figure in heaven who leads a people.

<sup>409</sup> The first command is addressed to Christ's people living in the city called Babylon, telling them to leave that city so that they stop participating in her sin and avoid the destructive judgment that is about to fall on her (cf. Jer 50,8; 51,6.9; 51,45; Is 48,20; 52,11). Above all, this command tells us that Christ's people are residing within this city, so it is highly significant that there is no mourning for the loss of human life after the downfall of Babylon, but only for the loss of trade and precious articles (Rev 18,9-19). It is evident that all those who find themselves in that city at the time of her destruction obey the divine command to leave, indicating in this way that they are all Christ's people. Babylon is a community made up entirely of Christians.

God has remembered her wicked deeds.<sup>410</sup> <sup>6</sup>Pay her as indeed she paid out, and give her double in proportion to her deeds; mix her double in the cup in which she mixed; <sup>7</sup>as much as she glorified herself and lived in luxury, by that much give her torment and sorrow.<sup>411</sup> Since she says to herself: “As

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<sup>410</sup> In Jeremiah, Babylon’s “judgment reaches heaven, it touches the clouds” (Jer 51,9). Here, it is Babylon’s sins that have reached heaven, and therefore God has remembered her wicked deeds (cf. Rev 16,19). The accumulation of Babylon’s sins ‘up to heaven’ suggests they now possess a certain timeless, spiritual and irredeemable quality, becoming the ‘spirit of sin’, or ‘sinful spirit’, which constitutes a clear ‘sign’ of the devil in heaven (12,3; n. 280)—the Sin which is at the centre of the “mystery of iniquity” (n. 392). By means of this diabolical ‘spirit of sin’, manifesting itself as spiritual pride, the devil is able to exercise his sinful influence in heaven and on earth, despite being locked and chained in the Abyss (20,2-3). Acting in this way through the beast and his accomplice Babylon, the devil is able to corrupt even pious individuals (see n. 393). As Babylon’s sin is eternal and unforgiveable, her judgment will also be eternal (19,2-3).

<sup>411</sup> The second command is addressed to the appointed agents of Babylon’s destruction, whom we know to be the beast and his allies (Rev 17,16-17). “Pay her as indeed she paid out” seems to be the order to attack, in words of straightforward retaliatory justice (*ius talionis*) similar to Jeremiah’s oracle against Babylon: “Repay her for her deeds, as she has done, do to her” (Jer 50,29; cf. 50,15). The same legal principle seems to apply to the final clause: “as much as she glorified herself and lived in luxury, by that much give her torment and sorrow”, but the two middle parts of the command speak of double payment “give her double in proportion to her deeds; mix her double in the cup in which she mixed”. This is interesting because in the two instances where double punishment is mentioned in the OT, both concern the penance dealt to the people of God (Is 40,2; Jer 16,18). The conclusion is that Babylon deserves double punishment because she is a community of God’s people, and simple retaliatory justice would not be sufficient. The mention of the cup (ποτήριον) in which she mixed recalls the golden cup in Babylon’s hand, which is “full of abominations and the filth of her fornication” (Rev 17,4)—another way of describing the wine that makes all the nations drunk (14,8; 17,2; 18,3), filling the earth with corruption (19,2). However, as the time for Babylon’s judgment draws near, the same cup becomes an instrument in her condemnation, for in this passage it is said to those who have the task of destroying her: “mix her a double measure in the cup in which she mixed”. Finally, Babylon is forced to drink from the same cup, now

queen I sit and am not a widow, and sorrow I certainly do not see”,<sup>412</sup> so in one day will come her plagues – pestilence and sorrow and famine – and

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precisely identified as ‘the cup of the anger of God, full of the wine of his passion’ (16,19). Therefore, the golden cup which Babylon holds in her hand is none other than ‘the cup of the anger of God’. The implication is that this sacred vessel was entrusted to Babylon by God in order to bring divine justice to the nations (cf. Jer 25,15; 51,7). However, Babylon fell for the temptation of wealth and abandoned the divine mission entrusted to her. Her priests not only lacked the ‘right intention’: they had the wrong intention, because they served Mammon, not God (Mt 6,24; Lk 16,13). So, instead of distributing the ‘wine of the passion of God’, she filled the cup with the ‘wine of the passion of her fornication’. In giving this intoxicating wine to the nations, she brought them corruption, instead of divine justice, love of luxury instead of love of justice. For abandoning her original mission from God, and for spreading her corruption throughout the world, she is held responsible for “the blood of prophets and of saints and of all those slain on the earth” (Rev 18,24, see n. 423).

<sup>412</sup> The reason for Babylon’s punishment is that she says in her heart “I am enthroned queen and am not a widow, and sorrow I certainly do not see”, which resemble the words put into the mouth of ancient Babylon by Isaiah (Is 47,7-8). In the context of Revelation, the statement is particularly revealing, for it is clear that Babylon, in her pride, has convinced herself that she is a queen, who knows nothing of death or suffering. Not only is the absence of death and suffering a defining characteristic of life with God in the New Jerusalem (cf. Rev 21,3-4), but also the New Jerusalem is the Wife of the Lamb, or in other words, the queen of the King of kings (cf. 17,14). So, thinking herself queen, and knowing nothing of death or suffering, it would appear that Babylon wishes to identify herself as the New Jerusalem, where God dwells among his peoples, in the consummate fulfilment of his promises for mankind (cf. 21,3-4). Denying the future and final judgment, Babylon appears to be thinking, albeit only to herself, ‘in her heart’, that the salvific plan of God has already been completely fulfilled, and she acts as if she herself represented that fulfilment. Although deeply mistaken, such a mentality is profoundly theological, and betrays a privileged, not to say presumptive, interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures. Such a perspective is entirely consistent with, and supportive of, the view that Babylon is fundamentally a religious community that has deviated from her true vocation. It does indeed give us the reason why Babylon must be judged and destroyed before the New Jerusalem can be realized (see n. 381).

with fire she will be consumed, for strong is the Lord God, the One condemning her. **413**

<sup>9</sup>And the rulers of the earth, **414** those who fornicated with her and lived in luxury, will weep and mourn for her when they see the smoke of her burning, <sup>10</sup>standing from a distance through fear of her torment, saying:

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**413** Babylon's punishment and destruction will be swift, "in one day" (cf. Is 47,9) and the end will come with fire (cf. Rev 17,16; cf. Jer 52,58). There is barely enough time for the plagues to take hold before the consuming fire will destroy everything "in one hour" (Rev 18,17-19). Such devastation is attainable nowadays with thermobaric missiles. The final warning about the 'One condemning her' again echoes Jeremiah's oracle against Babylon: "Strong is their avenger, whose name is the Lord of hosts" (Jer 50,34).

**414** A lament follows (Rev 18,9-19) voiced by those who are shocked over the fall of the great city, Babylon. It is in three almost parallel parts: the first is the lament of the rulers who fornicated with her and lived in luxury (18,9-10); the second is the lament of the merchants of the earth who became rich from her (18,11-13); the third is the lament of the maritime transporters who became rich from her wealth (18,17-19). The whole section appears to be modeled on Ezekiel's oracle against the city of Tyre (Ez 26) and the subsequent lament over her destruction (Ez 27). Although there has been considerable condensation, simplification and systemization in Rev 18,9-19, the content and tone are so similar to those of the Tyre prophecy that it appears the author wishes us to extract meaning from the comparison. Tyre's destruction was evidently chosen as a model for Babylon's destiny, because it was also an idolatrous city that lived luxuriously from the commerce that passed through her ports. In Isaiah, Tyre is even called a prostitute (Is 23,17-18). But there is another reason: Tyre's downfall is coming because she gloated over the destruction of Jerusalem, saying "Aha! it is broken, the gateway to the peoples; now that it is ruined, its wealth reverts to me!" (Ez 26,2). Could it not be that Tyre was chosen as a model precisely because Babylon (Rome) also triumphed and gloated over the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD? Babylon's destruction could then also be understood as an act of revenge for the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman armies in 66-70 AD. Understanding Edom as a code-name for (Christian) Rome in later Jewish tradition, this interpretation would indeed fit perfectly with the fulfilment of the oracles against Edom (esp. Is 34; 63,1-6; see n. 426) at the hand of the messiah expected by Orthodox Judaism and identified with the beast in Revelation (see n. 316).

Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon the strong city, for in one hour your punishment came. **415**

<sup>11</sup>And the merchants of the earth weep and sorrow for her, because no one buys their cargo any more: <sup>12</sup>cargo of gold and silver and precious stones and pearls and fine linen and purple and silk and scarlet, and every *kind of* scented wood and every object of ivory and every object of very costly wood and of brass and of iron and of marble, <sup>13</sup>and cinnamon and spice and perfumes and ointment and frankincense and wine and oil and fine flour and corn, and cattle and sheep, and horses and carts, and bodies and souls of men. **416**

<sup>14</sup>And the ripe fruit of the lust of your soul went away from you; yes, all the rich and shiny things vanished from you – and never again shall they find them. **417**

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**415** The rulers of the world weep and mourn for the loss of their worldly idol and are shocked by the speed with which this strong city was brought down (cf. Ez 26,6-18).

**416** The merchants of the earth weep and sorrow because they see their wealth disappearing with the loss of trade, which is specified here with a list of 28 mainly exotic items recalling Ezekiel's report of Tyre's cargo and trading partners (Ez 27,10-25). At least 18 of the items in Tyre's list recur in this list of Babylon's purchases, but without any details of trading partners. If, by adapting the trading list in Ezekiel 27, John had wished us to identify Babylon with ancient Rome, he would simply have followed this OT source even more closely by replacing the names of Tyre's trading partners with those of ancient Rome, but instead he omits these entirely. In this passage, John's concern is not to give historical details identifying Babylon with the ancient imperial capital, but rather to launch a critique of Babylon's grossly self-indulgent appetite for costly and luxurious articles. Furthermore, it would not make sense for a Christian prophet to aim this critique at pagan Rome, where, due to ignorance of the true God, idolatrous behaviour was the norm and where far worse crimes were committed. From such an ungodly place, he could barely have expected more modest and godly appetites. What makes this critique so relevant, so pungent, is that it is directed at a religious community that knows it should not be indulging itself with such expensive and extravagant commodities.

**417** The impression that this list of cargos is a critique of Babylon's disordered appetite for luxurious living is confirmed by this interjection

<sup>15</sup>The merchants of these things, those who became rich from her, will stand from a distance through fear of her torment, weeping and sorrowing, <sup>16</sup>saying: Woe, woe, the great city, she that was clothed with fine linen and purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, <sup>17</sup>for in one hour such great wealth was made desolate. **418**

And every ship's master and all the passengers and sailors, and all who work on the sea, stood from a distance <sup>18</sup>and seeing the smoke of her burning they cried out, saying: Who is like the great city? <sup>19</sup>And they threw dust on their heads and weeping and sorrowing they cried out, saying: Woe, woe, the great city, from whose wealth all those with ships on the sea became rich, for in one hour she was made desolate. **419**

<sup>20</sup>Be glad over her, heaven,  
and the saints and apostles and prophets,  
for God has given judgment for you against her. **420**

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addressed to Babylon herself (Rev 18,14). In the way of life she claims to follow, Babylon should not have possessed "rich and shiny things", a phrase which has a poetic quality in Greek 'τὰ λιπαρὰ καὶ τὰ λαμπρά'. Again, a comment like this would make no sense if it was addressed to people who, for ignorance of God's will, do not live orderly and godly lives.

**418** The merchants' lament continues here with their expression of shock over the loss of such great wealth in such a short time (see n. 413).

**419** The third and last lament is articulated by those who travel and work on the sea. For them, there is no other city like Babylon, for they say "Who is like the great city?" (cf. 13,4; Ez 27,32) and they are shocked that the source of such wealth has been destroyed so fast (see n. 413).

**420** Suddenly the lamentation of those who have profited from Babylon turns into the celebration of those from whose lives Babylon had profited (see n. 390). This is an invitation for the people of God, in heaven and on earth, to celebrate the delivery of divine retribution on Babylon (cf. Rev 12,12), and in this respect it vividly evokes the Song of Moses (Dt 32,1-43), which ends with a similar invitation to celebrate the Lord's victory over the enemies of his people: "Exult with him, you heavens, glorify him, all you angels of God; for he avenges the blood of his servants and purges his people's land" (Dt 32,43). There is also an echo of a passage in Jeremiah's oracle against Babylon: "Then heaven and earth and everything in them shall shout over Babylon with joy, when the destroyers come against her from the north, says the Lord" (Jer 51,48). The last line in this verse, which



<sup>21</sup>And one strong angel picked up a stone like a great millstone, and threw it into the sea saying: Like this, with fury, Babylon the great city shall be thrown, and never again be found.<sup>421</sup> <sup>22</sup>And the sound of harpists and musicians and flutists and trumpeters will never be heard in you again. And all the craftsman of every craft will never be found in you again. And the sound of a mill will never be heard in you again. <sup>23</sup>And the light of a lamp will never shine in you again. And the voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again;<sup>422</sup> for your merchants were the great ones

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gives the reason for the celebration, is one of the most difficult in the whole text: a literal translation would be “because God judged your judgment from her” (18,20b), but there are at least six different ways of translating this into idiomatic English. Though the wording may be discussed, the overall meaning is clear and profoundly resonant with Dt 32,43 (also with Dn 7,22; 1En 47:2,4), and indeed with the chorus of martyrs in Rev 19,2: “and he has avenged the blood of his servants on her”. The invitation to celebrate in this passage (18,20), finds its fulfilment in the heavenly liturgical scene which follows (19,1-5). At the centre of this scene, no doubt, are the martyrs who, a short time ago, had cried impatiently for the Lord to “judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth’ (6,10).

<sup>421</sup> After the anticipation of judgment and sorrow, we finally have a vision of Babylon’s downfall, but it is a symbolic vision: a mighty angel hurls a huge millstone into the sea and identifies this symbolic action with the violence of Babylon’s doom. The background for this image is the conclusion of Jeremiah’s oracle against Babylon (Jer 51,63-64), where Jeremiah tells his servant Seraiah to tie a stone to a scroll inscribed with the prophecy of Babylon’s judgment, and throw it into the River Euphrates, saying “Thus shall Babylon sink. Never shall she rise, because of the evil I am bringing upon her” (Jer 52,64). The substitution of the stone by a large millstone may have been influenced by Mt 18,6 and, prophetically, by its association with the corruption of minors. There are also traces of Ezekiel’s portrayal of Tyre’s demise: “I will make you a devastation, and you shall be no more; you shall be sought, but never again found, says the Lord God, (Ez 26,21; cf. also Neh 9,11).

<sup>422</sup> None of the familiar and heart-warming signs of city life will survive the devastation of Babylon. Furthermore, this city will never be rebuilt or repopulated, for ‘never again’ is repeated five times (cf. Rev 19,3: “her smoke goes up for ever and ever”). Jeremiah’s description of Jerusalem during the Babylonian exile seems to be the basis for this picture of doom and desolation (Jer 25,10), but, again, Ezekiel’s oracle against Tyre is not



of the earth, because all the nations were deceived by your charms; <sup>24</sup>and in her was found blood of prophets and of saints and of all those who have been slain on the earth.<sup>423</sup>

XIX <sup>1</sup>After this I heard *what was* like the great sound of a vast multitude in heaven saying:<sup>424</sup>

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forgotten: "I will put an end to the noise of your songs, and the sound of your lyres shall be heard no more" (Ez 26,13).

<sup>423</sup> Here are three more reasons for Babylon's judgment (cf. Rev 18,3.7): (1) her wealthy merchants had become the 'great ones' of the earth, which implies they may be controlling the traditional governmental power structures; (2) she had deceived all the nations with her sorcery, attracting people with her deceptive incantations (see n. 412) and intoxicating wine (see n. 384). Both Babylon and Nineveh were accused of sorcery in the OT (cf. Is 47,12; Nah 3,4); (3) "...in her was found blood of prophets and of saints and of all those who have been slain on the earth", a statement that cannot be literally true of any city in the whole world, past, present or future. It is either hyperbole, as in Jer 51,49 or, more likely, the affirmation of Babylon's blame for all this bloodshed, because instead of bringing divine justice into the world, she spread corruption (cf. 19,2; see n. 411). Instead of warning wicked men to repent and change their ways, she accepted their support and allegiance. So, Babylon is held accountable for all these deaths (Ez 33,7-9), even though she was not the killer (see n. 390). Note that Babylon is not called to repent, for her sin has reached heaven (Rev 18,5), and is now eternally evil and unpardonable (see nn. 280, 410).

<sup>424</sup> This is the last time John describes a liturgical scene in the heavenly Sanctuary: it is important because it represents the conclusion of the liturgical activity in the heavenly temple, and corresponds to the Levitical singing of Psalms at the culmination of the daily temple service. This conclusive part of the liturgy is distinguished from the rest by the singing of Hallelujahs (Rev 19,1.3.4.6). The liturgical activity is clearly divided into two parts: the first part (19,1-5) is the response to the invitation to celebrate the downfall of Babylon at 18,20 and the second part (19,6-10) introduces the fulfilment of the 'Mystery of God' in the marriage of the Lamb to his bride, the New Jerusalem. The close relation of these two themes reinforces the impression that Babylon must be destroyed before the New Jerusalem can be realized on earth (see n. 379). At the opening of this first part, the main participants are the great multitude of martyrs, previously seen at 7,9-10 and 15,2-3, performing a role analogous to that

Hallelujah!

The salvation and the glory and the power of our God!

<sup>2</sup>How true and just are his judgments,

because he has condemned the great prostitute,

who corrupted the earth with her fornication,

and he has avenged the blood of his servants on her. **425**

<sup>3</sup>And secondly they said:

Hallelujah! And her smoke goes up for ever and ever. **426**

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of the Levitical ministers in the ancient temple (see n. 350). The first word of their celebration is 'Hallelujah', a Hebrew word meaning 'Praise God', which is first found as an invitation to praise God in the final book of Psalms—in Psalms that were later associated especially with the celebration of the Jewish feasts (Pss 106, 111-113, 117, 135, 146-50, cf. also Tob 13,18). It occurs here at Rev 19,1.3.4.6, and nowhere else in the NT, though its meaning has changed slightly, becoming an expression of praise, rather than an invitation to praise.

