

## **The Book of Revelation Interpretation and Application**

\*What does progress look like in the Christian life? Have you ever questioned whether the church is on the winning side given your real-life experience?

\*What has been your experience reading the book of Revelation?

### **Historical Context**

1. Likely written during Domitian's reign (~AD 95)

2. Emperor Worship—

Revelation presupposes that Christians were being required to participate in the imperial cult (13:4-8, 15-16; 14:9-11, 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4) The threat of persecution hung over them because of refusal to worship the ungodly king. Some also suggest that the cult of Domitian at Ephesus with its colossal statue is what lies behind the depiction in Rev. 13 of believers being put to death for not worshipping the "image of the beast."

3. Options Christians faced in light of persecution

- Recant and deny Christian faith as Pliny records that some did.
- Some Jewish Christians were tempted to escape persecution by seeking some form of identification with Jewish synagogues, which were exempted from emperor worship and even the emperor cult in order to escape persecution...
- Openly confess Christ and suffer the persecution as Pliny also tells us happened.
- They could compromise. Some of the false teachers in the churches were encouraging (2:14-15, 20) this practice

4. Theological Crisis: Many Christians struggled with the perceived discrepancy between the proclamation that God's kingdom has come in Christ and the reality that people and institutions hostile to Christianity were in authority and oppressive to believers.

\*How can God be sovereign and good while evil forces continued to dominate the world we live in? What are some common Christian answers to this question?

### **Can We Really Understand the Book of Revelation?**

Yes. Very little of the Book of Revelation contains new information. It repeats much of the message of the New Testament but in symbolic form.

God rules history and will bring it to its conclusion in Christ. You can keep the main point in mind and understand it without understanding every detail.

If Revelation is so clear, why do so many people have trouble with it?

- We often start with the detail: "What do the bear's feet in Revelation 13:2 stand for?"
- If we start with such detail, and ignore the big picture, we will miss the point.

*"Revelation is a picture book, not a puzzle book. Don't try to puzzle it out. Don't become preoccupied with isolated details. Rather, become engrossed in the overall story. Praise the Lord. Cheer the saints. Detest the Beast. Long for the final victory."*  
Vern Poytheress

Ask a kid to read Revelation and they will tell you what it means; ask a seminary student and you will become confused.

1. History involves spiritual warfare. In this war, there are two sides. You are either for God or against him.
2. Revelation uses irony in its images to make a point:
  - God's opponents want to be like him but end up being beasts.
  - The opposition looks strong and frightening but are vanquished by a slain Lamb.
  - Spiritual warfare looks chaotic, but God is in control throughout.
3. **Overall Message:** Christ is the majestic king, and judge of the universe, and ruler of the church.

John receives a series of visions intended to open our eyes to the kingship and majesty of God, the nature of spiritual warfare, God's judgment on evil, and the outcome of the conflict.

Satan has two agents:

1. The Beast represents raw power and state persecution.
2. The False Prophet spreads false information.

Christians must maintain their testimony, even to the point of martyrdom. They are called to be lights to the world and maintain spiritual purity...BUT not apart from Christ! Their light is God's truth; their purity is fulfilled by the spotless Lamb.

**The Main Event** to come in Christian History is the Coming of Christ to bring Final Judgment. It is so important that Revelation describes it seven times!

1. Seven seals, 4:1-8:1
2. Seven trumpets, 8:2-11:19
3. Symbolic figures and the harvest, 12:1-14:20
4. Seven bowls, 15:1-16:21
5. Judgment of Babylon, 17:1-19:10
6. White Horse Judgment, 19:11-21
7. White Throne Judgment, 20:1-21:8

**MAIN POINT of Application:** "progress" comes ironically through the sufferings and tribulations of the saints.

- How should this inform your expectations in this life?
- How does it challenge you personally?
- How does it encourage you?

The present age is described as both a struggle and a triumph.

- In these "last days"-- Satan is "bound" or "restrained" and is unable to thwart the spreading of the gospel throughout the nations. BUT STILL ACTIVE AND ABLE TO INFLICT SUFFERING AND CONTEXT

- Also, in these last days-- those who die the "first death" (earthly death) who belong to Christ are described as "reigning" with Christ in heaven ... these are a people over whom the "second death" (their eternal and spiritual death) has no power.

### **Ultimate Purpose: A worshipful life of faith**

The consummation of church history is told with the jolting visions of heavenly liturgy in John's apocalyptic epistle. We are met there with visions of the glorified Christ in the company of worshippers (especially ch. 4-5). These liturgical visions are central to John's exhortation to the church in her mission to persevere in being a witness to the nations for the glory of God as revealed in Christ.

- What effect does this message have on you?

### **Literary Style: Understanding the Apocalyptic Genre**

The book of Revelation seems strange, foreign to our experience, and can be discouraging for those who want to hear God's message from it.

It does, however, make sense and even follow patterns of a type of ancient literature in the apocalyptic genre. This genre was used by several OT prophets and some intertestamental Jewish writings. Knowing the rules of the apocalyptic genre will help us.

Revelation's introduction gives us a clue as to how we should read it.

#### **Rev. 1:1-3.**

*1 The apocalypse of Jesus Christ, which God gave to Him to "show" to his servants what is necessary to happen shortly and (the things which) God signified by sending his angel to his servant John **2** who witnessed (testified) the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ as much as he saw. **3** Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.*

#### Observations from 1:1-3

The word "signified" in v. 1 indicates that God was revealing things in symbolism (sign form).

There is a rich OT prophetic tradition of communicating God's message through vivid symbolic images. Revelation quotes the OT more than any other NT book. Many of the symbols are derived from books such as Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah.

#### *Why use symbolic language?*

Prophets (including Jesus) used vivid imagery especially when ordinary warnings and exhortations were no longer being heeded.

1. These images could jolt the hearer's imagination and penetrate those who have grown spiritually callous.
2. Like Jesus' parables, they also could condemn by keeping God's truth a mystery to those who were hard of heart. John uses the phrase "the one having ears let him hear."
3. It teaches a transcendent truth about everyday life from heaven's perspective.

#### *What is the time period envisioned: Is Revelation Past, Present, or Future?*

**Verses 1-3** again give us a clue. It is an allusion to **Daniel 2:28-30, 45**.

- Revelation has many verbal links to this passage.
- Daniel 2 refers to a prophetic dream about God's kingdom that will come to destroy Nebuchadnezzar and other worldly kings.
- Dan 2:28 speaks of it coming "in the latter days"
- Rev. 1:1, however, say "to show...what things must take place quickly/shortly" ...in other words, "immediately." This matches Jesus' teaching that the time is near (Mark 1:15), the day is fulfilled (Luke 4:21).

### **Purpose of Revelation**

\*Is the book describing supernatural future events? Is it simply replaying ancient history? Does it have anything to say to us?

#### Three Common Views:

- 1) **Preterist**—(About the past up to church history) Two forms:  
Rev. as a prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD  
Rev. is a prophecy of the fall of the Roman Empire
- 2) **Historicist View** (About Church history up to now) Many versions-- see Rev. as literally pertaining to church history, most of which have been fulfilled at this time...
- 3) **Futurist View** (About the future) Popularized by "Left Behind" Series-- dispensational futurism-- very literally and generally sees the order of the visions as representing the historical order of future events

### **The Progressive Recapitulation View**

This view notices a great deal of repetition in themes and symbols. Rather than reading it as one historical account in chronological order, this view sees the same story being told **seven** different times (recapitulated).

Each section runs parallel to each other but is told with increasing intensity. Each tells the story about the **church in the midst of battle yet triumphant**. They culminate in the final return of Christ to judge evil and reward his people.

#### Four major visions

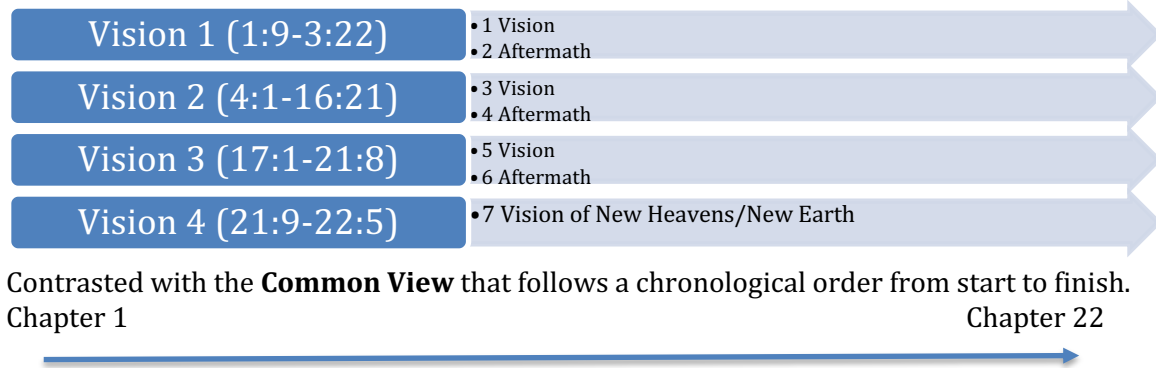
- 1:9-3:22
- 4:1-16:21 (most of the book)
- 17:1-21:8
- 21:9-22:5

Each vision is introduced by these four characteristics.