**425** The martyrs celebrate and sing 'Hallelujah' for the final demonstration of God's salvation, glory and power (cf. Rev 7,9), made manifest in the perfect justness of his judgment against Babylon and the avenging of the blood of his servants in this way. A small group of these martyrs had specifically petitioned God for this action in 6,10, and were told to wait a short time more. They must have recognized the response to their petition in this act of judgment against Babylon. Since the majority of the martyrs in this scene were the victims of the beast and his false prophet (see n. 350), it is relevant to ask, if it is still not clear, why revenge for their death was taken out on Babylon. Since Babylon exploited the sacrifices of the saints and martyrs of Jesus, in order to finance her lust for luxury (see n. 390), and then corrupt the whole world with this lust (19,2), it is particularly appropriate that revenge for these martyrs' deaths should be taken out on her. This not only avenges their death, but stops further corruption.

**426** The second 'Hallelujah' reinforces the first and augments it because Babylon's "smoke goes up for ever and ever", i.e., her destruction is absolutely final and indeed eternal. The expression recalls the punishment of those condemned to the lake of fire for following the beast (14,11) and implies that, when the time comes, Babylon too will be thrown into that place of eternal condemnation along with other negative and diabolical elements of the present age (19,20; 20,10.15; 21,8). The wording is also vividly reminiscent of the fate of Edom in Isaiah's prophecy of her

<sup>4</sup>And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshipped God, the One seated on the throne, saying:

Amen, hallelujah!

<sup>5</sup>And a voice came out from the throne, saying:

Praise our God all his servants and you that fear him,  
the small and the great.<sup>427</sup>

*Preparations for the Marriage of the Lamb* <sup>428</sup>

<sup>6</sup>And I heard *what was* like the sound of a vast multitude, and like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunders, saying:

Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God, the Almighty, has come to reign!<sup>429</sup>

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judgment: “Edom’s streams shall be changed into pitch, and her earth into sulphur, and her land shall become burning pitch, night and day it shall not be quenched, its smoke shall rise forever. From generation to generation she shall lie waste, never again shall anyone pass through her” (Is 34,9-10).

<sup>427</sup> The heavenly court—the living creatures and the elders—prostrate themselves in worship before the throne, chanting their own chorus of “Amen, hallelujah!” Then, finally, one of the four living creatures invites all the faithful on earth, from every socio-economic level, to join in and praise God with their own ‘Hallelujahs’. This universal act of praise by the faithful in heaven and on earth fulfils the invitation in Rev 18,20 and concludes the section on Babylon—the so-called Babylon Appendix. The liturgical praise continues, however, with renewed vigour.

<sup>428</sup> With the end of the section on Babylon, which was the last interruption to the baseline prophetic narrative (see n. 379), a new section of text begins, which is the last, because in it are described the events that constitute the fulfilment of the Mystery of God: the preparations for the marriage of the Lamb (Rev 19,6-10); the manifestation of the Lord of Lords and King of kings (19,11-18); the Battle of the Great Day of God the Almighty (19,19-21); Satan and the Millennium (20,1-10); the Final Judgment (20,11-15); the New Creation (21,1-8); the New Jerusalem—the Wife of the Lamb (21,9-22,5). This will be followed by an Epilogue (22,6-21), which echoes parts of the Prologue (1,1-8) and brings the Book of Revelation to a close.

<sup>429</sup> The martyrs return with a chorus that sounds even louder than before. They praise God with another Hallelujah, because “the Lord our God, the Almighty, has come to reign”. Their chorus echoes the

<sup>7</sup>Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come  
and his Wife has prepared herself,  
<sup>8</sup>and fine linen, bright and clean, was given to her to wear,  
because the fine linen is the righteous work of the saints.<sup>430</sup>

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thanksgiving of the elders in 11,16: "We thank you Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken up your great power and have come to reign", and can be understood to be in direct continuity with it. Since the elders' thanksgiving occurs just before the opening of the Sanctuary in 11,19, which we have identified with the same event in 15,5 (see n. 274), and before the outpouring of the bowl-plagues in Rev 16, this timing would place the present liturgical activity at the same time as the singing of the martyrs in 15,2-3, thus uniting all the previous liturgical scenes (11,15-18, 15,2-3 and 19,1-8) into one grand, concluding liturgical action, marking the culmination of the heavenly liturgy at the consummation of God's kingdom. This temporal coincidence of the last three liturgical scenes would also fit with the timing of Babylon's destruction during the reign of the beast and prior to the outpouring of the bowl-plagues. What is significant in this passage is the sheer magnitude of the celebration of Babylon's downfall. It is difficult to believe that the faithful could take so much pleasure in such a brutal and swift act of destruction by the beast and his allies. This verse (19,6), however, gives us the answer: the martyrs move immediately from praise for Babylon's judgment to praise for the completion of God's reign. The conclusion is surely that Babylon's presence on earth was all that was holding up the consummation of God's kingdom. This would explain why the celebration of her downfall is so exuberant and extensive.

<sup>430</sup> From their praise for the consummation of God's kingdom, the martyrs move on to rejoice and be glad over the next most important moment in their heavenly lives: the marriage of the Lamb, and the preparation of the bride. Under the influence of the prophets (Hos 2,21-25; Is 54,5-8; 61,10; 62,1-5), the OT metaphor of the Sinaitic Covenant as a marriage between God and Israel is transformed in NT times, into the eschatological marriage between God's Messiah and his people (cf. Mt 22,1-14, 26,29; Mk 2,19-20; Lk 14,15; 2Cor 11,2; Eph 5,25; *Tg. Ps 45, Midr. Rab. Ex 15:31*). So here, as in other contexts in Revelation the woman represents a community (Rev 12 and 17), in this case the purified community of God's faithful being presented to Christ as a wife. The result

<sup>9</sup>And he says to me: Write; blessed are they that are invited to the wedding banquet of the Lamb.<sup>431</sup>

And he says to me: These words of God are true.<sup>432</sup>

<sup>10</sup>And I fell down at his feet to worship him.

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of this marriage will be the realization of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, described in Rev 21 and 22. In this moment of preparation for the wedding, the bride's most distinctive feature is her wedding garment, made of fine linen, bright and clean, representing the righteous deeds that the saints performed during their lives and then took with them to heaven (14,13). In ancient Mediterranean society, 'fine linen' (βύσσος) was softer and more expensive than 'ordinary linen' (λίνον: Rev 15,6). In the OT, fine linen was the material that was used to make the hangings for God's dwelling (Ex 26,31.36; 27,9) and the garments worn by the high priest and his colleagues every day (Ex 28,4-5; 39,27-29). In Revelation, both Babylon (Rev 18,12.16) and the Bride of the Lamb (19,8.14) are dressed in fine linen (βύσσινος), albeit of different colours. The Bride's fine linen, bright and clean, identifies her with the martyrs (see n. 185) and with the armies of heaven, the saints (see n. 441), who are precisely those who are celebrating in this vision. The virginal chastity of the 144,000 men (14,4), the description of their camp as the 'Beloved City' (20,9) and their intimate and faithful relationship with the Lamb (14,1), also point to the identification of the 144,000 on Mt. Zion with the Bride of the Lamb. In the field of mystical theology this kind of relationship is called 'spiritual betrothal' leading to 'spiritual marriage' (see nn. 325, 326).

<sup>431</sup> This is the fourth beatitude in a series of seven (1,3; 14,13; 16,15; 19,9; 20,6; 22,7.14) and appears to be spoken by the bowl-angel revealer (17,1), whose last recorded intervention, at 17,15, was introduced by the same words "and he says to me". John is told to write this beatitude for the churches, to involve them in a way that parallels the living creature's command in 19,5. We have just seen how the heavenly multitude is identified with the Bride. Here the faithful on earth are described as those who are invited to the Bride's wedding banquet, as the future wedding guests. Simply being invited to that festivity is a blessing (see also n. 517).

<sup>432</sup> "These words of God are true" or "These are true words of God" tells us that the angel is not speaking on his own behalf, but that the beatitude he has announced is coming from God himself. A similar assurance is given in the Epilogue at 22,6 (cf. 21,5), which appears to refer to the whole revelation transmitted to John.

And he says to me: No! I am a fellow-servant of yours and of your brothers who have the Witness of Jesus; worship God. For the Witness of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy.<sup>433</sup>

*The Manifestation of the Lord of lords and King of kings* <sup>434</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> With the assurance that the message comes from God himself, John falls to the ground to worship the angel, either mistaking the messenger for the source of the message, or simply awed by his angelic brightness. Anyway, he is sharply rebuked and told to worship God alone. The angel is only a servant like John and like all those who have the 'Witness of Jesus' (1,2,9; 12,17; see n. 6). The angel then offers a rather opaque explanation of why the angels and the witnesses have the same dignity: "for the Witness of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy". The meaning seems to be that both the witnesses and the angels have the same source of inspiration: for the witnesses it is the 'Witness of Jesus' (subject of the genitive: i.e., the witness given by Jesus and recorded by John in the Book of Revelation) and for the angels it is the 'the Spirit of prophecy', but these are in fact the same. The Witness of Jesus is simply an expression of the Spirit of prophecy. Those who keep the 'Witness of Jesus' in their hearts (cf. 22,9) are raised to the level of angels, which is to say that the witnesses and the angels are fellow-servants, and both are inspired by the Spirit of prophecy.

<sup>434</sup> The peaceful joy of preparing for a wedding suddenly changes into a vision of war, with the Bridegroom leading his Bride out of heaven and on to earth to engage the enemy at Harmageddon (16,16 and 19,19). However, before this battle of the Great Day of God the Almighty is engaged, there is a lengthy description of the leader of the heavenly armies, whose title is 'Lord of lords and King of kings' and whose features resemble those of the angel of the risen Christ in the introductory vision (1,9-20). This figure is a conquering warrior Messiah, who brings final victory in the battle against the enemies of God and his people, and so conforms precisely to the messiah awaited in early Jewish eschatological expectation. For the most part, this expectation was based on OT holy war traditions, in which victory was won by God, alone or accompanied by his heavenly armies. In its most ideal form, victory was attained without any human combat (e.g., Ex 14,13-14; 2Kgs 19,32-35; 2Chr 20). Descriptions of the eschatological war in later OT writings (Is 59,16; 63,3; Joel 3,11, Zech 14,5) remain true to this ideal. Early apocalyptic literature (Daniel, *Test. Moses*) follows the same ideal of supernatural victory, with Israel's angelic patron, Michael, as the divine warrior. Identifying the divine warrior with the long-awaited

<sup>11</sup>And I saw heaven opened,<sup>435</sup> and behold, a white horse; and the One sitting on it is called Faithful and True<sup>436</sup>

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messiah, later apocalyptic and early post-biblical literature continued to speak about victory gained in a miraculous and supernatural way, without the need for active human combat (cf. *2Bar* 40:1; *1En* 62:2-3; *4Ezra* 12:31-33; 13:9-11; 37-38; *Ps. Sol.* 17:22-25; 1QSb 5,24-25). The early Church adopted the same tradition by identifying the conquering warrior messiah with Jesus Christ at his Second Coming (cf. *2Thess* 1,7-8; *Jude* 1,14-15; see n. 27). In the vision described here, the author of Revelation presents its most vivid expression in the NT. However, such war-like images of Christ are often said to be incompatible with the image of Christ in the Gospels, even though they give more than a few hints to this final stage of his messianic task (e.g., *Mt* 24,27-28; 25,31.41; 26,64; *Lk* 19,27). It should be clear, though, that this part of Christ's work, while really resulting in the destruction of the wicked, has been entirely 'spiritualized' (cf. *Mt* 24:27; *Lk* 17:24) and there is no indication in the text that faithful Christians will have to participate physically in any military or paramilitary activity. The particular manner in which this comes about will be discussed later (see n. 447). Of note, the Qumran War Scroll 1QM, 4QM) was the only contemporary work to break with the above tradition and prophesy physical combat between the forces of good ('sons of light') led by the warrior messiah in person and the forces of evil represented by the Roman armies ('sons of darkness').

<sup>435</sup> In Rev 4,1 a door was open in heaven; in 11,19 (repeated in 15,4) the heavenly Sanctuary was opened, and now the heavens themselves are opened. Finally, the first heaven and the first earth will disappear (20,11) to make way for a new heaven and a new earth (21,1). Each stage in the disclosure of the heavenly realities takes us closer to the final transformation and renovation of the cosmos.

<sup>436</sup> The opening of the heavens reveals a warrior on a white horse, recalling the first of the four horsemen in Rev 6,2, who is the invincible force behind the preaching of the Gospel throughout the world (see n. 146). The symbolic association between that white horse and its rider (6,2) and this white horse and its rider (19,11) therefore assures us that there is no contradiction between these two aspects of the Christian mission: the preaching of the Gospel in all the world and, at the completion of this work, the final engagement in combat against the enemies of the same Gospel. The rider is called 'Faithful and True', two adjectives which have such similar meanings that they tend to reinforce each other in a circular manner: faithful because true and true because faithful. There is an evident



and with justice he judges and makes war.<sup>437</sup> <sup>12</sup>His eyes are like a blazing fire, and on his head are many diadems and he has a name written which

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reference here to the risen Christ, who is the ‘faithful and true witness’ (3,14), but there is also a more specific reference to the ‘faithful and true’ words of God transmitted by the angel and recorded in the Book of Revelation (22,6; cf. 19,6; 21,5). The impression that the rider is very closely identified with the words of the text of Revelation receives endorsement in verse 13, where we learn that he has also been called ‘Word of God’, a name that is also used of this book (cf. 1,2.9). We have also noted that both the rod of iron and the sharp sword (19,15) are metaphors for two different aspects of the Word of God expressed in the text: prophetic and judgmental respectively (see n. 238). In the following account of the final battle, the messianic conqueror seems to be identified not only with the returning Jesus Christ, but also more specifically as the ‘faithful and true’ source of the ‘Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ’ in the Book of Revelation.

<sup>437</sup> The justice, or righteousness, of God’s judgments has been affirmed in various ways in the last few chapters of the text (15,3-4; 16,5-7; 19,2) and it is repeated here with respect to the returning Christ, who ‘judges and makes war with justice (or righteousness)’. In the OT, the ability to “judge with righteousness” is frequently attributed to God (cf. Pss 9,9; 72,2; 96,13; 98,9), but it is also presented as an ideal for judges (Dt 1,16; 16,18), kings (Prov 31,9) and for everyman (Zech 7,9), in whom adherence to this ideal is a way of defending the poor and powerless. It is not surprising, then, that this particular attribute is applied to God’s future messiah in an important messianic prophecy in Isaiah (which also underlies Rev 19,15): “But he shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the land’s afflicted. He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked” (Is 11,4). The same messianic attribute is found in the *Psalms of Solomon*: “He shall judge peoples and nations in the wisdom of his righteousness” (*Ps. Sol.* 17:29). It should be noted that the just judgment of the messiah is applicable to faithful and unfaithful alike (cf. *Ps. Sol.* 17:26), a fact which explains the importance of the second part of the expression “and makes war”, for this refers solely to the destruction of the wicked in the combat that is about to begin. Finally, the figure of a king (19,12.16) who ‘judges and makes war with justice (or righteousness)’ cannot but recall Melchizedek, whose name means “king of righteousness” (cf. 11QMelch; Heb 7; Ps 110,4; Gn 14,18-20; see n. 27).



no one knows except himself;<sup>438</sup> <sup>13</sup>he is clothed with a cloak dipped in blood,<sup>439</sup> and his name has been called the Word of God.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>438</sup> The penetrating, all-seeing eyes like a blazing fire recall the same feature of the 'one like a son of man' in Rev 1,14 (cf. 2,18); his many diadems indicate royal authority as indicated by his title King of kings and Lord of lords (17,14; 19,16) and the new name that nobody knows except himself, written on a part we are not told, is a mystery that we have encountered and examined before at 3,17 (see n. 64).

<sup>439</sup> Before the battle has even begun, the Messiah's cloak has been dipped in blood. The reason for this is given a little later: he has just been treading the grapes in the winepress of God's anger (Rev 19,15), in which vast amounts of blood collect and overflow 'up to the bridles of the horses' (14,20). It is not therefore his own redeeming blood that stains his cloak, but the blood of his enemies, vividly evoking Isaiah's prophecy of God's revenge on Edom: "I trod them in my anger and trampled them down in my wrath; their blood spurted on my garments; all my apparel I stained" (Is 63,3). The image of a "cloak dipped in blood" is even closer to a passage from the Palestinian Targum (*Tg. Neofiti*) on Gn 49,11: "How beautiful is the King Messiah! Binding his loins and going forth to war against them that hate him, he will slay kings with princes, and make rivers red with the blood of their slain... His garments will be dipped in blood and he himself like the juice of the winepress". It will be noted in these passages, however, that the themes of waging war and treading the winepress are intermixed, whereas in Revelation they are clearly separated (Rev 14,19-20; 19,11-21), though not entirely unrelated (see n. 443).

<sup>440</sup> There is no contradiction with the new name 'which no one knows except himself' in the previous verse (19,12): "His name has been called Word of God" is another way of saying that his old name is 'Word (λόγος: *Logos*) of God'. It is quite likely that the divine personification of the term *Logos* here, and in other Johannine writings (Jn 1,1-2,14; 1Jn 1,1), has its origin in the *Memra* theology of the Targums. *Memra* is the Aramaic term (מִמְרָא) for the powerful and active word, speech, utterance or command of God, manifesting his power in the created world (e.g., Pss 33,6,9; 107,20; 119,89; 147,15,18; 148,8; Is 9,7; 55,11; Wis 18,15-16; Sir 42,15). It was used in the Targums as a substitute for God's name, whenever an anthropomorphic expression was to be avoided, i.e., "In the Targum, the *Memra* figures constantly as the manifestation of the divine power, or as God's messenger in place of God himself, wherever the predicate is not in conformity with the dignity or the spirituality of the Deity" (*Memra*, Online *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1901). In the NT and later Christian theology, the

<sup>14</sup>And on white horses the armies of heaven followed him, clothed in fine linen, white and clean.<sup>441</sup> <sup>15</sup>And out of his mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it he may strike the nations, and he will shepherd them with a rod of iron;<sup>442</sup>

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*Memra* (Logos, or Word of God) became identified with Jesus Christ, principally through the Johannine writings. In Revelation, the Word, or *Memra*, of God can be identified with 'the one like a son of man' in Rev 1,10-20 (see n. 25); the mighty angel of 10,1 (see n. 226); and the 'one like a son of man' in 14,14 (see n. 339). As eschatological judge, warrior and redeemer, the 'Word of God' in this vision performs a role that is typically associated with the *Memra*.

<sup>441</sup> The warrior Messiah leads the heavenly army clothed in fine linen, white and clean, and mounted on white horses, like himself. In the OT, the 'armies of heaven' are always identified with the angels under the Lord's command (1Kgs 22,19; Ps 148,2; 103,20-21; Neh 9,6) and for this reason God is often called 'the Lord of the armies' (יהוה צבאות) and the angels are symbolized by the stars of the sky (Gn 2,1; Rev 1,20; 12,4.7-9). Here, however, those with the Messiah are "called, chosen and faithful" (17,14), indicating that the armies include the souls of the martyrs, who have been faithful up to death. They also include the risen saints, because "the fine linen is the righteous work of the saints" (19,18). As a whole, these armies can be identified with the Bride of the Lamb by means of the clothes of fine linen, bright and clean that they wear (cf. 19,7-8). The armies appear to play a purely supportive role because there is no indication in the text that they take part in the fighting. Since both the angels and the saints are identified with the armies of heaven, it can be inferred that, in heaven, the saints and martyrs are equal to the angels. In fact, Scripture is clear on this point: in the resurrection, men and angels are equal (Rev 19,10; 22,9; 21,17; Lk 20,34-36) and, at the end of time, both saints and angels will come with Jesus Christ in the glory of God, in order to defeat their enemies (Rev 19,14; 1Thess 3,13; Jude 14-15; Mt 25,31).

<sup>442</sup> Next, the Messiah's weapons are described. He has a sharp sword projecting from his mouth in order to strike the nations and a rod of iron with which to shepherd them. We have met both instruments before: in the introductory vision, the 'one like a son of man' also had a sharp, double-edged sword coming out of his mouth (Rev 1,16; 2,12), which he threatens to use against the Nicolaitans (2,16). In 12,5, the male child born to Zion will shepherd all the nations with a rod of iron. Earlier, the messianic rod of iron is promised to the 'one who overcomes' so he will shepherd the nations and "break them into pieces like pots of clay" (2,27; see n. 78). On

and he treads the winepress for the wine of the passion of the anger of Almighty God,<sup>443</sup> 16 and on the cloak and on his thigh [standard] a title is

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a similar note, the author was given a cane similar to a rod, which can be identified with the prophecy that follows in the text (11,1; see n. 238). Both weapons can be traced to a widely influential messianic passage in Isaiah: it appears that the parallel expression of messianic activity in “He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked” (Is 11,4) has, at some stage, been interpreted as a double form of attack: the ‘rod of his mouth’ has become the ‘rod of iron’ (cf. Ps 2,9; Ps. Sol. 17:39; 1En 62:2) and the ‘breath of his lips’, probably under the influence of Tg. Isaiah 49,2 (“he placed his word in my mouth like a sharp sword”), has become the ‘sharp (two-edged) sword’ for slaying (cf. Is 49,2; 2Thess 2,8; Rev 2,16; 19,21). Both weapons are metaphors for the authority of the word of the Messiah, which is also the Word of God (see n. 440), each with its own distinctive function: the first (the iron rod) for striking, ruling and ‘shepherding’ and the second (the sword) for fighting and slaying. As noted before (n. 238), the iron rod appears to represent the word of prophecy, while the sword stands for the word of judgment (cf. Heb 4,12).

<sup>443</sup> In Rev 14,19, well before the final battle is announced in 16,12-16, this winepress was being trodden ‘outside the city’. Here we are told it is the warrior Messiah, the returning Christ, the Word of God, who treads it and for this reason his cloak is stained with blood even before the battle begins (19,13). The relation of the treading of the winepress to the final battle is therefore an important one. From a literary point of view, the treading of the winepress (14,19-20) must precede the final battle, because the wine from this activity is the wine of God’s passionate anger which is then poured onto the earth in the form of the 7 bowl-plagues (Rev 16), and it is not until the 6<sup>th</sup> bowl-plague that the preparations for the final battle begin (16,12-16). However, there is not only a temporal separation between the treading of the winepress and the final battle. There is also a physical separation: the treading of the grape takes place outside the historical city of Jerusalem (see n. 344), while the final battle takes place at a different location, at Harmageddon (see n. 373). Nevertheless, there is a very close relation between the two events: not only is the wine from the trodden winepress causally related to the preparations for the final battle at Harmageddon (Rev 16,12-14.16), as we have just seen, but the one who treads the winepress (19,15) is also the main protagonist at the final battle of Harmageddon. From the visual impression of the two events, we can discern another link: the enormous volume of blood that comes out of the

written: King of kings and Lord of lords.<sup>444</sup>

*The Battle of the Great Day of God the Almighty*

<sup>17</sup>And I saw one angel standing in the sun and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds flying in mid-heaven: Come, assemble for the great banquet of God, <sup>18</sup>to eat the flesh of rulers and the flesh of military officers and the flesh of strong men, and the flesh of horses and of their

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winepress (see n. 346) can only be explained as a consequence of this final battle. So, we can conclude that although the trampling of the winepress evidently precedes the assembly for the final battle at Harmageddon, the process of judgment symbolized by this metaphor appears to lead into and culminate with the great final battle, resulting in the horrific bloodbath described. The link between the metaphor of wine production and the final eschatological battle is found also in the Targums of Isaiah (*Tg. Is* 63,3-4) and the Prophets (*Tg. Joel* 4,13-14). The close connection between the two events, the first in Jerusalem and the second at Harmageddon, also harmonizes with the ancient sources that describe Jerusalem as the site of God's judgment expressed in a final battle (*Zech* 14,2-4; *4Ezra* 13:33-35; *2Bar* 40:1).

<sup>444</sup> For those who were not yet convinced, the title "King of kings and Lord of lords" confirms the identity of the warrior Messiah here with the Lamb, who bears the same title in an inverted order: "Lord of lords and King of kings" (*Rev* 17,14). Similarly, Jesus Christ is called 'the ruler of the kings of the earth' (1,5). In the OT, recognizable elements of this title are attributed to God (cf. *Dt* 10,17; *Ps* 136,3; *Dn* 2,47), making this another example of the application of divine titles to Jesus Christ (see n. 13; cf. also *1Tim* 6,15). The writing of this title on his cloak and on his thigh presents difficulties, especially because the cloak would block the author's vision of anything written on the rider's thighs. An attractive solution to this mystery is to suppose there was a copying error in the hypothetical Hebrew or Aramaic original of the text (see n. 226): the word for 'standard' (דגל) was inadvertently replaced by the word for leg (רגל), due to the very small difference between them, and the Greek translator then chose to represent the uppermost part of the leg, the thigh. This explanation has the virtue of demonstrating an awareness of, but certainly not a dependency on, the Qumran *War Scroll* (dated to the end of 1<sup>st</sup> century BC) containing the rules of engagement for the 'sons of light' in their final battle against the 'sons of darkness', in which 'standards' played an important part (cols 3-5, 1QM, 4QM).

riders, and the flesh of all people, both free-men and servants, both small and great.<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> The first part of the account of the final battle is the vision of an angel inviting all the birds flying high in the sky to ‘the great banquet of God’, to feed themselves on the flesh of all those participating in the final battle. The high-flying birds are the vultures and birds of prey. This vision is important for several reasons: firstly, it is undoubtedly intended to recall Ezekiel’s prophecy against Gog and Magog: “say to birds of every kind and to all the wild beasts: Come together, from all sides gather for the slaughter I am about to provide for you, a great slaughter on the mountains of Israel: you shall have flesh to eat and blood to drink. You shall eat the flesh of warriors and drink the blood of princes of the land... You shall be filled at my table with horses and riders, with warriors and soldiers of every kind, says the Lord God” (Ez 37,17-20). This deliberate allusion to the war of Gog and Magog creates a link between this part of the final battle in Revelation and the part described later, in which Gog and Magog are specifically mentioned (Rev 20,7-10). In a way that will be amply confirmed later, it opens the way to understand these two parts (19,17-21 and 20,7-10) as two successive stages of the same final battle between the forces of good and evil. Secondly, no Jew could read this passage without being reminded of the ‘Leviathan banquet’ at the end of this age (cf. 1En 60:7-11,24; 4Ezra 6:49-53; 2Bar 29:4; b.T. *Baba Batra* 74b; 75a; *Leviticus Rabbah* 13:3 [*Mid. Rab.* 4:167] and *Esther Rabbah* 2:4 [*Mid. Rab.* 9:36], summarized in A. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:26-31). According to this ancient tradition, there will be a contest at the end of time between the two great monsters created on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> days of Creation, and kept apart since then: Leviathan, who lives in the depths of the sea, and Behemoth, who lives in the desert to the East of the garden of Eden. It is said that these two monsters will clash and destroy each other, and a huge banquet will be prepared from their flesh, to be shared by all the righteous people who survive the ‘birth pains of the Messiah’. In Revelation, the elements of this tradition are present, although the details are very different. The context of the battle is eschatological, but the combatants are not limited to the two creatures analogous to Leviathan and Behemoth, namely the ‘beast from the sea’ (Rev 13,1) and the ‘beast from the land’, or false prophet (13,11). The other combatants include all the rulers of the earth with their armies, assembled for the battle of the great Day of God the Almighty, in the place called Harmageddon (16,14-16). The conquerors are the righteous, with Christ the Lamb at their head (17,14; 19,11-21), but they do not eat the flesh of the two beasts after defeating them, since these two beasts are

<sup>19</sup>And I saw the beast and the rulers of the earth and their armies assembled to make war against the One sitting on the horse and against his army. <sup>20</sup>And the beast was captured and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in front of him, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image; the two were thrown alive into the lake of fire burning with sulphur.<sup>446</sup>

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thrown alive into the lake of fire; neither do they eat flesh of any other kind. This banquet of God is not intended for the righteous, but rather for the birds of prey, and it consists of the flesh of all the defeated armies (19,18-21; cf. Ez 39,4.17-20). The righteous are, in fact, about to participate in a different kind of eschatological banquet: the wedding-banquet of the Lamb (cf. Rev 19,9). Finally, this vision may contain a reference to the enigmatic sign of the last days reported in the St. Luke's Gospel: "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather" (Lk 17,37).

<sup>446</sup> After an exceedingly long build-up (Rev 16,12-16; 17,14: 19,11-18), we have arrived at the final battle itself, at Harmageddon. Knowing that the one sitting on the horse is armed with an iron rod (19,15; cf. Ps 2,9), the wording of this verse evokes the rebellion of the nations in the messianic Psalm 2: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples utter folly? The kings of the earth rise up, and the princes conspire together, against the Lord and against his anointed" (Ps 2,1-2), who "shall rule them with an iron rod; you shall shatter them like an earthen dish" (Ps 2,9). Remarkably, as soon as battle is engaged, it is over for the warrior Messiah's rivals, the two beasts—the false messiah and his false prophet—who are captured immediately and condemned, without 'due process', to the lake of fire, where an eternity of torment awaits them. The text notes, interestingly, that they were not put to death first, but, as if they were immortal fallen angels, they were thrown *alive* into the fire, which is the 'second death' (n. 336). The economy of this description, implying the haste and brevity of their inglorious fate, is striking. Even so, it contains an echo of the conclusion of the rite of expiation on Yom Kippur in the second temple: after the high priest had confessed all the transgressions of the Israelites over the goat chosen by lot to be the live offering to Azazel, the scapegoat, it was led out into the desert (Lev 16,22), to the top of a cliff a few miles outside Jerusalem, and then thrown *alive* and backwards into the ravine below (*m. Yoma* 6:1-6). The analogy between the roles of the false prophet and the scapegoat has already been explained (cf. Rev 13,11; see n. 313).

<sup>21</sup>And the rest were killed by the sword that comes out of the mouth of the One sitting on the horse, and all the birds were filled with their flesh.<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> For the other rulers and their armies, there is no description of actual warfare, but the results of the confrontation are clearly stated: although they are spared the 'lake of fire', they are all physically killed, for they all become food for the birds, without distinction of class or rank. They would then descend to 'Death and Hades' to await their resurrection for judgment at the time of the final judgment (Rev 20,12-15). Nevertheless, the question remains as to how the rulers and their armies are physically killed, if the sword of the warrior Messiah is not to be understood literally, but as a metaphor for his word. In the allusion to *1En* 100:1-3 in 14,20 (n. 346), and in the allusion to the eschatological combat between Leviathan and Behemoth (see n. 445), there is an indication as to what may actually occur in the final battle, in which the rulers from the East and their armies encounter the beast and his allies at Harmageddon (16,12-16). In the first of the two allusions mentioned (*1En* 100:1-3), the sinners slaughter each other mercilessly and the carnage yields a lake of blood up to the breasts of the horses. In the second allusion, Leviathan and Behemoth also killed each other and their corpses provided the food for a huge banquet. This situation of 'mutually assured destruction' recalls the holy war between King Jehoshaphat's army and the allied forces of the Moabites, the Ammonites and the Edomites (2Chr 20,1-30). At the moment the Levitical singers started their clamour of praise: "Give thanks to the Lord, for his mercy endures forever" (Ps 136,1), the enemy began to kill one another, so that when Jehoshaphat's army approached, they found only the corpses of their enemies, without a single survivor (2Chr 20,21-23). We suggest a similar scenario in Revelation, where the martyrs correspond to the Levites and the 24 elders to the heads of their divisions (see n. 115): the elders sing "We thank you Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken up your great power and have come to reign" (Rev 11,17), which is then echoed by a great chorus of martyrs who sing "Hallelujah, because the Lord our God, the Almighty, has come to reign!" (19,6-7), whereupon the enemy combatants from East and West turn their weapons on each other and kill, until there are no survivors. Mutually assured destruction is the end of all who reject the mercy and forgiveness of God, especially those who are trodden in the winepress of God's anger or struck by the sword of the 'one sitting on the white horse'.



**448** It is impossible to comment on the next ten verses (Rev 20,1-10) without mentioning the division they have caused among the Christian faithful over the last two millennia, for they have spawned the heterodox doctrine called ‘millennialism’ (‘chiliasm’). A majority of biblical scholars support this doctrine by saying that the binding of Satan (20,1-3) and the millennial (1,000-year) reign of Christ with his saints (20,4-6) should, according to the text, be understood as a sequel to the Second Coming of Christ described at the end of the previous chapter (19,11-21). According to this ‘millennialist’ view, Christ’s 1,000-year reign follows his Second Coming and, as this event is yet to happen, is still a future development. It is said to be the natural reading of 20,1-10 and, according to the narrative sequence, it is the simplest and most obvious way to understand these verses. However, this view is disputed by a growing number of scholars, who have shown that the vision of Satan’s capture (20,1-3) and of Christ’s millennial reign (20,4-6) recapitulates the situation preceding the Second Coming, as described in other parts of the text (e.g., 1,5-6.9; 2,26-27; 5,9-10; 6,9-11; 12,7-18; 15,2). This interpretation supports the ‘amillennialist’ view of Christ’s reign as a recapitulation of the interval between his first and second comings, and therefore as a present reality. This view would explain why there is no indication either in the text of the Revelation, or in the NT, or in the doctrine of the Church, for an interval of 1,000 years between Christ’s Second Coming (19,11-21) and the final judgment (20,11-15), as predicted by the millennialist interpretation. In the text of Revelation, for example, there is no hint of a 1,000-year interval in the list of events following the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet blast (11,15-19), which itself announces the complete fulfilment of God’s Mystery (10,7); nor should the fully prepared Bride of the Lamb (19,7-9) have to wait 1,000 years for her wedding to take place (21,2.9); nor, if the bowl-plagues represent the final outpouring of God’s wrath (15,1), should there be a further outburst of wrathful fire against Satan’s army (20,7-10) after the peaceful interval of 1,000 years. Although the millennialist reading of 20,1-10 may be arguable on superficial narrative grounds, it is entirely mistaken from the wider literary, scriptural and theological points of view. While the debate becomes more and more detailed and sophisticated, the issue continues to divide Christians in ways that are perhaps more acrimonious and critical than ever before. The expectation of a blessed and holy millennial reign in the future, before the end of history, is a strong and unpredictable inspiration for dramatic, and often violent, social, religious and political movements. In brief, it is a subject that is crying out for resolution. The



XX <sup>1</sup>And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the Abyss and a great chain in his hand.<sup>449</sup> <sup>2</sup>And he seized the dragon, the ancient serpent who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years <sup>3</sup>and threw him into the Abyss, and shut and sealed *it* over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any more until the thousand years are finished.<sup>450</sup>

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novel approach taken in this commentary is to reframe the problem on the basis of an allusion to Ps 90,4, and in this way to reconcile the millennialist and amillennial views (see n. 453); for a full treatment of this approach, see [link 24](#).

<sup>449</sup> In Rev 9,1, the author saw an angel with the key of the ‘shaft of the Abyss’, and we argued there that this must be the same key as the key of the Abyss mentioned here in 20,1 (see n. 211). The angel, however, is different. There, in 9,1, the angel was a ‘fallen’ angel, implying that he had been dragged down from heaven by the devil and recruited into the service of evil (see n. 210). Here, the angel ‘comes down’ from heaven, which means that he was sent down on a mission and remains in the service of God (see n. 225). This is an important difference and alerts us to an oddity: if the event in 9,1 precedes the event in 20,1 (as predicted by the ‘millennialist’ view), you then have to assume that an angel in the service of evil returns the key of the Abyss to an angel of God, so that it may be used later to lock up his master, the devil (20,1-3). This is untenable! More acceptable is the view that the angel of God locks and chains the devil in the Abyss for the 1,000-year interregnum (20,1) and only at the end of that period gives the key to the fallen angel who then unlocks it, as described in 9,1. So we should already suspect that this vision is retrospective in content, and that the start of the 1,000-year period is well before Rev 9,1 and the 6<sup>th</sup> trumpet-plague. The unlocking of the Abyss in 9,1 can then be seen as prelude to the events at the end of the period, after which there will be no further need to lock the Abyss, for it will be needed no more (20,14; 21,1). Even though the Abyss is opened by the evil angel in 9,1, the devil cannot yet escape from the Abyss because he is still chained up within.