1. Vision is introduced by some heavenly figure.
2. Afterwards, John talks about being "in the Spirit".
3. Then there is instruction on what John will see.
4. Finally, there is an element of worshipping at the feet of the divine figure.

Each vision is followed by a description of the "Aftermath," which is the response fitting to the vision it follows.

### **Progressive Recapitulation**



### Images and Symbols:

- Symbolism of 12's: The number twelve (12) has significance in the light of the twelve tribes of Israel. This "image" is re-emphasized by Jesus Christ's twelve apostles, in the New Testament.
- Symbolism of 1,000's: The number one thousand (and therefore millennia) had been used for many years by the Jews as a concept of "many" or "a very great amount". It was used in relation to many people, many years, a very large amount of time,....etc. Never as a precise number.
- Symbolism of 144,000: One more number in the Book of Revelation. The number one hundred and forty-four thousand (144,000) is used to denote all (or most) of humanity. It is the twelve tribes, times the twelve disciples (new covenant), times one thousand [12 x 12 x 1000].
- Allusions to Egypt: The "image" of Egypt is normally used in reference to those who under adverse conditions want to abandon their faith. A reference to those who are like the Israelites in the desert, who wanted to return to the fleshpots of Egypt
- Allusions to Babylon: The allusions to Babylon on the other hand, in Revelation and the many other writings of the time, always represents Rome and the Roman government. Corrupt, tyrannical, and immoral Rome becomes a personification of Babylon; the "harlot" or prostitute of the world.
- Allusion to Armageddon: Although the name Armageddon as such does not appear in any literature before Christ (or after, other than Revelation), most of the scholars believe that it is a reference to, or better said a Greek transliteration of, the Hebrew name Har Megiddo; that is to say "Mount" Megiddo. The plain of Megiddo, or better said again, the "mountain pass" of Megiddo, was the location of many major critical battles in the Old Testament. It is the place where the Israelite armies first confronted all the invasions from their north, such as the Assyrians, Macedonians and the Chaldeans (Babylonians). In other words, it is "the place of confrontation". [The mountain overlooking this pass (or plain) is now called Mt. Carmel.]

### Outline Structure

**Symbolic use of 7**: a number of completion (7 days of creation, etc.)

Structure works like a four act play with seven scenes. Yet, **each act recapitulates the full drama**.

- 1:9-3:22
  - 1 Vision

- 2 Aftermath
- 4:1-16:21
  - 3 2<sup>nd</sup> Vision
  - 4 Aftermath (7 seals, 7 trumpets, 7 bowls)
- 17:1-21:8
  - 5 3<sup>rd</sup> Vision
  - 6 Aftermath
- 21:9-22:5
  - 7 4<sup>th</sup> Vision

### **Prologue: 1:1-8**

- A. Revelation 1:1-3 -- Note the chain of giving this vision: origin of revelation in God which he gave to Jesus who gave to angel who gave to John who gave to servants.
- B. Salutation 1:4-8 -- a typical letter introduction. As if starting over (as though the whole book were a letter). The seven spirits as symbolic of the One spirit (seven being the number of perfection); a correspondence with the seven churches mentioned.

### **I. The First Vision 1:9-20 -- Glorified Christ (7 churches)**

- v9 Jesus is king of all creation though unrecognized by earth dwellers.
- v 10 "The Lord's Day" -- probably a Sabbath reference rather than an eschatological reference.
- 12-20 -- "Son of Man" vision. OT background is Daniel's vision of "one like a son of man"; the son of man described has qualities that seem to partake of Daniel's description of the Ancient of Days. Indeed the Son of Man has now **received the dominion that Daniel saw** in his vision.
- V 16 -- the sharp sword has OT background (Is 11:4; 49:2; Ps 2:9). This is the gloried messiah with power to judge.
- 17ff -- Christ's words: Jesus speaks and interprets the vision for John. Church as lampstands -- give light to the world. Also gives a picture of the temple (both on earth and in heaven). Linking of seven spirits and the seven churches in 4:5 by use of the light imagery.
- Who are the angels? Bishops/pastors; messengers who came to visit John. Perhaps they are actually guardian angels.