<sup>450</sup> The binding and incarceration of the devil in the Abyss therefore refers to the removal of his spiritual freedom and his confinement within the unredeemed human population metaphorically called the ‘Abyss’ or ‘sea’ (see n. 256). This severely restricts his level of operation to activities dependent on human agency—an interpretation that is entirely consistent with the fact that, in this state, he cannot “deceive the nations any more

After this he must be let loose for a short time.<sup>451</sup>

<sup>4</sup>And I saw thrones and they sat on them, and power to judge was given to them, and I *saw* the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the Witness of Jesus and because of the Word of God; also *were there* those who did not worship the beast or his image and did not receive the mark on their forehead and on their hand;<sup>452</sup>

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until the thousand years are finished". This restriction evidently does not imply that evil ceases to exist during the thousand years, but indicates, rather, that evil is restrained from perverting the truth of God revealed by Christ and his Gospel. This facilitates the propagation of the Gospel and creates the necessary conditions for every living soul to choose freely whether to accept or reject it.

<sup>451</sup> The liberation of the devil, after the thousand years have ended, is described in 20,7-10.

<sup>452</sup> Amongst those who live and reign with Christ for a thousand years, three groups can be discerned here: the first is simply described but not identified (they who sit on thrones and judge), the second are the faithful martyrs who have been killed throughout history because of their Witness to Jesus and to the Word of God (including those in 6,9), and the third are those of any faith or creed who were martyred because they did not pledge their loyalty to the beast, in any way, in the final period of history (cf. 13,11-17; 15,2-3). The last group is added at the end, because they are indeed the last to be included. The question remains as to who are those whom the author sees sitting on thrones, to whom judgment was given (20,4; cf. Dn 7,21-22). Accepting the identity of the priests who reign with Christ in this passage (Rev 20,4-6) with the priests who (are to) reign *on earth* in 5,9-10 (cf. n. 140), then clearly the vision of the millennial kingdom in 20,4-6 cannot be exercised solely in heaven, but must also be established on earth. Seeing that the last two groups in 20,4 both refer to martyrs, who were previously seen *standing in heaven* (7,9; 15,2), there is no alternative but to recognize the first group—those unidentified people who are sitting on thrones—as those who are ruling on earth. Since they are on earth, they cannot be identified with the 24 elders sitting on thrones in heaven, as suggested by a number of commentators. There are other passages in Revelation that can shed light on the identity of those sitting on thrones: "To the one who overcomes—I will let him sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat with my Father on his throne" (3,21; also 2,17). The unidentified people sitting on thrones, and ruling on earth, can therefore be identified with the faithful who have received, already in their own

and they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.<sup>453</sup>

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mortal lives, this particular promise of the risen Christ for those who overcome (see nn. 107, 454).

<sup>453</sup> This describes the millennial reign of Christ. Although a temporary messianic kingdom is described in several sources, ranging in length from 40 to 7,000 years, the author of Revelation is the first to describe this as a period of 1,000 years (Rev 20,2.3.4.5.6.7). The emphasis on the 1,000-year duration of Christ's reign evokes one particular passage in the OT: "A thousand years in your sight (Lord) are as a day, a yesterday that is passing away, a watch in the night" (Ps 90,4; cf. 2Pet 3,8). In the light of Ps 90,4, the 1,000-year reign of Christ is to be understood from both a human and a divine perspective. From the human point of view, the poetic comparison in this verse makes it very unlikely that the 1,000-year interval should be understood literally as a period of exactly 1,000 years, but rather as a somewhat protracted historical era. From the divine point of view, it should be seen not only as if it were a single day, which is to say a rather brief period of time, but also as if it were *a day that is already passing away*. The indisputable allusion to Psalm 90,4 strongly supports the interpretation of the 1,000-year reign of Christ as the retrospective vision of an era that is passing away and nearly over. The author's evocation of Ps 90,4 can therefore be explained as a device for guiding the interpretation of the millennium in this way. On the basis of this insight, both the millennialist and the amillennialist views can, to a certain extent, be reconciled: the author does indeed present the millennium as if it will follow Christ's Second Coming, while at the same time indicating, through the allusion to Ps 90,4, that it should be understood as a vision that is retrospective in scope. The millennium does indeed seem to be in the future, but when that future arrives it will be revealed as having passed, for it already exists in the present. The comparison of the 1,000-year period to one day in the eyes of the Lord, a day that is already passing away, resonates strongly with the finding that the liturgy, celebrated before the throne in the heavenly Sanctuary, and unifying all the diverse visions in the Book of Revelation, is a synthesis of the liturgical activity that took place on the Day of Atonement in the ancient temple. The divine day that corresponds to the millennium is not just any day, therefore, but the Day for Atonement—a finding that further supports the identification of the millennium with the present age of reconciliation and salvation in Jesus Christ (see [link 1](#)).

<sup>5</sup>The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection.<sup>454</sup> <sup>6</sup>Blessed and holy is he that takes part in the first resurrection,<sup>455</sup> over these the second death has no power, but they will

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<sup>454</sup> Christ's millennial reign is now called the first resurrection, confirming that for the martyrs, at least, we must understand the verb 'lived' (ἐζησαν) in Rev 20,4.5, as meaning 'lived on after their death'. This resurrection, though, is to be distinguished from the general resurrection, when the 'rest of the dead' will return to life for the final judgment (20,13-14). The nature of this 'first' resurrection can be inferred from the description of the three groups in 20,4 (see n. 452). In heaven, Christ's reign is represented by the souls of those martyred throughout history, with special mention of those killed during the great tribulation at the end of history. The reign of these martyrs is realized through those who have overcome and can therefore participate in Christ's millennial reign during their own regenerated lives on earth. It is not unreasonable at this stage to postulate a 'mystical communion' between the earthly and heavenly groups in this vision. By no mere coincidence, this 'postulate' happens to be an established doctrine of the Church (CCC 954-962) and, in fact, it is only a small step to see the thrones, here, as the 'cathedrae' of the bishops in the Church—the visible expression Christ's millennial reign on earth. The vision of the millennial kingdom of Christ is therefore not only retrospective from the point of view of Christ's Second Coming, but also depicts the ruling authority of the Church as composed of those members who have 'overcome', whether they are presently in heaven or on earth. The first resurrection should therefore be broadened to include Christ's faithful in heaven and on earth—a historical community which has been called the Holy Catholic (Universal) Church.

<sup>455</sup> This is the fifth of seven beatitudes in the text (Rev 1,3; 14,13; 16,15; 19,9; 20,6; 22,7.14). It exhorts the readers to participate in the first resurrection and be members of the community outlined in 20,4, which we have just identified with the Holy Church. Like 'the one who overcomes', they "will never be hurt by the second death" (2,11) and they will reign with Christ, sharing in his authority (2,26-28) and throne (3,21). Then the speaker affirms that they will be priests of God and Christ, which is a promise that has already been realized with their redemption through Christ's sacrifice (1,6; 5,10). This adds even more weight to the identification of Christ's millennial reign as a present reality that started with Christ's first coming.

be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with him for a thousand years.<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> The presentation of the 1,000-year messianic reign at this point, as the immediate precursor of the final judgment and the 'new creation', resonates strongly with an apocalyptic plan of history known, in modern times, as the 'Cosmic Week'. In this view of history, the Genesis account of Creation in seven days (Gn 1,1-2,4) is combined with the formula equating one day with a thousand years (in Ps 90,4), so that each day was regarded as an era lasting for one thousand years. The final 1,000-year period came to be viewed as analogous to the last day of Creation, which was the Sabbath—the day God rested. In apocalyptic literature, this era was anticipated to be a transitional period of rest, peace and blessing on earth under the leadership of the Messiah, the sovereign anointed by God (cf. *1En* chs. 91-104; *2En* chs. 30-33). It is similar in Revelation, where this theme is evoked in the description of the participants as 'blessed and holy' (Rev 20,6), and by the granting of heavenly 'rest' to the martyrs and saints after their deaths (6,11; 14,13; n. 157). The affirmation that the saints work for salvation on earth and take their rest in heaven guides the authentic interpretation of the millennial reign of Christ with his saints (cf. Heb 3,7-4,11). The millennium does not consist in the enjoyment of sensual pleasures, or even in the absence of wickedness in the world, but in the participation of the faithful in the vocation and mission of the Christian community.

It is worth taking this opportunity to reflect on why the messianic reign of Christ with his saints is presented at this point, as a retrospective vision, following the defeat and condemnation of the beast: (1) Although Christ's reign has been a reality since his first coming, its full revelation must await the destruction of the main sources of evil in the world (Babylon and the two beasts, 17,1-19,6; 19,19-21), whose presence obscures the existence of his reign. This can be confirmed by other passages in the NT, which show that Christ's kingdom cannot easily be recognized for what it is. Because of its humility and service, the reign of Christ is very different from other kingdoms in the world (Mk 10,42-45; Lk 22,25-30). It is accessible only to those who are most child-like in their faith: "Amen I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter into it" (Mk 10,14-15; Mt 18,3-5). Being *in* the world, but not *of* this world (Jn 18,36), Christ's kingdom can only be perceived by divine insight or accepted as a matter of faith. So, although Christ's reign exists already in the Church, this reign is not widely recognized, but will be revealed plainly only after "the kingdom of this world has become our Lord's and his Christ's" (Rev 11,15),

<sup>7</sup>And whenever the thousand years are finished, Satan will be let loose from his prison<sup>457</sup> <sup>8</sup>and will go out to deceive the nations in the four

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when it will be revealed as ‘a yesterday that is passing away’ (Ps 90,4). To place the retrospective vision of Christ’s reign after his Second Coming implies that many, if not most, of the earth’s inhabitants will not recognize Christ’s reign, or enter under his rule, before his Second Coming.

(2) The author is following the order in Daniel’s prophecy (Dn 7,23-27), in which the little ‘horn’ corresponds to the beast: “For as I watched, that horn made war against the holy ones and was victorious until the Ancient One arrived; judgment was pronounced in favour of the holy ones of the Most High, and the time came when the holy ones possessed the kingdom” (Dn 7,21-22). Just as in Daniel the saints of the Most High receive kingship and dominion over all the kingdoms of the earth after the power of the tyrant is taken away, so in the Book of Revelation Christ’s followers are seen to be reigning with him (Rev 20,4–6) only after the two tyrannical beasts and their armies are destroyed (19,11–21) and Satan is chained (20,1–3). Reproducing the order in Daniel 7,9–27 has the effect of linking these two passages and indicating the fulfilment of Daniel’s vision in Christ’s millennial kingdom.

(3) Other prophecies of messianic victory and rule, undoubtedly inspired by this prophecy of Daniel, were circulating widely among the Jews in the first century AD, at least until the second Jewish Revolt in 135 AD (e.g., *4Ezra*, *2Bar*, *4<sup>th</sup>* and *5<sup>th</sup>* *Sib. Or.*), so the order presented here may have been intended to reflect, in outline and in the light of Christ’s first coming, the popular messianic expectation at the time it was written (95-96 AD). Due to the delay in the Second Coming (*Parousia*) of Christ, and in a context of heightened Jewish messianic fervour following the assassination of Domitian (96 AD)—in the reigns of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian—this presentation of the reign of Christ would have inspired Jewish Christians to stay with the Church and not go back to the Synagogue (see [link 7](#)).

<sup>457</sup> We have just been told that the end of the thousand years corresponds to the time of the general resurrection (Rev 20,5), when the ‘rest of the dead’ will rise for judgment (20,12-13). The account of the final judgment does indeed follow in the text (20,11-15), but first we are told that the devil will be liberated from the Abyss, no doubt because the Abyss is about to disappear along with the first heaven and the first earth (20,14; 21,1). He has only a very short time to act (20,3) before the realization of the new heavens and the new earth, from which he will most certainly be excluded. Since the end of the thousand years and the liberation of the devil occur after the Second Coming of Christ, it is evident that the ‘temporal’ 1,000-

corners of the earth, the Gog and Magog, whose number is as the sand of the sea, to assemble them to the war.<sup>458</sup> <sup>9</sup>And they went up over the breadth of the land<sup>459</sup> and surrounded the Camp of the Saints and the Beloved

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year reign of Christ is also “without end” (Lk 1,33; *Nicene Creed*: “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end”), since it runs seamlessly into the all-embracing consummation of God’s eternal kingdom (cf. 11,15-19).

<sup>458</sup> On being released from the Abyss, the devil will deceive countless multitudes of people from all the countries in the world and assemble them for ‘the war’. Two important points need to be made: first, the use of the definite article with ‘war’ implies that this is a war we have already been told about, namely the war of the great day of Almighty God (16,14). Perhaps no indication is given as to where this assembly will take place, precisely because we have already been told it will be at Harmageddon (16,16). The second point reinforces the first: the naming of the hordes incited by the devil as ‘Gog and Magog’ cannot fail to associate this part of the final war with Ezekiel’s prophecy about the eschatological war of Gog of Magog (Ez 38–39), in which Gog is the leader of an invasion of tribes from around the Black Sea in the North (Ez 38,3-4). Since John alludes to the same prophecy (Ez 37,17-20) at the start of the war at Harmageddon (Rev 19,17-18), his intention appears to be to unite the two accounts of the war (19,17-21 and 20,7-10) into two consecutive stages of the one final war (see n. 445). Needless to say, this would fit with the vision of the millennium as a retrospective vision (20,1-10). The interlocking of these two parts of the final war permits a closer view of the succession of events: since the beast is that part of the Abyss—that member of the unredeemed multitude of people (see n. 256)—in whom the devil is presently imprisoned, i.e., he is the historical embodiment of the devil (see n. 393), the liberation of the devil occurs just as the vanquished beast is thrown alive into the lake of fire (19,20). Seeing his side defeated, the devil then rallies the world in one final ‘surge’ against the forces of God, which we can call the battle of Gog and Magog.

<sup>459</sup> The hordes of Gog and Magog then ‘go up’ over the ‘land’. Both the verb ‘to go up’ (ἀναβαίνω and לעלות) and the noun for ‘land’ (ἡ γῆ and הארץ) have a particular connection with the land of Israel, as well as strongly echoing Ezekiel’s prophecy against Gog: “You will go up, coming like a devastating storm, like a cloud, covering the land” (Ez 38, 9; cf. Ez 38,16). There are, however, two major differences: in Ezekiel, it is the Lord, not the devil, who brings Gog’s hordes against his land and people, in order to “prove his holiness” to all the nations (Ez 38,16). Secondly, Gog’s defeat



City,<sup>460</sup> and fire came down from heaven and consumed them.<sup>461</sup> <sup>10</sup>And the devil, the one deceiving them, was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur,

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takes place on the mountains of Israel (Ez 39,4), whereas in Revelation, the final combat occurs at a place called the “Camp of the Saints”.

<sup>460</sup> The armies of Gog and Magog go up from Harmageddon, cover the land of Israel, to finally arrive at, and surround, the “Camp of the Saints”, which is also called “the Beloved City”. The fact that this camp can be surrounded indicates that it is not ‘just a symbol’ as many scholars assert, but a circumscribable place on this earth, which can therefore be identified and even located. ‘Camp of the Saints’ is a term which strongly evokes the encampments of the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt and before their entry into the promised land (cf. Ex 14,19-20; Nm 2,2-34; Dt 23,10-15). These camps are often described in military terms, as the temporary abode of an army on the move, engaged in holy war. The recurrence of the Exodus theme here prompts us to identify the ‘Camp of the Saints’ with the assembly of 144,000 saintly men seen in Rev 14,1-5, after their identification with Zion and their exodus to a mountain in the desert. Their vocation to flee to this place is described in a way that clearly recalls the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt (see n. 284). The naming of the ‘Camp of the Saints’ as the ‘Beloved City’ also points to the assembly of the 144,000 on Mt. Zion: not only is the ‘Beloved City’ a name signifying divine solicitude and nearness, a reference to the presence of the Lamb and to the heavenly communion described in 14,1-5, but it also recalls those biblical passages that speak about God’s special love for Zion (esp. Pss 78,68; 87,2). So, the names ‘Camp of the Saints’ and ‘Beloved City’ both help to identify this community with the 144,000 assembled on Mt. Zion. Because of Zion’s prior exodus, there should be no attempt to include historical Jerusalem in this description. Owing to Jerusalem’s special relationship with the beast during his end-historical reign, this city can no longer be called the ‘Beloved City’ (cf. Sir 24,11; Jer 11,15; 12,7), or ‘Holy City’, but instead it is called ‘great city’ (Rev 11,8; see n. 258). For the location of this camp, see n. 327.

<sup>461</sup> Finally, while they are besieging the Camp of the Saints and threatening the 144,000 members of the Lamb’s army (see n. 175), the armies of Gog and Magog are killed and consumed by heavenly fire. This extraordinary manifestation of God’s presence in the camp brings to mind the equally extraordinary vocation and mission of the 144,000, described in the text in certain ‘mystical’ stages. To their ‘sealing’ (7,1-8), their experience of the ‘heavenly birth’ (12,5), their enjoyment of the presence of the Lamb in a ‘spiritual betrothal’ (14,1), their mystical communion with



where also are the beast and the false prophet, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.<sup>462</sup>

*The Final Judgment* <sup>463</sup>

<sup>11</sup>And I saw a great white throne and the One seated on it from whose face the earth and heaven fled, and no place was found for them.<sup>464</sup>

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the choruses in heaven (14,2-3), we can now add their mystical union with the One who sends 'fire from heaven', here being made manifest to the whole world, as fire that comes down from heaven and consumes their enemies. There can be little doubt that the vocation and mission of the 144,000 men can best be explained as their progress on the extraordinary path to the highest level of divine union, aided by certain well-documented mystical experiences (see n. 325). The falling of fire from heaven is not unknown in OT times, as shown in the response of the prophet Elijah to the troops sent by the king to speak to him (2Kgs 1,10.12). Perhaps more relevant to this incident is the Lord's warning to Gog, reported by Ezekiel, that he will use fire against him and against Magog (Ez 38,22; 39,6). The destruction of the Messiah's eschatological enemies by fire becomes, in some circles, a traditional theme, as seen in 4Ezra 13:10-11. In the Targums of *Neofiti* and *Pseudo-Jonathan* on Nm 11,26, the details come quite close to this passage in Revelation.