### **II. The Aftermath 2:1-3:22 -- (7 messages to 7 churches)**

Addressed to the angels and integrally related to the vision in ch 1. Reference to Christ in each. In each (except the last), the allusion comes from the vision itself. The letters follow a structural pattern: This looks a lot like the OT prophetic lawsuit form.

### **III. The Second Vision: Ch. 4-5 (the heavenly throne room)**

This is a foundational vision for all that happens through to the end of CH 16 (even to the end of the book). Depiction of Judgment and tribulations (in series of sevens) will appear. All these things flow directly out of this initial vision.

- Immediately "in the spirit" -- John beholds the **heavenly worship**. The description of the throne room goes back to Exodus (for example 24:9-10) and Ezekiel (ch 1 for instance) -- imagery of stone sea.
- Who are the 24 elders --- represent of redeemed humanity, the church.

- Four Creatures: Echo of Is 6. similar to the 4 faced creatures of Ezekiel. These creatures are reflected by the cherubim on the ark.
  - Each beast representing the apex of a class
    - Lion -- wild beast;
    - ox -- tame beast;
    - eagle -- birds;
    - man -- over all
- The elders casting down their crowns/rewards in humble submission to God in honor.
- Ch 4 -- worship of God the creator
- Ch 5 -- worship of Christ the redeemer. This depicts something new in heaven. The slain lamb is now there.
  - This scene depicts things only conceivable since the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.
- 5:1 -- John sees the scroll w/seven seals: it is the Lamb's book of life -- note that only the Lamb is found worthy of opening the scroll
  - Parallels with Daniel 7:9-11. There book of judgment is opened. There is one book to be opened -- go to ch 20:11f opening books with the great judgment.
- The lion and the lamb: 5:5 -- goes back to Genesis 49 (Lion of Judah). He has conquered.
  - What has he conquered? Satan and Death. He holds the keys of death and Hades.
  - In v 6, John sees a lamb -- a symbol of submission and sacrifice. This is the Christian paradox. Christ conquered, but by being sacrificed.
- v 13-14 -- everyone worships. All creation. This brings the initial vision to a close

#### IV. The Aftermath 6:1-16:21 (7 seals, 7 trumpets, 7 bowls)

##### A. The Seven Seals

1. The six seals -- the first four involves the four living creatures. And we see the four horsemen of the apocalypse.
  - 6:1-2. The first Seal. The first horseman -- Christ or someone representing the spread of the gospel. These horsemen are mentioned in Zechariah and the idea that they are operating at the command of Christ -- it seems that these are the messengers of God. Amidst the wars and rumors of wars, the gospel is going forth into all nations. A parallel with the Olivet discourse Matt 24-25.
  - 6:3-4 The second Seal: The Second horseman --
  - 6:5-6 The Third Seal: Not harming the oil and the wine -- is it a reference to the idea that there will still be luxuries around even during the time of tribulation.
  - 6:7-8 The Fourth Seal: The four horsemen stand for conditions that prevail throughout the entire advent age (you will hear wars and rumors of wars, but don't be alarmed.)
  - 6:9-11 The Fifth Seal: John sees the souls of the slain under the altar. Extension of Matt 24:9 persecution of Christians? this is a picture of the martyrs alive in heaven.
  - 6:12-17 The Sixth Seal: The universe collapses with the breaking of the sixth seal -- a fearful vision of the last day.

- Mark 13: 24-27 -- description of Parousia seems to parallel this language. This clearly seems to be a universal judgment. So here we are at the brink of the end of the world.
  - We will come back to this vision again and again -- each time from a different vantage point. This seems to indicate that a principle of recapitulation going on in this book.
2. The two Multitudes: The two pictures are reassuring that should console and comfort the saints
- 7:1-8 the 144,000 -- sealing of the servants on the foreheads. This must be a sealing w Holy Spirit. Eph 1:13, 4:30. 1 John 4 (anointing) -- see also Ezek 9 -- the marking of the individuals who groaned against idolatry.
  - the number is 12 times 12 time 1,000. 12 is often associated with the number of the people of God. This multitude is pictured in heaven before the Lamb's throne. They wear the white robes and palm branches of the victors.
    - Here we have the concept of the great tribulation? There is no indication that this is a future event -- this is what is going on here and now. See John 16:33 -- Jesus promise that believers will have tribulation.
3. The Seventh seal: 8:1--The silence represents a listening to the prayers.