<sup>462</sup> After the total annihilation of the hordes of Gog and Magog, their leader, the devil, survives the heavenly fire, only to be thrown into the lake of fire, where he will continue to exist in a state of perpetual torment, impotence and regret. This is the place "prepared for the devil and his angels" (cf. Mt 25,41; see n. 56), into which the beast and the false prophet have already been thrown (Rev 19,20), to be joined soon by Death, Hades, and all those whose names have been scrubbed from the Scroll of Life (20,14-15).

<sup>463</sup> First Babylon was judged and condemned (19,2), then the beast and the false prophet (19,20) and then the devil (20,10). The entire 'mystery of iniquity' has been thrown into the lake of fire. Now the time has come to judge the dead (11,18; 20,12-15) and to consummate the 'Mystery of God'. For a full explanation of the final judgment in the Book of Revelation, see [link 16](#).

<sup>464</sup> In 19,11, the heavens were opened. Here the throne of God is fully revealed and the first heavens and the first earth flee away from the presence of the One seated there. The fact that the sea persists after the disappearance of the first heavens and the first earth (20,13) indicates that

<sup>12</sup>And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. And another scroll was opened, that which is of Life. And the dead were judged according to their deeds, from what had been written in the scrolls. <sup>465</sup>

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this language is not to be taken too literally, but rather as a way of saying that during the period of judgment the whole of creation is confronted by Almighty God sitting in judgment and there is nowhere to hide: everything is *disclosed*. During this process, all the evil that remains will be exposed and removed into the lake of fire (20,14-15), so that afterwards there can be a total renewal of creation, called ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (21,1) “in which righteousness dwells” (2Pet 3,13; Is 65,17-25; 66,22). There are no grounds for supposing that the final judgment results in the total destruction of planet earth and the relocation of life to another place in the universe. The only NT passage that comes close to this view is in 2Peter: “then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be *burned up*” (2Pet 3,10 according to the RSV). However, the word for ‘burned up’ is not found in the most reliable Greek manuscripts (א, B, K, P, et al.). Instead, these simply state that “the earth and everything that is done on it will be *disclosed* (εὐρεθήσεται)” (NRSV), which is entirely appropriate for the judgment taking place at the same time (2Pet 3,7) and matches the disappearance of the old creation in Rev 20,11. There is further evidence in the text of Revelation itself that the final transformation does not, in any way, involve the destruction of planet earth: see n. 471.

<sup>465</sup> When people die, they either go straight to heaven (Rev 14,13), where they are said to be alive (20,4-5), or they go to ‘Death or Hades’, which are the temporary abodes for the dead awaiting the final judgment (see n. 151). So, unless the next verse (20,13) is a simple repetition of this verse, then the ‘dead’ in this verse (v. 12) are not the same as the ‘dead’ in that verse (v. 13), i.e., they are not to be identified with the dead in ‘Death and Hades’, or in the sea. So the dead in this verse (v. 12) are most likely to be the spiritually dead, which is to say the people who are alive in the body but dead to God and to his salvation in Christ (cf. Gn 2,17; 3,3; Mt 8,22; Lk 9,60)—i.e., the unredeemed, those called ‘the inhabitants of the earth’, the ‘waters’ (synonymous with the sea and the Abyss) or ‘the peoples from every tribe and tongue and race and nation’. These living dead, great and small, are brought before the throne, and scrolls are opened (cf. Dn 7,9-10). One of the scrolls is the Scroll of Life. Although the other scrolls are not named, they must be scrolls on which everyone’s deeds are recorded,

<sup>13</sup>And the sea gave up the dead in it, and Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and they were judged, everyone according to his deeds.<sup>466</sup>

<sup>14</sup>And Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.<sup>467</sup> This is the

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because they supply the evidence on which the judgment of deeds can proceed. Traditionally, these are called the 'Scrolls of Deeds' and they are a metaphor for God's memory. Along with the Scroll of Life and the Scroll of Destiny (see nn. 6, 237), the Scrolls of Deeds complete the traditional stock of heavenly scrolls, books or tablets. The judgment of individuals 'according to deeds' is standard NT teaching (Rev 2,23; 20,12-13; also 1Cor 3,8; 2Cor 5,10;11,15; Eph 6,8; Mt 16,27; 1Pet 1,17), and it basically means that their reward in the next world will depend on their deeds in this world (Rev 22,12). It is important to note, however, that the judgment of their deeds does not determine whether they will be included or excluded from the enjoyments of the 'new heavens and the new earth', because that is determined by the Scroll of Life (20,15). If someone's name does not appear in the Scroll of Life, then regardless of the deeds he has performed, he will be thrown into the lake of fire, where he will be excluded forever from the enjoyments of the next world (20,15). For the process by which names are removed from the Scroll of Life, see n. 469.

<sup>466</sup> The dead arise for judgment from the temporary abodes of the dead, called 'Death and Hades' (see n. 151), and since those who died at sea were believed to have been unable to enter 'Death and Hades', we are told that the sea also gives up its dead (cf. *1En* 51:1). The dead from these regions will be judged according to their deeds, in the same way as the living dead described in the previous verse. What is less certain is whether the name of anyone from Death and Hades has been erased from the Scroll of Life. Those who had lived during the reign of the beast, and also worshipped his image or accepted his mark, would certainly have had his name erased from the Scroll of Life (see n. 309). But for the rest, we only know that they will be judged according to their deeds, and that the unrepentant cowards, faithless, depraved, murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters and liars will be condemned to the second death, the lake of fire (Rev 21,8; cf. 21,27; 22,14).

<sup>467</sup> As in 6,8, 'Death and Hades' are personified here (see n. 151). They do not just disappear along with the first heaven, the first earth and the sea (20,11; 21,1; cf. 1Cor 15,54-55; Is 25,8), but are thrown into the 'lake of fire' to be tormented forever along with the agents of evil. This is difficult to reconcile with their role as riders of the fourth horse, on a mission commanded by one of the living creatures in heaven (Rev 6,7). Either they are condemned for their exorbitant appetite for human blood (cf. Is 5,14;

second death, the lake of fire.<sup>468</sup> <sup>15</sup>And if anyone was not found written in the Scroll of Life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.<sup>469</sup>

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1*En* 56:8; Rev 6,8; 2*Bar* 56:6) or, as survivors from the ancient gods of the underworld (e.g., Nergal and Ereshkigal, Mot, Resheph, Shuwalu), they side with the agents of evil by deceiving many with the lie that they, Death and Hades, are a permanent and inescapable 'prison' of the dead, and that there is no heaven, no resurrection, no final judgment and no 'lake of fire'.

<sup>468</sup> See n. 56.

<sup>469</sup> These are perhaps the saddest yet most important words in the whole Book of Revelation, for they speak of the eternal torment awaiting those whose names have been scrubbed from the Scroll of Life by the risen Christ, who 'searches hearts and minds' and has the authority to erase names from that scroll (Rev 2,23; 3,5; cf. Ex 32-33). The text has already prophesied this fate for countless numbers of people (13,8; 17,8), so the 'if' in this verse cannot be interpreted as an unlikely, or even rare, possibility. Underlying this brief statement, however, is the whole story of final judgment, to which the present vision is just the culmination and conclusion. Neither the judge, nor the process of judgment, is described in this short passage (20,11-15), but is only alluded to in the mention of the Scroll of Life (20,12.15), which is a register of the names of all who ever lived, or will live, on the earth (see n. 190). In fact, the most important act of judgment is the erasure of names from this scroll by the risen Christ (3,5), after he has broken all the seals and opened the scroll (8,1). This corresponds to the time of the trumpet blasts and their plagues (Rev 8,6-11,15), the mission of the two witnesses (1,260 days) and the subsequent reign of the beast from the sea (42 months). According to the way it is described in the text (Rev 13), the reign of the beast can be understood quite literally and historically as a brief, and diabolically inspired, system of government headed by a false messiah who promises a false redemption and controls the whole world immediately before the Second Coming of Christ. Up until the start of that short period, repentance is possible and is openly preached by the two witnesses (11,3-13), but during the reign of the beast, the risen Christ erases the names of all those who identify themselves with the beast by worshipping him or accepting his markings (see n. 309). By choosing to align themselves with this false messiah, they put themselves eternally against Christ and beyond salvation through the forgiveness of sin. The sinner and his sin are henceforth inseparably united, prior to their removal from creation. The reign of the beast therefore plays an important part in the identification and removal of eternal sin, prior to the eschatological renewal of creation, and this

*The New Creation* **470**

XXI <sup>1</sup>And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea is no more.<sup>471</sup> <sup>2</sup>And I saw the

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appears to be its main purpose. This concurs with what St. Paul refers to in 2Thess 2,9-12, where he wrote: "The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore, God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness". The link, in time and purpose, between the final judgment and the reign of the beast reveals the universal judgment as a real, end-historical process, which is experienced in every part of the world by those living at that time. The above findings not only confirm that the beast's reign lies in the future, but also indicate the critical significance of this period for the eternal destiny of each person living in those days.

**470** The last major section of the Book of Revelation presents a vision of the new creation centred on the New Jerusalem. It can be divided roughly into three parts: the first speaks generally about the new creation (Rev 21,1-8), the second describes the New Jerusalem as a walled city radiant with the light of God's glory (21,9-27), and the third represents the city as a paradise centred on the throne of the Godhead (22,1-5).

**471** The disappearance of the first heavens and the first earth (20,11) makes way for the new heavens and the new earth, in which there is no sea. It should be recalled that 'sea' in Revelation can refer to unredeemed human society, when it is synonymous with the 'waters' and the 'Abyss' (see n. 256), so it is probably in this sense that we should understand its absence in the new creation. The theme of the 'new heaven and new earth' derives from Isaiah (Is 65,17; 66,22), but is taken up and developed by later authors, either in the sense of the transformation of creation through the removal of sin and evil (e.g., 1En 45:4-5; Jub. 23:18), or in the sense of the total destruction of the cosmos and its recreation anew (e.g., 4Ezra 7:29; Sib. Or. 4.171-192; 5.476-483). Although the language in Revelation sometimes suggests that the 'new heaven and the new earth' will be a totally new creation (e.g., Rev 22,1; 22,5-6), there are also indications it refers to a purification and renovation of the old order, since many features of the present way of life are recognizable there: there will be 'nations' that will need to receive healing from the leaves of the Trees of Life (22,2), so that they may then be able to walk by the light of the Holy City (21,24). There will also be 'rulers of the earth', who bring the glory

Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.<sup>472</sup>

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and the honour of the nations into this city (21,24-26). In the transformation of the old order into the 'new heavens and the new earth', there are certainly elements of discontinuity and continuity, but owing to the elements of continuity, and to the signs elsewhere in the text contradicting a total destruction (see nn. 233, 273), it is reasonable to conclude that John's vision of the new creation describes a purification and renovation of the old order, principally through the removal of all that is evil, rather than total destruction and recreation *ex nihilo*.

<sup>472</sup> In Rev 11,2, the Holy City is historical Jerusalem about to be profaned by the nations during the 42-month reign of the beast. Here, in 21,2 and 21,10, the Holy City is the New Jerusalem, which never was, nor ever will be, profaned (cf. 21,27), for she is coming down from God in heaven, fully prepared as a Bride adorned for her husband. In other words, she will be established at a place, on earth, where there is no other city. There is little doubt, then, that apart from the name, Jerusalem, and the title 'Holy City', the New Jerusalem has no geographical or historical connection with the present city of Jerusalem. She is one part of the new creation that is being created anew by God. If the name of the historical city is being applied to this new city, we can make two observations: firstly, that historical Jerusalem no longer exists as an inhabited city and her name can therefore be used elsewhere (see n. 344), and secondly that all the OT prophecies and promises regarding Jerusalem are finding their fulfilment in this city (cf. Is 60; 62; 65,18-25; Ez 40-48, 1En 90:28-29). The unveiling of the heavenly Jerusalem at the advent of the Messiah became a common theme in the apocalyptic tradition (*Test. Dan* 5:12; *2Bar* 32:2-4; *4Ezra* 7:26; 10:49-50) with some circles asserting that this city pre-existed in heaven in order to come down to earth at the end of time. The concept of the pre-existent heavenly Jerusalem was taken up by NT authors, who exhort the faithful to consider themselves citizens of this city, while it is still in heaven (Gal 4,26-27; Heb 12,22-24; Rev 3,12). In Revelation, the New Jerusalem is described in two ways, both as a Bride prepared for her wedding (21,2 taking up 19,7-9) and as a paradisaical city where God and the Lamb will dwell in the midst of their creation (Rev 21,10-22,5). Although she is described in this double way, there is no doubt that the same ultimate reality is intended in both descriptions. The comparison of this city to a Bride adorned for her husband is a transparent way of identifying this city with the Bride of the Lamb, who has prepared herself for her wedding in 19,7-9. She can be identified with the purified Church in heaven, consisting

<sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying:<sup>473</sup>

Behold, the dwelling of God is with mankind;

and he will dwell with them,

and they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them,<sup>474</sup>

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of the martyrs, the saints and the 144,000 (see n. 430). But there is more to it than that. Both here and in the next vision (22,9), the glorious appearance of the Bride descending from her place of preparation in heaven gives the impression of her ceremonial entrance at the start of the wedding celebration, with the bridegroom and all the guests admiring her majestic beauty as she is about to become the Queen of the King of kings. The scene links up directly with 19,7-9, without a 1,000-year interval, and is yet another reason for regarding the vision of the millennium as a retrospective vision of the present age. The eternal marriage of the Lamb and his Bride is about to take place and is presented as the realization of Holy City, the New Jerusalem, on the new earth.

<sup>473</sup> The loud voice from the throne has spoken twice before (16,17; 19,5) and on both occasions there were good reasons for supposing that it was from one of the four living creatures (see n. 374). The same reasons apply here, again leaving the impression that this is the voice of one of those four living creatures.

<sup>474</sup> Two themes are combined in this description of life in the new creation: God will dwell with mankind, and mankind will be his peoples. Several OT prophecies are combined in this announcement from the throne: "My dwelling shall be with them; I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Ez 37,27); "I will bring them back to dwell within Jerusalem. They shall be my people, and I will be their God, with faithfulness and justice" (Zech 8,8); "I will set my dwelling among you, and will not disdain you. Ever present in your midst, I will be your God, and you will be my people" (Lev 26,11-12). In these prophecies, the 'dwelling' of God refers to his 'tent' or 'temple' (מִשְׁכָּן, σκηνή), but in this vision of the New Jerusalem there is no Sanctuary (Rev 21,22). The 'dwelling of God with mankind' is therefore referring to the New Jerusalem as a whole, which is cube-shaped like the Holy of holies in the former temple (21,16; see n. 490). Another important difference is that while the OT prophecies announce that the Israelites 'shall be his people', in this vision the whole of mankind 'will be his peoples' (according to the best manuscript witnesses), a change that reflects the universal dimension of redemption brought about by the Lamb (cf. 5,9). Finally, the wording of "God himself will be



<sup>4</sup>and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes,  
and *there* will be no more death;  
neither sorrow, nor crying, nor pain will *there* be any more,<sup>475</sup>  
because the former things have passed away.<sup>476</sup>

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with them” indicates the final fulfilment of the prophecy of Is 7,14, in which the name of the promised son is “God with us” (*Immanuel*)—a prophecy that the Church has applied to Jesus Christ and to his mission of bringing God’s kingdom to all men.

<sup>475</sup> In the previous verse, the promise of God’s dwelling with mankind takes us back to the description of divine protection in Rev 7,15-17, when God “will spread his dwelling” over the assembly of martyrs in heaven (see n. 187). God’s tender care for his people in heaven has now come down to earth, where all people are now his people. So it is inevitable that the same divine blessings experienced in the heavenly Sanctuary are now extended to the entire population of the new heavens and the new earth, explaining why the text repeats 7,17: “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes”, which itself evokes Is 25,8. However, the prophecy for the New Jerusalem here at 21,4 proves itself to be a much more final fulfilment of Is 25,8 than Rev 7,17, because of its universal extension and announcement of the abolition of death: “He will destroy death forever. The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces” (Is 25,8). The end-time abolition of death is already anticipated by the condemnation of ‘Death and Hades’ in 20,14, and is standard NT doctrine (1Cor 15,26.54-55; cf. Jn 5,24; 8,51; 11,25-26). Death entered the world because of sin (Gn 3; Rom 5,12), so its abolition signifies complete liberation from sin and a return to the innocence and purity that prevailed in Paradise before the fall. However, the glorious presence of God among men will not only abolish death, but every sign of suffering, such as sorrow, crying and pain, recalling similar eschatological promises recorded by Isaiah (Is 35,10; 65,16-19.25). The theme is also familiar to other apocalyptic writings (4Ezra 8:53; 2Bar 21:23; 1En 10:22; 2En 65:9-10). For those interpreters who claim that the prophecies of the New Jerusalem have already found fulfilment, the presence of death, sorrow, crying and pain in our world must surely be an irrefutable contradiction. Nevertheless, this appears to be the attitude of Babylon, when she says to herself “As queen I sit and am not a widow, and sorrow I certainly do not see” (Rev 18,7; see n. 412). This fully realized eschatology is nowadays so ubiquitous that it deserves to be called by a special name: “Babylonian theology”.

<sup>476</sup> The disappearance of death, sorrow, crying and pain has come about because of the passing of the old ways of life, characterized by sin and its



<sup>5</sup>And the One seated on the throne said:<sup>477</sup> Behold, I am making all things new.<sup>478</sup> And he says: Write, because these words are faithful and true.<sup>479</sup>  
<sup>6</sup>And he said to me: It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.<sup>480</sup>

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tragic consequences. The old order started to crumble with the first coming of Christ (2Cor 5,17), but is not completed until the total transformation of creation at the end of history. There is a strong echo, here, of Is 65,17: "Lo, I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind".

<sup>477</sup> The One seated on the throne is always the Almighty God, and this is the first time he has spoken since Rev 1,8.

<sup>478</sup> As in Rev 21,4, Is 65,17 is again in mind as God announces he is now making everything new. For obvious reasons, this differs slightly from the text of Is 65,17, where God announces that he is about to create a new heaven and a new earth: a promised future action has become present and ongoing. The renewal that St. Paul so much promoted among believers is reaching its fulfilment on a cosmic scale (2Cor 3,18; 4,16-18; 5,16-17).

<sup>479</sup> This is the first time that God himself has commanded John to write, and the reason is that these words are faithful and true. In the text of Revelation, 'faithful and true' are perhaps the highest and most noble attributes that someone or something can possess. They are used of Jesus Christ himself (Rev 3,14; 19,11) and several times for the words spoken to John and recorded in the text (19,9; 21,5; 22,6). Here God is assuring John and his readers that 'these words' can be trusted entirely. Coming from God himself, it would not be going too far to say that the faithful should trust these words with their life. The Almighty seems to be referring particularly to the prophecy of the new creation and the New Jerusalem, which the faithful may be tempted to feel somewhat remote and beyond belief, especially if there is a contrary teaching circulating, claiming that this new creation had already been fully realized (see nn. 412, 475).

<sup>480</sup> Literally, God said "they have come to pass", referring to the faithful and true words of prophecy about the new creation and the New Jerusalem. The new creation is ready to receive the New Jerusalem in her midst. So, these divine words of completion are to be understood in their context, as preparing for John's vision of the Bride descending from heaven in 21,9. The same words, "it is done", were pronounced by one of the four living creatures at the completion of the bowl-plagues God's wrath (16,17). The repetition of these words, here, by God himself, remind us that the text is describing the consummation of his divine mystery: first his judgment (16,17) and finally his salvation (21,6). The titles 'Alpha and Omega' and

To the one who thirsts I will give freely from the fountain of the Water of Life.<sup>481</sup> The one who overcomes will inherit these things, and to him I will be God and to me he shall be a son.<sup>482</sup>

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'Beginning and End' are shared with Christ (22,13), signifying the complete union between God and Christ (see n. 13). In this context of new creation, it simply affirms the Godhead as the origin and end of all things.

<sup>481</sup> This divine promise of free, living water alludes to a similar promise in Isaiah: "All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money come, come, receive grain and eat; Come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk!" (Is 55,1). In the OT, thirst for water is a frequent metaphor for the soul's desire for union with God (cf. Pss 42,1; 36,9; 63,2), for God is the source of living waters (Jer 2,19; Ps 36,10). In the NT, the source is to be found in Jesus Christ, where it is explained as a symbol for the Holy Spirit, which completely satisfies the soul's yearnings and leads it to eternal life (Jn 4,10-14; 7,37-39; cf. *Ps. Sol.* 30:1-3). In Revelation, the living water is described as a river running through the centre of the New Jerusalem, whose source is the throne of God and the Lamb (Rev 22,1). In this eschatological context, God's offer of water from the fountain of Water of Life is really an invitation to enter the New Jerusalem and receive its blessings. It is repeated almost word for word at 22,17. The promise of the Water of Life in these passages was anticipated in Rev 7, with which close links have already been noted (see n. 475): the martyrs who go through the great tribulation are promised that, in heaven, "the Lamb at the centre of the throne will shepherd them and will lead them on to fountains of Waters of Life" (7,17). As noted before, the blessings of heaven in the present age of salvation anticipate those of the New Jerusalem in the age to come.

<sup>482</sup> Here is a final promise for the one who overcomes, to add to those promises of the risen Christ at the end of each of the messages to the churches (see n. 48). The one who overcomes and remains faithful to the end of his or her life will eat from the Tree of Life (2,7; cf. 22,2), not be hurt by the second death (2,11, cf. 21,7-8), receive from the hidden manna and a white stone (2,17; cf. 21,3), receive authority over the nations (2,26; cf. 22,5), not have his or her name erased from the Scroll of Life (3,5; cf. 21,27), be a pillar in the Sanctuary of God (3,12; cf. 22,3), and sit with Christ on his throne (3,21; 22,5). God now promises that he or she will not only inherit all the eternal blessings of the New Jerusalem ("these things"), confirming that admission to the New Jerusalem is indeed the 'reward of his servants and saints' (cf. 11,18), but also that he or she will be God's child. The promise of sonship is stated in a form that strongly evokes

<sup>8</sup>But for the cowardly and faithless and depraved and murderers and sexually immoral and sorcerers and idolaters and all the liars, their share is in the lake burning with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.<sup>483</sup>

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Nathan's prophecy about King David's son and heir, when God says: "I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me" (2Sam 7,14), implying that the divine sonship will be granted through the messianic descendant who fulfils the prophecy for all time, namely Jesus Christ (Heb 1,5). As one of the blessings of the New Jerusalem in the age to come, this particular promise sounds familiar, for once again it has been anticipated in the Church, during the present age of salvation (cf. Jn 1,12; Eph 1,5; 1Jn 3,1-2). However, the substitution of the word 'father' by the word 'God' in this promise stands out. It is true that the author of Revelation only ever refers to God as the father of Jesus Christ (Rev 1,6; 2,27; 3,5; 3,21; 14,1, all with the personal pronoun emphasised) and so in this book, at least, it appears to be the special privilege of Jesus to call God his father. The same is true for other Johannine writings (except for Jn 20,17 and for the impersonal form "the Father" in e.g., Jn 4,21.23; 1Jn 3,1, etc). This would then confirm that the divine sonship of God's people is only granted through Christ, the Messiah who completely fulfils the prophecy of Nathan to David. John may have objected to anyone else, except Christ, calling God 'father', precisely because Christ is the 'only begotten' son (Jn 1,14.18), i.e., God has begotten only one son, and all his other children are adopted through their adherence to Christ. However, even adopted children are allowed to call their father 'father', so we are still uncertain why the author is reluctant to use that family title here. The answer may lie in the discussion in Jn 8,31-59. At the time, it was common for the Jews to claim that God was their father (cf. Jn 8,41.54; also reflected in the use of the impersonal 'the Father'), but in truth their father was not God, but the devil. So, by substituting 'God' for 'father' here, and by virtually never mentioning God's fatherhood of the faithful, we suggest John wished to impose a limit, in public at least, to the use of this affectionate title for God, leaving private prayer as the only proper occasion for using it.

<sup>483</sup> The vice list that follows is different from others in Revelation (Rev 9,20-21; 22,15) not only because its first two groups (cowards and faithless) are not mentioned in the other lists (or in any of the other vice lists in the NT), but also because these two classes of person refer specifically to members of the Church who have fallen away: the 'coward' (δειλοῖς) in this case is the opposite of the 'one who overcomes', i.e., it is someone who is unable to commit himself to the cause of Christ, because of its risks and hardships; the 'faithless' (ἀπίστοις) is someone who has not

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kept the Faith for love of the world, or the pressure of persecution. All the other groups in the list (the depraved, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters and liars) are mentioned again in 22,15 and may apply to both believers and unbelievers. Coming as it does after the promises inherited by those who overcome, this list is aimed above all as a warning to those *in the Church* who are not overcoming, but continuing to behave in ways that are contrary to the faith. Far from inheriting the blessings of the New Jerusalem, they are on their way to eternal condemnation in the lake of fire, which is the second death (see n. 56). Far from being able to call God their father, they are on their way to joining their father the devil (see n. 482). The depraved (ἐβδελυγμένοις, lit. abominable) refers to those whose actions are ritually or ethically corrupt, often through association with idolatrous worship. In a Christian sense, the source of the impurity includes sins of the heart and extends to those who have sinful thoughts and desires. Another possibility is that it refers to homosexual practices since it matches ‘dogs’ (κύνες) in the vice list of 22,15, and ‘dogs’ can refer to male prostitutes. On the other hand, sexual sins between homosexuals and heterosexuals are included in the fifth group in the list, the sexually immoral (πορνούς). The fourth group are the murderers (φονεῦσιν), which needs no explanation. The sixth group are ‘sorcerers’ (φαρμακοῖς), which refers to those who practice the magic arts to control the lives of other people, using charms, spells, voodoo, potions, divination, necromancy, fortune-telling and horoscopes. The seventh in the list are ‘idolaters’ (εἰδωλολάτραις), meaning those who participate in the worship of pagan deities or, in a more modern context, those who persist in Babylon’s idolatrous love of wealth and luxury. Finally, ‘all the liars’ (ψευδέσιν) is explained by the last group in the list of 22,15, “everyone who loves and practices lying”. This list would have been, and still is, challenging for almost everyone in the Church and could be used as an aid to the examination of conscience. One is tempted to ask, with the disciples, “then who can be saved?” (cf. Mk 10,26), and the answer they were given would also be uplifting in this context: “For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God” (Mk 10,27).

**484** In several respects this section corresponds to the ‘Babylon Appendix’ (see n. 379) and has therefore been called the ‘New Jerusalem Appendix’ by some: it is introduced by one of the bowl-angels (Rev 21,9), probably the same as in 17,1-2; it starts with a spiritual transport (21,10) as in 17,3; and it concludes with John attempting to worship the revealing angel (22,8-9), as in 19,10. As noted previously, these literary similarities

<sup>9</sup>And one of the seven angels that had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke to me, saying: Come, I will show you the Bride, the Wife of the Lamb.<sup>485</sup>

<sup>10</sup>And he carried me away in spirit on to a great and high mountain, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,<sup>486</sup> <sup>11</sup>having the glory of God — her radiance like a most precious stone,

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indicate a formal juxtaposition of the two cities, Babylon, the face of the mystery of iniquity, and New Jerusalem, the consummation of the Mystery of God, in such a way as to imply that Babylon must be judged and destroyed before the New Jerusalem can be realized. In other words, the existence of Babylon has been obstructing the consummation of God's plan culminating in the realization of the New Jerusalem (see n. 412).

<sup>485</sup> This is probably the same bowl-angel as in 17,1, acting as a revealer and interpreter of God's salvation, as well as a deliverer of God's judgment. The form of the sentence is very similar to 17,1, indicating a deliberate literary juxtaposition (see n. 484). The description of the New Jerusalem as the Bride of the Lamb is taken up again from 19,7 and 21,2, but only to be immediately dropped, because from now on the city will no longer be described as the personification of a community (see n. 430), but rather as a place—a vast walled city full of glory and wealth. Because she is called the Bride and the Wife of the Lamb, some have concluded that she is now married, but the same terms are used together in 19,7, before she has made her public appearance. As noted above, the time of her wedding seems to be represented by her establishment on the newly transformed earth (see n. 472).

<sup>486</sup> This is the fourth time that John finds himself 'in spirit' for further revelations (Rev 1,10; 4,2; 17,3). In 17,3, the angel took John to the desert; but here he takes him to a great and high mountain, where he sees the Holy City, Jerusalem, descending from heaven in all her radiant beauty, like a Bride entering the wedding hall at the start of the marriage ceremony. As the Bride changes into a city in front of John's eyes, we can assume the wedding is taking place (see n. 472). The vision now takes the form of Ezekiel's description of the restored city and temple (Ez 40-48), and especially the opening verse: "the hand of the Land came upon me and brought me in divine visions to the land of Israel, where he set me down on a very high mountain. On it there seemed to be a city being built before me" (Ez 40,1-2). In biblical terms 'the great and high mountain' is none other than Mt. Zion (cf. Ez 40,2; cf. Is 2,2-3; Mic 4,1-2). In Revelation, this is the mountain where the 144,000 assemble (Rev 14,1) after their exodus to

crystal-clear like jasper stone.<sup>487</sup> <sup>12</sup>She has a great and high wall with twelve gates, and over the gates twelve angels and names engraved which are of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. <sup>13</sup>On the east *there* are three gates and on the north three gates, and on the south three gates and on the west three gates. <sup>14</sup>And the wall of the City has twelve foundations and on them twelve names—of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.<sup>488</sup>

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the desert, and so it could also have been the place from which John earlier saw Babylon sitting on many waters (see n. 385). It is later identified as the Camp of the Saints and the Beloved City (20,9; see n. 460). The language used to describe this mountain in the desert is highly suggestive of Mt. Sinai (see n. 327). It is from this encampment of the 144,000 saints that the author sees the New Jerusalem descend on to earth. The fact that John was able to see the descent of the New Jerusalem from this mountain shows at least some continuity between the old and new orders of creation, confirming that the ‘new heaven and new earth’ is not a new creation *ex nihilo*, but a total transformation and renewal of the present order (see n. 471).

<sup>487</sup> As the city descends from heaven, the author sees her ‘having the glory of God’, which is the visible and luminous manifestation of God’s presence (cf. Ex 16,7-10). He compares her appearance to a radiant, crystalline precious stone, which he calls jasper. This was the stone that came to his mind when describing the enthroned Deity in 4,3. There were different types of jasper and it is possible that the crystalline type is what has since come to be known as diamond. Isaiah’s prophecy of the restored Jerusalem is in the background of John’s vision: “Rise up in splendour! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you. See darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples; but upon you the Lord shines, and over you appears his glory” (Is 60,1-2).

<sup>488</sup> The description of the city starts on the outside with the walls and gates, what enters and what cannot enter (Rev 21,12-27). It then moves in to the central parts (22,1-5), constantly alluding to Ezekiel’s plan for restoration (Ezekiel 40 and 47). The city is surrounded on all sides by a high wall in the form of a square, with the wall on each side facing one of the points of the compass and breached by three gates. Each of the twelve gates bears the name of one of the tribes of Israel (cf. Ez 48,30-34) and the foundation of each of the twelve sections of wall between the gates bears the name of one of the apostles. We are clearly to understand this glorious city as the fulfilment of God’s promises to both Israel and the Church, for both are honoured in the naming of the gates and the walls. The NT Church

<sup>15</sup>And the one speaking to me had a measure, a golden reed, to measure the City and her gates and her wall.<sup>489</sup> <sup>16</sup>And the City lies square, and her length the same as her breadth. And he measured the City with the reed at twelve thousand stadia, her length and breadth and height are equal.<sup>490</sup>

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founded on the twelve apostles is presented as being the continuation of the OT people of God, divided among twelve tribes. The tradition of posting a guardian angel, or cherub, at the entrance of a sacred place goes back to the account of the Garden of Eden (Gn 3,24; cf. Ez 28,14,16) and was later represented pictorially on the temple doors (1Kgs 6,29; 2Chr 3,7; cf. Ez 41,17-25). As it will become apparent (Rev 22,1-5), the New Jerusalem is the perfect fulfilment of the original Garden of Eden. The angel posted above each gate acts as a guardian, making sure that “nothing impure enter her, nor anyone doing what is shameful and false, only those written in the Scroll of Life of the Lamb” (Rev 21,27). The inference is that outside the New Jerusalem, there will still be human imperfection and sickness after the eradication of evil at the final judgment, and that the nations will need to come to the Holy City for healing and guidance (cf. 21,24; 22,2; see n. 501).

<sup>489</sup> The angel measures the city’s wall and gates, so that the author can add its measurements to his description of the city, whose realization still lies in the future. The golden reed of the angel distinguishes his act of measuring from that of the author, John, in Rev 11,1, when he was given a reed like a rod and told to measure the temple with it. There John was helping to fulfil the plan of temple restoration given to Ezekiel, with the Church as the restored temple (see n. 241). Here, though, the realization of the city is still in the future, and so John can do no more than record the measurements given to him by the angel, exactly as Ezekiel did in his vision (Ez 40,5–42,20). The conclusion is that John represents the fulfilment of Ezekiel’s final vision (Ez 40–48) in two separate stages: before the final judgment—the construction and completion of the new temple; after the judgment—the realization of the New Jerusalem, in which there will not be a temple (Rev 21,22).

<sup>490</sup> The author begins his description in two dimensions, calling the city a square, but then changes into three dimensions, describing it as a cube. The only structure to which this could correspond is the most sacred part of the ancient temple at Jerusalem, the Holy of holies, which was a cube with sides of 20 cubits (1Kgs 6,20). Until the Babylonian exile, this chamber was regarded as the dwelling of God’s presence on earth. By



<sup>17</sup>And he measured her wall at a hundred and forty-four cubits by man's measure, which is an angel's.<sup>491</sup> <sup>18</sup>And her wall is encrusted with jasper; and the City is pure gold like clean glass.<sup>492</sup>

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describing the Holy City as a cube, the author suggests that this ancient dwelling place of God on earth will be perfectly fulfilled by the Holy City, New Jerusalem, in its entirety (see also n. 474). In the meantime, the Holy of holies is represented by the heavenly Sanctuary envisioned in so many parts of the text up to this point (see n. 113), implying that the New Jerusalem is simply the realization (materialization) of the heavenly Sanctuary on earth. In other words, the heavenly Sanctuary is indeed the 'pre-existent' New Jerusalem in heaven. Only one dimension is given for the city: 12,000 stadia. The city can therefore be envisaged in one of three ways: (1) as a square with each side measuring 12,000 stadia (approx. 2,220 kms); (2) as a square with all four of its sides totalling 12,000 stadia (cf. the perimeter as in Ez 48,35), so each side is only 3,000 stadia (approx. 555 kms); (3) as a cube whose 12 sides add up to 12,000 stadia, so that each side measures 1,000 stadia (approx. 185 kms). The alternative is to leave aside the literal interpretation for the time being and accept that, since these numbers are all factors of 144,000, then it is the 144,000 men on Mount Zion who will decide on the eventual dimensions of this city.

<sup>491</sup> Again, it is not stated which dimension of the wall this measurement is: the height or the width. If Ezekiel is our guide, it could be either (Ez 40,5). Again, it seems more than a coincidence that this measurement is a factor of 144,000 (divided by 1,000), so again it would be wise to leave the decision about the size of the wall to these 144,000 men. This may indeed be what the author wants us to understand, since he then goes on to say that the measure he was given is the measure of a man (a cubit being the distance from the finger tips to the elbow), but since it is being done by an angel, he quickly adds that the measure of an angel is the same. One could possibly infer from this that the Holy City is built by, and for, both men and angels, but it may be going too far to say that this endorses NT statements about the identity of angels and men in the resurrection (cf. Mk 12,25; Mt 22,30; Lk 20,36).