## B. The Seven Trumpets

### 1. The Six Trumpets

- 8:2-9:21 -- The seals seem to be a fulfillment of the Olivet discourse; the trumpets seem to be another aspect of the judgment. The trumpets seem to be God's response to prayers of the people of God throughout history (8:3-5).
- 8:2-6 -- the preparation: mingling of prayers with incense. Ezek 10:2-6: Vision of destruction of Jerusalem. This vision of revelation seem to deal with the whole earth
- 8:7 -- first trumpet: This is a partial judgment, not all consuming.
- 8:8-9 --second trumpet: the sea is consumed -- all the disasters on the sea throughout history are a part of this judgment.
- 8:10-11 --third trumpet: inland waters
- 8:12-13 -- fourth trumpet: heaven -- note the threes and fours that happen in creation. A third of the day and night are darkened. This seems to be clearly symbolic -- perhaps of a spiritual darkening.
- The first three had to do with non-human creation -- next three are directly against earth-dwellers.
- 9:1-12 -- fifth trumpet -- opening the bottomless pit.
  - Key is given to the star fallen from heaven. Later we read of this being locked for the millennium. From the smoke that arises, come locusts that afflict mankind, except those who are sealed with the seal of God. This means that there are at least some saints on earth.
  - See Mark 13:21-22 -- deception is not going to overtake the elect. What are the five months? It seems to refer to the



growing season -- a part of the imagery of the locusts.  
Remember Joel 1-2.

## 2. Interlude

a. The angel and the little book (10:1-11)

b. The measuring stick and the two witnesses (11:1-14)

The two witnesses: Many early commentators think it to be early prophets like Enoch and Elijah. Many a-mil interpreters see these as symbolic representations of the church. See ch 11 where they are referred to as lamp-stands and olive trees -- these are images used of the church elsewhere. Zech 4 (olive trees symbolizing the king and the high priest). These two witnesses are also called prophets. They have power to afflict sky water and earth (just like first trumpet blasts and the bowls). If we see these two as the church, then this ties in well with the prayers of the saints affecting the trumpet blasts.

Great city of 11:8 -- allegorical of the anti-Christian world.

This interlude is the time of the church's witness.

## 3. The Seventh trumpet. An indication of the last judgment

Note in 11:18-- Reference to the all the dead being judged. This is the *last* judgment -- note that there is no thousand year interlude between judgment of wicked and righteous.

## D. Interlude: (the seventieth week) 12:1-14:20

- 12:1-6 seems to clearly be representative of Christ's incarnation and ascension up into heaven.
- The woman in v 6 becomes a complex symbol of the church, Israel, Eve (note the showdown between the serpent and the son of Eve -- this goes back clear to Genesis), the Bride of Christ.
- Don't read this simplistically. With this reading, we see the three and a half years as not being literal and starting about the time of the ascension of Christ
- The battle in heaven -- Satan is cast down. If we read this battle as future, then Satan is still in heaven and he is not bound. 12:10ff -- Satan is cast down and bound-- the paradox is here -- the kingdom has come, but the people of Christ conquer by bearing the blood of the lamb. They may still have to die for their faith. But the kingdom still has come. Heaven is told to rejoice, but woe to the earth and sea. (Satan had access in the OT -- note Job and Zech 3; now he does not have access).
- 12:13-17 Satan goes after the woman, but she is protected, so he goes after her offspring.
- Ch 13 -- the two beasts (one from sea, one from earth)-- they demand universal worship. What are the beasts. Perhaps related to the roman situation, but they even represent *any* situation that represents a hostile environment for the people of God.
- Ch 14 -- the lamb on Mt Zion -- is this predicting an earthly or heavenly scene.

## E. The Seven Bowls

## V. **The Third Vision 17:1-19:10**

## A. The Mystery of Babylon: 17:1-18

## VI. The Aftermath 19:11-21:8

- When the angel took John and told him what will be shown, he said we'd see the judgment of the harlot -- now we see the judgment of the harlot's allies.
- 19:11-21 -- presents us with the vision of Christ's defeating and slaughtering of the beasts and the false prophet. Expansion on the scene in ch 17:12-14. Now we read of the ultimate demise of the beast
- Coming of Christ presented as great warrior on white horse. (remember 2:16 -- spiritual war imagery) With Christ are his saints riding white horses
- 19:17-21 -- the last battle and ultimate victory -- there is no opposition left here -- the picture is given of a complete and total victory. The ruin of beast and false prophet is depicted, but the ruin of Satan is not. The dragon is not mentioned at all
- 20:1-10 -- the ruin of Satan. Takes place in 2 stages. A binding in the bottomless pit. but he escapes and gathers Gog and Magog for battle. Then he too is finished in the end.