<sup>492</sup> The first word in this sentence (ἡ ἐνδύμησις) is extremely rare and its meaning is unclear, although several scholars agree that it probably refers to something built into the wall as an encrustation or inlay, rather than the substance of the wall itself, so our translation is "the wall is encrusted with jasper". This agrees well with the author's first impression of the city, which is "crystal-clear like jasper stone", the stone whose radiance most accurately represents the glory of God (Rev 4,3). For further



<sup>19</sup>The foundations of the wall of the City are adorned with every precious stone:<sup>493</sup> the first foundation jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald,<sup>20</sup>the fifth sardonyx, the sixth cornelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprasus,

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discussion on this stone, see n. 487. The wall is jasper but the city is pure gold that reflects light like clean glass. In the author's mind, perhaps, is the reflection of sunlight from the Sanctuary of the second temple, of which Josephus wrote: "For being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays" (*J.W.* 5.5.6 [222], trans. Thackeray, Loeb Series). In Rev 21,21, this description is repeated almost word for word, except that it is applied to the main street, not to the city in general, and also the gold is said to be like 'clear' glass instead of 'clean' glass. So, in his use of both jasper and gold in the description of the Holy City, the author first gives a general impression (the city is "crystal-clear like jasper stone", and "pure gold like clean glass") before specifying which part of the city has these materials (her "wall is encrusted with jasper" and her street "is pure gold like clean glass"). Interestingly, in this drift from general to specific, the author moves from a fantastic and purely symbolic description of the city to a feature of its infrastructure that could, in fact, be realized literally, if sufficient natural resources were available. This last point seems to be answered later, where it is written "the rulers of the earth... will bring the glory and the honour of the nations into her" (Rev 21,24-26). It is not stated what the inhabitants of the Holy City will do with the treasures that the nations bring into her, but it seems reasonable to suppose that they will want to display them in public places, not only to exhibit their natural beauty, but also to show that poverty, theft and envy have disappeared entirely.

<sup>493</sup> Each of the twelve foundations of the wall of the Holy City is adorned with a different type of precious stone. The OT background for this part of John's vision is a prophecy by Isaiah about the restored Jerusalem: "I lay your pavements in carnelians, and your foundations in sapphires; I will make your battlements of rubies, and your gates of carbuncles, and all your walls of precious stones" (Is 54,11-12; cf. Tob 13,16-18). Since the precious stones adorn the foundations, which bear the name of the apostles (Rev 21,14), it appears that each precious stone represents an apostle. This link between the precious stones and the apostles will be followed up after the author has listed the name of the twelve different kinds of stones.

the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst;<sup>494</sup> <sup>21</sup>and the twelve gates are twelve pearls; each one of the gates was of one pearl apiece.<sup>495</sup>

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<sup>494</sup> Each of the 12 foundations is adorned with a different precious stone, whose names are then listed: 8 out of the 12 precious stones correspond directly, in Greek, with the precious stones on the 'breastplate of decision' of the high priest in the ancient temple (LXX: Ex 28,17-20; 39,10-12). Two more names in John's list appear to be translations from the Aramaic *Tg. Neofiti* for Ex 28 and 39. The final two names in John's list belong to the same family as the remaining two precious stones in the Exodus list. So, we can be reasonably sure that the author intended to associate the stones on the high priest's breastplate with those on the foundations of the Holy City. In Exodus, each of the stones of the breastplate was engraved with the name of one of the tribes (Ex 29,21), whereas in John's list each of the foundations, adorned by the precious stones, bears the name of one of the apostles. So, in the Holy City, the precious stones that were once associated with the twelve tribes, now become associated with the twelve apostles. If, in Exodus, the precious stones represented the people of God, named according to the twelve tribes (cf. Ex 29,29-30), so, in the Holy City, the precious stones still represent the people of God, but now they are named according to the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

<sup>495</sup> Each of the twelve gates was made of one pearl. Pearls are unknown in the OT and seem to have reached the Middle East around the times of Alexander the Great (4th century BC). In second temple times, they were among the most highly valued gems, as can be seen from their significance in the parables of Jesus (Mt 13,45-46; cf. 1Tim 2,9). Having said this, the idea that there are pearls large enough to serve as gates into the Holy City is too fantastic to be real. There happens to be a similar expectation in the Babylonian Talmud, concerning the gateways of eschatological Jerusalem: they will be made of gems and pearls 30 cubits by 30 cubits with entrances carved into them 10 cubits wide and 20 cubits high (*b.T. Baba Bathra* 75a; *b.T. Sanhedrin* 100a). It is just possible that John is re-envisioning a popular expectation circulating in NT times, in which case the purpose would be to ensure that the reader understands his vision of the Holy City to be the fulfilment of all their expectations. Perhaps the feasibility of John's vision should not concern us too much, since the pearls in this vision perform the function of gates (not gateways) and we know that the gates will never be closed (Rev 21,25). In other words, there will be no need for gates into the Holy City.

And the street of the City is pure gold like clear glass.<sup>496</sup>

<sup>22</sup>And I did not see a Sanctuary in her, because the Lord God Almighty is her Sanctuary and the Lamb.<sup>497</sup> <sup>23</sup>And the City has no need for the sun or the moon to shine upon her, for the glory of God gives her light, and her lamp is the Lamb.<sup>498</sup> <sup>24</sup>And by her light the nations will walk, and

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<sup>496</sup> See n. 492.

<sup>497</sup> It has already been noted that John represents the fulfilment of Ezekiel's final vision (Ez 40–48) in two separate stages: before the final judgment—the construction and completion of the new temple; after the judgment—the realization of the New Jerusalem, in which there will not be a temple (see n. 489). It has also been noted that, because of its cubic form and the presence of God within, the entire Holy City itself could be described as a materialization of the heavenly Sanctuary at the centre of the new earth (see n. 490). The rest of the new earth would then correspond to the court of this Sanctuary, and the whole of the new creation would represent the new temple. Nevertheless, in spite of this unexpected correspondence, John states that he sees no Sanctuary *within* the Holy City. The reason he gives is that the purpose of the temple is entirely fulfilled by the presence of the Godhead, who can be encountered there directly and immediately (cf. Ez 48,35: יְהוָה שָׁמָּה), and so there will be no need for a building in which God can be approached indirectly with the help of priests and sacrifices. One is surprised that John felt the need to emphasize the absence of a temple in his vision, until one realizes that he was a Jew and that the rebuilt temple was, and still is, an indispensable element of the restored Jerusalem that Orthodox Jews are awaiting (see n. 316). For mainstream Christians, however, the rebuilding of the temple is certainly not needed, since the worship of God is no longer focussed in one place (Jn 4,21). Furthermore, the new temple of God is now identified with the faithful community itself (1Cor 3,16-17; 2Cor 6,16; Eph 2,19-22; 1Pet 2,4-10; Heb 12,22-24; Rev 3,12; 11,1-2; see n. 241).

<sup>498</sup> Clearly this verse is not intended to mean that there will be no sun or moon in the new heavens, shining upon the New Jerusalem, but rather that there will be a source of light that is divine and even more essential for life. That light source is a lamp, represented by the Lamb, and the light it radiates is the glory of God (see n. 26). The OT background for this passage is again the prophecy of Isaiah: “No longer shall the sun be your light by day, nor the brightness of the moonshine upon you at night; the Lord shall be your light forever, your God shall be your glory” (Is 60,19). Evidently not wanting to imply there will be no more sun or moon shining on that

the rulers of the earth bring their glory into her;<sup>499</sup> <sup>25</sup>and her gates shall never be closed by day, and *there* will be no night there; <sup>26</sup>and they will bring the glory and the honour of the nations into her.<sup>500</sup> <sup>27</sup>And by no means

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city, John's wording follows *Tg. Isaiah* 60,19, when it says: "Thou shalt no longer *need* the sun for a light by day...". His harmonization of the Lord's light and God's glory in *Is* 60,19 into the single image of a lamp, which is the Lamb, whose light is the glory of God is brilliant to say the least.

<sup>499</sup> The glorious light of the lamp, which is the Lamb, will illuminate and guide the people of the nations living outside the Holy City and the rulers of these nations will make pilgrimages there, bringing their finest treasures into the city, where they will be used for adornment (see n. 492). Again, Isaiah's prophecy of restoration is in the background: "Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance... Then you shall be radiant at what you see, your heart shall throb and overflow, for the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you, the wealth of the nations shall be brought to you..." (*Is* 60,3.5-7). It may be surprising that, at this stage, even after the final judgment and the creation of the new heavens and new earth, there are still nations with rulers, needing to receive healing (*Rev* 22,2) and guidance in the way of God and the Lamb. Although evil has been banished forever, there is still imperfection and sickness among the nations (*21,12.27*; see n. 488). It has been argued that this is good evidence of continuity between the old and the new orders (see n. 471). It is also a reflection of the fact that the final judgment does not lead to the elimination of everyone who is not perfect in the eyes of God (the 144,000). There are many whose names will not have been erased from the Scroll of Life from the foundation of the world, even though they may not have been perfected and purified before the judgment. They will have been judged according to their deeds (*20,12-13*). These are the people of the nations who now need to undergo healing from the Tree of Life and receive guidance in the way of God and the Lamb. They show their utter commitment and dedication to God and the Lamb by bringing their treasures to the Holy City, in a way that seems to have been prefigured by the three wise kings, the Magi, at the birth of Christ (*Mt* 2,1-12).

<sup>500</sup> The entrance of the rulers of the nations, bearing their treasures leads naturally into the next two verses: the first simply says that the gates of the city will always be open, and is so closely modelled on a verse from Isaiah that there is a repetition of the nations' gifts to the Holy City: "Your gates stand open constantly; day and night they shall not be closed, but shall admit to you the wealth of the nations, and their kings in the vanguard" (*Is* 60,11). The absence of night follows logically from *Rev* 21,23, where we

shall anything impure enter her, nor anyone doing what is shameful and false, only those written in the Scroll of Life of the Lamb.<sup>501</sup>

XXII <sup>1</sup>And he showed me a river of the Water of Life, bright as crystal, coming out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.<sup>502</sup> <sup>2</sup>Between her street

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were told that the divine light of God and the Lamb outshines the natural light of the sun and the moon (cf. Zech 14,7).

<sup>501</sup> Nothing impure (profane) can enter the Holy City, nor anyone doing what is shameful and false, only those written in the Scroll of Life of the Lamb. This verse seems to have been inserted to correct the impression that everyone and everything can now enter the Holy City, because the gates are always open. This prohibition distinguishes the New Jerusalem from the historical Jerusalem, which will be profaned for 42 months (see n. 243). The OT background includes Is 52,1.11 and Ez 44,9. The angel posted at each gate (Rev 21,12) appears to be the one who will enforce this prohibition in practice, scrutinizing each visitor and rejecting “everything profane”—it seems this is a reference to objects, materials and consumables (especially alcohol, drugs, weapons, cosmetics, images, etc), rather than to people, for by now every person on earth will have survived the final judgment by remaining inscribed in the Scroll of Life, and will therefore be permitted to enter. Nevertheless, the prohibition on profane material suggests that these visitors still lack discernment on what is holy and what is profane, thus explaining why they are still in need of guidance (21,24) and healing (22,2). One could speculate that the pilgrimage of the nations to the Holy City may even have the purpose of replenishing pilgrims with the Holy Spirit, to give them the discernment and healing they need (22,6.17). By adding the fact that “only those written in the Scroll of Life of the Lamb” can enter, the author seems to be addressing his readers, before the final judgment, encouraging them to ensure that they remain inscribed in that scroll. The addition of “those doing what is shameful (abominable) and false” also seems to be addressed to the reader, for such as these will, at the final judgment and according to the lists at 21,8 and 22,15, end up in the lake of fire, along with all those who are not inscribed in the Scroll of Life.

<sup>502</sup> From describing the walls and the gates of the New Jerusalem and those who will enter her, the author moves towards the centre and sees the divine throne and its surroundings. The landscape resembles that of Ezekiel’s vision of restoration (Ez 47), and includes several features (Rev 22,2-3) identifying the Holy City as the fulfilment of the original Paradise

and the river, on both sides, are Trees of Life producing twelve fruits— throughout each month they give their fruit— and the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations. **503**

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of God in the Garden of Eden (Gn 2-3). In Ezekiel's vision, water emerges from under the threshold of the temple, flowing eastward past the altar and becoming a large river as it rushes down to the Dead Sea (Ez 47,1-12; cf. Joel 4,18; Zech 14,8). There is no Sanctuary in John's vision (Rev 21,22), so the river of crystal-clear Water of Life (or living water) issues directly from the throne of God and of the Lamb (cf. Gn 2,8-10; Ez 47,1). Gushing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, this water is infused with the Holy Spirit (holy water), providing divine and eternal life to those who receive it (cf. Jn 7,37-39). To drink freely from this water is promised as a divine reward (Rev 21,6; 22,17; see n. 481). The divine throne, where God will dwell among men, is at the very centre of the new creation and of the Holy City (21,3): it is not only the origin of the light of the glory of God (21,23; 22,5), but also the source of the river of Water of Life (see n. 503).

**503** The scene John now describes is literally translated as follows: "in the middle of the main street and of the river, here and there, a Tree of Life producing twelve fruits...". This difficult construction has given rise to several proposals. We have simply translated the Greek "in the middle of" as a Semitism for "between", giving us the image of a large avenue with the river flowing down its centre and lined by Trees of Life on either side. However, since it is in the singular, 'a Tree of Life producing twelve fruits' gives the impression there is only one type of tree that changes its crop every month, which is not only unimaginable, but also inconsistent with Ezekiel's vision of many kinds of tree yielding different kinds of crop: "Along both banks of the river, fruit trees of every kind shall grow; their leaves shall not fade, nor their fruit fail. Every month they shall bear fresh fruit, for they shall be watered by the flow from the Sanctuary. Their fruit shall serve for food, and their leaves for medicine" (Ez 47,12). Perhaps the use of the singular 'Tree of Life producing twelve fruits' has been determined by the single 'Tree of Life' that was planted in the midst of the Garden of Eden and conferred immortality (Gn 2,9; 3,22), but in John's vision a single tree would certainly not be able to provide enough fruit for all those who have overcome (Rev 2,7; 22,14) or leaves for the healing of the nations (22,2). The context demands a huge number of trees of different kinds as described in Ezekiel's vision (Ez 47,12). We therefore take the single 'Tree of Life' in Revelation to be a collective singular. The monthly harvest from the Trees of Life follows Ezekiel and implies a certain nutritional dependence on this fruit by residents and visitors to the

<sup>3</sup>And no more will *there* be any curse.<sup>504</sup> And the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in her, and his servants will worship him<sup>505</sup> <sup>4</sup>and they

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Holy City (Ez 47,12; cf. 1En 25:4ff; *Test. Levi* 18:11; *Tg. Isaiah* 65,22). According to the Genesis account, eating the fruit confers individual immortality (Gn 3,22), but here, as no other food is described in the Holy City, it signifies food that fully satisfies the needs of the body for nourishment and the needs of the soul for eternal life (see also n. 49). On a more literal level, it suggests a return to the fruitarian diet of the original inhabitants of Paradise (Gn 1,29; 2,16). The therapeutic use of the leaves of these trees also follows Ezekiel (Ez 47,12) and, as noted previously, implies a residual, though probably minimal, lack of perfection among those living outside the Holy City (see n. 499). In the opinion of this author, there is no contradiction in saying that human sickness will persist outside the Holy City, beyond the total eradication of evil at the final judgment, since sickness, whether mental or physical, is caused by so many other factors apart from evil spirits. We must simply note that the remedy for the nations is only to be found in the Holy City, thus obliging these nations to turn to this city of perfection for their healing and guidance. The residual imperfections of these peoples draw them to seek the perfection of the Holy City, meaning that there is, in the new creation, a tendency pulling the nations towards the perfection of the New Jerusalem. The presence of the divine throne, the light of God's glory, the Water of Life (cf. Ez 47,8-12), the Trees of Life (cf. Gn 2-3) and the pilgrimage of the nations, all show that the paradisaical city, the New Jerusalem, described by John goes far beyond the original Garden of Eden, and cannot be described as mankind's return to paradise, but rather as the perfect fulfilment of all that it represented.

<sup>504</sup> In a context so rich with allusions to the Garden of Eden, the author seems to be referring primarily to the curse that banished the sinful couple from the Garden of Eden, and has ever since marred the life of the human family (Gn 3,14-24). This tragic curse is certainly going to be totally annulled in the new creation, but by writing '*any* curse' the author goes further to affirm a general annulment for any and every curse that has ever been pronounced at any time.

<sup>505</sup> The presence of God on his throne, in the midst of his creation, is the blissful end-point of the progressive revelation of the throne traced in Revelation: in Rev 4,1 a door was open in heaven and God's throne was revealed to John; in 11,19 and 15,4 the heavenly Sanctuary was opened revealing his throne to the 144,000; in 19,11 the heavens themselves are opened and in 20,11 the throne appeared for the judgment of all creation. Throughout the gradual revelation and descent of the divine throne, this is



will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.<sup>506</sup> <sup>5</sup>And *there* will be no more night, and they will have no need of the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, because the Lord God will give them light, and they will reign for ever and ever.<sup>507</sup>

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the first time we hear unambiguously that the throne has two occupants: God and the Lamb (cf. 5,6; 7,17; cf. 1En 61:7-8). For those who need confirmation, God and his Messiah, Jesus Christ, are eternally united on the one throne of glory, where they are worshipped by God's servants. In Revelation, the 'servants of God' is a very broad term which includes the author, John (Rev 1,1; 19,10; 22,9), the angels (19,10; 22,9), the faithful in the churches (1,1; 2,20; 22,6; 19,5), the 144,000 (7,3); the martyrs (6,11; 7,15; 19,2.5), Moses (15,3), the prophets, the confessors and those who take to heart the words of this prophecy (11,18; 19,10; 22,9). In brief, the 'servants of God' is an inclusive term for the faithful people of God of every time and place, and includes the faithful angels: all who will receive the eternal enjoyment of life in the Holy City as their reward (11,18). They will be the permanent residents of the Holy City, where they will continually worship God, like those dwelling in the heavenly Sanctuary (7,15), of which the Holy City is the materialization (see n. 497).

<sup>506</sup> The greatest reward for those living in, or visiting, the Holy City will be to see God's face—a blessing that is otherwise known as the beatific vision. In the OT, God warned "No one may see me and live" (Ex 33,20), and Moses was only allowed to see his back (Ex 33,23). In the NT, Jesus taught that only the pure in heart will see God (Mt 5,8). For those admitted to heaven after death, the beatific vision is the reward for their heroic virtue in this life. Similarly, here, it is the eternal reward of all the faithful servants of God of every time and place. Among slaves or servants, a name on their foreheads is a sign of ownership. Placed upon the forehead of faithful servants of God, the divine name can be interpreted as a sign of their belonging and consecration. According to the wording of the priestly blessing in the OT, "And I will place my name on the Israelites and I will bless them" (cf. Nm 6,27), it can also be interpreted as a sign of God's eternal blessing. Those already marked in this way include those who have overcome (Rev 3,12) and the 144,000 (14,1).

<sup>507</sup> This is a repetition of the theme of 21,23-25: due to the divine light of God's glory shining in the city, there will be no need for any other kind of light, and there will be no darkness or night (cf. Is 60,19-20; Zech 14,7). It is evidently in this context that we must understand the eternal reign of God's servants. They reign because they are the servants of the divine light by which the nations will walk. They will guide the nations in their desire



Epilogue **508**

<sup>6</sup>And he said to me: These words are faithful and true, and the Lord, God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.**509**

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to walk in this light and help them to receive healing. Their reign is one of eternal service and worship, in perfect fulfilment of their vocation to be “a kingdom and priests” to God, who reign on the earth (Rev 1,6; 5,9-10; 20,6; 1Pet 2,9; Ex 19,6). The fact that their reign is eternal shows that Christ’s millennial kingdom will indeed have no end, but rather an everlasting extension (Rev 20,4-6; see n. 457).

**508** The Epilogue brings the Book of Revelation to a close, repeating many of the themes that were raised in other parts of the text and especially in the Prologue: the book is an authentic prophecy (1,3 and 22,6.9-10.18-19) by a recognized prophet (1,1-2.9-10 and 22,8-10) to inform the churches (1,1.3.11 and 22,16) and to encourage the faithful (1,3 and 22,7.12.14). Its main functions are (1) to emphasize the divine authority and trustworthiness of the book, (2) to stress the imminence of the events it prophesies, (3) to exhort the faithful to remain faithful, (4) to warn against any modification of the text. It is written in the same discursive style as the Prologue, with contributions from several different speakers: the revealing angel (one of the seven bowl-angels: 21,9), the author John, the angel of the risen Christ, the Spirit and the Bride.

**509** The first to speak is the bowl-angel who has been revealing the Holy City to the author (21,9-10). He assures John that the words he has written are ‘faithful and true’, which is the highest recommendation they could receive (see n. 479). By recalling the opening verse of the entire text (1,1), to remind the author that they come from God with the aim of informing his servants (cf. 22,16), the angel is referring to the entire text of the Book of Revelation. The whole book is totally trustworthy and reliable. By calling the Lord ‘God of the spirits of the prophets’, the angel is stressing both the prophetic nature of this text and its divine inspiration. The term ‘God of the spirits of the prophets’ refers to God as the commander of the angels who communicate prophecy to the prophets. This appellation for God evokes a similar title, ‘Lord of the Spirits’, used more than a hundred times in the Parables of Enoch (1En 37-71), where it refers the Lord’s authority over every spirit and creature. Furthermore, by comparing 1En 39:12 (“Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of the Spirits, he fills the earth with spirits”) with Is 6,3 (“Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory”), this epithet seems to derive from, and be a substitute for, ‘Lord of the armies/hosts’ (see n. 441).

<sup>7</sup>And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is he that keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.<sup>510</sup>

<sup>8</sup>And I, John, am the one that is hearing and seeing these things.<sup>511</sup> And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel showing me these things. <sup>9</sup>And he says to me: No! I am a fellow-servant of yours and of your brothers the prophets and those who keep the words of this book; worship God.<sup>512</sup> <sup>10</sup>And he says to me: Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.<sup>513</sup>

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**510** The angel of the risen Christ interjects here (as at Rev 16,15) with the news he is coming ‘soon’ (or ‘quickly’, but see n. 8) followed by the sixth of the seven beatitudes in the text (1,3; 14,13; 16,15; 19,9; 20,6; 22,7.14). The imminence of his Second Coming is repeatedly stressed in this final section of text (cf. 22,7.10.12.20) as it was in the Prologue (cf. 1,1; 1,3). The sixth beatitude is very similar to the first, since it encourages the faithful to keep the words of this book in their hearts (see n. 7). Again the prophetic nature of the text is emphasized and again we see the Epilogue repeating affirmations from the Prologue.

**511** This statement serves to confirm that John is the prophet behind the entire text, repeating a similar declaration in the Prologue (1,2; cf. 1,9).

**512** When the revelation was over, John was about to worship the bowl-angel, repeating the action for which he was rebuked at 19,10. He receives a very similar response to the one he received on that occasion: he should worship only God, for the angel is a fellow-servant of John and his fellow prophets and all those who have become prophets by keeping the words of this book (see n. 433). The service of this angel is clearly in communicating prophecy: he may indeed be one of the ‘spirits of the prophets’ (see n. 509). One asks why John repeated the same gesture on this occasion, as at 19,10: one can only guess that, because of the interjection of angel of the risen Christ at 22,7, he thought he was worshipping the risen Christ (cf. 1,17).

**513** Next the angel tells John not to ‘seal’ his book, i.e. not to hide it from the faithful as Daniel was commanded to do (Dn 12,4.9; cf. 1En 1:2), for the time is near. In the Prologue, the fact that ‘the time is near’ is given as the reason why the faithful should pay attention to the prophecy of this book. In conjunction with statements confirming Christ is coming soon (cf. Rev 22,7.10.12.20), the time that is near clearly refers to the time of the Second Coming of Christ, endorsing its imminence (see n. 8). The order not to seal his book therefore conveys the same message as the blessing in the

<sup>11</sup>Let the wicked person carry on doing what is wrong and let the filthy person carry on being filthy. And let the righteous person carry on doing what is right and let the holy person carry on being holy.<sup>514</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Behold, I am coming soon and my reward is with me, to pay each one according to how is his work.<sup>515</sup> <sup>13</sup>I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.<sup>516</sup>

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Prologue (1,3): now is the time for the faithful to read and hear the words of this prophecy, for the Second Coming of Christ is fast approaching.

**514** What follows may sound rather strange to evangelical ears. The message seems to be that the faithful should concentrate their energies on increasing their holiness and righteousness, and not on trying to change or 'save' the ones that are going to be lost. Evangelization will proceed through the love of God's people for one another (cf. Jn 13,34-35). Those who are not drawn to Christ by the holiness and righteousness of the faithful will not be drawn by anything, so they should be left to their own fate. Evil will increase and the faithful should avoid contacts that may put their faith in jeopardy. This wise, but seemingly harsh counsel, seems to have been modelled on the passages in Daniel that, like this one, speak about the sealing of the prophecy: "Many shall fall away and evil shall increase" (Dn 12,4), and again: "Many shall be refined, purified, and tested, but the wicked shall prove wicked; none of them shall have understanding, but the wise shall have it" (Dn 12,10).

**515** Again, the Lord's angel announces that Christ's Second Coming is imminent (cf. Rev 22,7). He is bringing his reward with him and will pay each person according to his deeds—an expression that combines two passages in Scripture: "Here comes with power the Lord God, who rules by his strong arm; here is his reward with him, his recompense before him" (Is 40,10; cf. 62,11) and "He who guards your life knows it, and he will repay each one according to deeds" (Prov 24,12). Reward according to deeds therefore becomes traditional teaching (Jer 17,10; Mt 16,27; Rom 2,6; 2Tim 4,14; Rev 2,23; 20,13). From its biblical use, the expression is clearly ambiguous: the 'reward' can refer to both recompense and punishment. In brief, Christ is saying he is coming to judge soon and each person's deeds are going to determine their reward, as in final judgment scene at Rev 20,12-13.

**516** This is the first time that all these titles, which are essentially synonymous in denoting the universal extent of God's sovereignty, are applied to the risen Christ, who, up to now, has been called only 'the First and the Last' (1,17; 2,8; cf. Is 41,4; 44,6; 48,12). 'The Alpha and the Omega'

<sup>14</sup>Blessed are they that wash their robes so that they may have the right to the Tree of Life and may enter by the gates into the City.<sup>517</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the sexually immoral and the murderers and the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices lying.<sup>518</sup>

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and 'the Beginning and the End' were previously attributed only to God the Almighty (1,8; 21,6). The unification of these titles in the risen Christ emphasizes the supreme extent of his divine role. As noted before, the only titles reserved for God, in Revelation, are 'the Almighty' and 'the One who is and who was' (see n. 13).

**517** This is the seventh and final beatitude in the book (1,3; 14,13; 16,15; 19,9; 20,6; 22,7.14). The blessing is for those who wash their robes, so they may enter the New Jerusalem by its gates and eat from the Tree of Life (cf. 2,7). The washing of robes is not a new expression: in the past tense signifying a point in time, and combined with the act of bleaching, it describes the purification of the martyrs who give up their lives in the great tribulation and attain the heavenly Sanctuary (7,14; see n. 185). By using the verb 'to wash' in the present tense, here, the speaker tells us that the purification is a continuous process, and even unrelated to martyrdom. The 'purification process' most probably refers to the normal Christian life of penitence (charity, alms, prayer and fasting), not to mention frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Confession. The faithful who follow this ordinary route, even though they are not martyred, will also have the right to the Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem. The unique expression 'to have a *right* to the Tree of Life' recalls a matching use of the same expression in *1En* 25:4: "no flesh has the *right* to touch it [the Tree of Life] until the great judgment". The emphasis on entering the Holy City *by its gates* is also difficult. It implies that these people are indeed blessed because they can enter the Holy City from outside, but that, unlike the more active servants of God, they do not belong to the Holy City as residents (see n. 505). It seems to be addressing those faithful souls who, for one reason or another, survive the final 42-month trial without going through the great tribulation (without first entering the heavenly Sanctuary), and then end up living outside the Holy City. They must then enter by her gates to eat from the Tree of Life. They can probably be identified with those who are blessed because they are invited to the wedding banquet of the Lamb (Rev 19,9), but are not identified with the Bride. They are, in fact, in a similar situation to the nations who seek guidance and healing from the Holy City (see n. 499) and enter by the gates (n. 501).

**518** This vice list is almost identical to that of 21,8 (except for the substitution of 'dogs' for the 'depraved'), where it was stated that the

<sup>16</sup>I, Jesus, sent my angel to witness these things to you in the churches.<sup>519</sup> I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the bright Dawn Star.<sup>520</sup>

<sup>17</sup>And the Spirit and the Bride say: Come. May the one who hears also say: Come. And let the one who thirsts come, and the one who wants – let him take the Water of Life freely.<sup>521</sup>

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groups of people in the list will, at the final judgment, be condemned to the lake of fire (see n. 483). So, it can be assumed that this list also refers to the types of people who will find themselves condemned to the lake of fire. In this context, then, ‘outside’ means excluded forever, as the lake of fire is a destiny from which there is no escape. Since it is also called the ‘second death’, we suppose that these people are dead, to all intents and purposes, although they continue to live in eternal torment. Putting this information together, we infer that the lake of fire is indeed outside the New Jerusalem. However, since those in the lake of fire “will be tormented by fire and sulphur *in front of* holy angels and *in front of* the Lamb” (Rev 14,9), the distance between the lake of fire and the Holy City, where the Lamb is enthroned, may be very small. This observation recalls a common tradition in apocalyptic literature, which foresees the apostates burning in a fiery abyss outside Jerusalem (1En 26–27; 90:26–27) and in full view of the righteous and holy (1En 27:3; 48:9; cf. Is 66,24; see also nn. 336, 344, 346).

<sup>519</sup> This is almost a repetition of Rev 22,6, differing only in that Christ, not God, is the one who sends the angel to the churches. Both versions recall the opening verse of the Prologue (Rev 1,1) in which the full chain of transmission is described: God gives the revelation to Christ who then sends his angel to John, who then records it for the churches. As in 22,6, this verse serves to authenticate the entire contents of the book by reminding us of their divine origin.

<sup>520</sup> These are both ancient messianic titles for the Messiah, of which ‘Root of David’ was cited previously (5,5). ‘The Root and the Offspring of David’ derives from Isaiah (Is 11,1.10). The prophecy about the anointed descendant, the ‘Shoot’ or ‘Branch’, of David also appears in other prophetic books of the OT (Jer 23,5–6; 33,15; Zech 3,8; 6,12). The problem of how the Messiah can be the descendant and, at the same time, the root of David, was explained by Jesus when he was confronted by the Pharisees (Mt 22,42–46). For ‘the bright Dawn Star’, see n. 79.

<sup>521</sup> The Spirit represents the risen Christ (cf. Rev 2,7.11.17.29; 3.6.13.22) and the Bride represents the triumphant Church in heaven (see n. 430). They are soon to be married (19,7). With one accord, they invite those who

<sup>18</sup>I witness to everyone hearing the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, <sup>19</sup>and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the Tree of Life and in the Holy City described in this book. **522**

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are listening to this prophecy to “come” to their wedding (cf. 19,9) and participate in the blessings of the New Jerusalem. The One who hears should respond by also saying “come”, because the marriage will not be held and the New Jerusalem will not materialize, until Christ ‘comes’ to judge and the Bride ‘comes’ down from heaven. Responding in this way (cf. 22,20), the hearer would show his longing for the ‘blessed hope’ of the Second Coming and the consummation of the whole plan of God. The dialogue ends with a repetition of the offer of the Water of Life in 21,6, for those who thirst (Is 55,1) and long for it (Ps 42,1). It confirms that the Spirit and the Bride are inviting the hearers to share in the eternal blessings of the New Jerusalem, in whose midst is the source of that Water of Life, see n. 481.

**522** This solemn warning recalls a similar injunction in Deuteronomy: “In your observance of the commandments of the Lord, your God, which I enjoin upon you, you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it” (Dt 4,2). It puts the words of the prophecy of this book on the same level as the commandments of God, the unalterable Torah, and therefore affirms its status as ‘canonical’. There is nothing inconsistent about this, however, since the author has repeatedly described the contents of the book as the “Word of God and the Witness of Jesus” (see n. 6). Apart from Paul’s stern warning to those who would distort the Gospel (Gal 1,6-9), there is nothing else like this in the NT. Taken at face value, it warns hearers not to distort the text in any way, at risk of losing their share of future beatitude or of receiving the judgments described within. Whether or not copyists, translators and commentators have applied it to themselves is a moot point. The overtly Semitic style of the text and the inelegant, often incorrect, Greek syntax may owe its origin to a meticulously literal translation from Aramaic or Hebrew, undertaken by translators who were acutely conscious of this warning and determined to stay as close as possible to the original. For the same reason, the translation presented above runs as close as possible to the original text, while trying to avoid stilted English. For the faithful who work with the text, there is little doubt about the effectiveness of this warning: it is a strong incentive to treat the text as it stands with great respect. It is hard

<sup>20</sup>Says he that witnesses these things: Yes, I am coming soon.<sup>523</sup>  
Amen, come Lord Jesus!<sup>524</sup>

<sup>21</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all.<sup>525</sup>

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to decide whether it is pronounced by the author, or by the risen Christ. In view of Rev 22,12-13, where Christ declares he is bringing his reward with him, it is unlikely he would then say ‘God will add’ or ‘God will take away’. He would be much more likely to say ‘I will add’ or ‘I will take away’. On this basis, it is reasonable to assume that the author, John, is the one who ‘witnesses’ this warning, presumably on instruction from above.

<sup>523</sup> For the third time in the Epilogue, the risen Christ interjects by saying he is coming soon (Rev 22,7.12). The one who witnesses these things is actually the Lord’s angel, according to 22,16, but as noted previously the Lord’s angel is simply the visible form in which the risen Christ communicates directly to John (see n. 25). So, the one whose coming is imminent is indeed the risen Christ himself. Conversely, the one who is coming soon is the same as the one witnessing these things—the one who has communicated the revelation to John for the sake of the churches (cf. 22,16).

<sup>524</sup> There is a response, almost liturgical in character, from the hearers. It responds precisely to the invitation of the Spirit and the Bride, when they say “May the one who hears also say: Come” (22,17; see n. 521). Here the hearers are indeed saying “Come!”. In fact, the expression they use (ἔρχου κύριε Ἰησοῦ) is a Greek translation, from Aramaic, of one of the most ancient liturgical formulas in the Christian Church: “*Marana tha*”, which simply means “Our Lord, come!” and is also found in 1Cor 16,20 and *Didache* 10:6. In the *Didache*, which is more or less contemporary with the Book of Revelation, it is said at the end of the Eucharistic prayer.

<sup>525</sup> In St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, the “*Marana tha*” is followed by the invocation of the Lord’s grace “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you” (1Cor 16,22-23) and the letter promptly ends. In an almost identical way, the Book of Revelation concludes with the “*Marana tha*” followed by an invocation of the Lord’s grace. It would be reasonable to assume that by using these expressions, in this order, the author is following a traditional ending for liturgical texts or documents to be read in a liturgical setting.





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| 18 | Jerusalem in Revelation<br><a href="http://www.newtorah.org/pdf/Jerusalem%20in%20Revelation%202023.pdf">www.newtorah.org/pdf/Jerusalem%20in%20Revelation%202023.pdf</a>   |
| 19 | The Time Periods<br><a href="http://www.newtorah.org/pdf/The%20Time%20Periods%202023.pdf">www.newtorah.org/pdf/The%20Time%20Periods%202023.pdf</a>  |
| 20 | The Two Witnesses<br><a href="http://www.newtorah.org/pdf/The%20Two%20Witnesses%202023.pdf">www.newtorah.org/pdf/The%20Two%20Witnesses%202023.pdf</a>   |
| 21 | Revelation 12 and its Mystical Interpretation<br><a href="http://www.newtorah.org/pdf/Revelation%2012%20Mystical%202023.pdf">www.newtorah.org/pdf/Revelation%2012%20Mystical%202023.pdf</a>                         |
| 22 | A Profile of Antichrist<br><a href="http://www.newtorah.org/pdf/A%20Profile%20of%20Antichrist%202023.pdf">www.newtorah.org/pdf/A%20Profile%20of%20Antichrist%202023.pdf</a>   |
| 23 | The Identity of Babylon<br><a href="http://www.newtorah.org/pdf/The%20Identity%20of%20Babylon%202023.pdf">www.newtorah.org/pdf/The%20Identity%20of%20Babylon%202023.pdf</a>   |
| 24 | Revelation 20 and the Mystery of Iniquity<br><a href="http://www.newtorah.org/pdf/Rev%2020%20and%20Mystery%20of%20Iniquity%202023.pdf">www.newtorah.org/pdf/Rev%2020%20and%20Mystery%20of%20Iniquity%202023.pdf</a> |

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