- The four basic views are premil, dispensational premil, amil, and postmil.

### Interpretive issues

- 1) look at eschatological context: Giving this context, it would be surprising if this were pre-mil. The images of the early church stand in contrast to the standard notion of the righteous dead waiting in anticipation. Revelation seems to be firmly non-chilastic in its notions of afterlife for the redeemed.
- 2) is the relationship of ch 19 and 20 chronological or recapitulatory: If sequential, you have to have some form of premillennialism. If Recapitulatory, then you are free from that. It is recapitulatory because of these reasons
  - We've seen recapitulation before -- we can't dismiss the principle of recapitulation outright
  - Ezekiel: Gog and Magog feast of birds Ch 20:7-10 and 19:17-21 -- recapitulation
  - Everybody seems to be dead at the end of Ch 19 -- how can Satan deceive the nations in ch 20 if everyone is either dead or saintly.
  - The great war: the first mentioning of the beast occur in ch 12 and 16. Note that this war is mentioned with a definite article as "the war" It seems clear that this is singular
  - With the last of the bowl judgments, the wrath of God is ended -- this is ended with the second coming of Christ. If ch 20 is another period, then we have wrath poured out again after the millennium
  - There are parallels in the cosmic disintegration recorded here and in other places in Revelation. Is earth being destroyed more than once: cf. 6:12-17; 16:17-21; 19:11-21; 20:11.
  - We have similarity in identity of presentation of the ages of the church. CF ch 11 with ch 20. Relatively long times of church activity, short time of Satan being loose.

The binding of Satan: Satan has been bound during the present age. We can undeniably say that Satan is bound. Matt 12:29 -- strong man is bound Luke 10:17 -- Satan falling like lightning from heaven; John 12:31 -- ruler of this world described as cast out.; Col 2:15; Heb 2:14-15; 2 thess 2:6-7; 1 john 3:8.

- Satan was bound by Christ's first coming. The text does not say that Satan is bound in every respect. He is not bound absolutely -- his binding is simply so that he will not deceive the nations. Satan is not able to prevent the gospel from spreading; also there is a specific focus to the binding -- he may not deceive the nations in order to gather them for battle. No matter what scale of crimes Satan has been able to perpetrate, but he has not been able to gather the forces of unbelief in a united front to extinguish the gospel. See this as related to ch 12; even in pursuit of woman, he is prevented from destroying her.
- Who reigns with Christ: 20:4ff -- this seems to be at least the martyrs. Martyrs are not singled out, but that all those who worship the lord are pictured as martyrs. If pressed literally, this applies only to beheaded martyrs. We see the martyrs specifically as souls.
- What is the First Resurrection: Is it bodily or spiritual: 1) the NT and the OT presents the resurrection as being the just and the unjust; Acts 24:15 and Daniel 12:22 and John 5:24-25 speak of the resurrections being the same. 2) the adjective "first" is interpreted. The believers go through 2 resurrections (soul and body) while non-believers go through 2 deaths (body and soul). the term "death" does not really apply any longer to believers (in its fullest sense).
- What is the 1000 years: A number of perfection (10 x 10); The issue at hand is when is the lord coming back. It has been used to talk about the time between the comings. Interesting background in scripture and Jewish thought -- idea that Adam should have lived 1000 years ( he actually lived 930 years), but his sin cut him short. It could be that this reference here brings us back to Adam and the ideal reign of Adam. Christ is fulfilling this ideal 1000 year reign. Christ is the last Adam bringing to fulfillment what the first Adam should have done. This is potent since Satan is referred to as the "ancient serpent" -- several allusions to the Genesis story (cf. Gen 3 with Rev 12). We have lots of paradise imagery. See Luke 23:42-43 where the dying thief begs Jesus' remembrance -- equation of his kingdom with paradise.
- From where is the reign conducted: From the heavenly -- the kingdom is going on now -- therefore 20:3-6 is a heavenly scene. Every mention of throne, god or saints is in heaven.

## **VII. The Fourth Vision: 21:9-22:9**

### **A. New Jerusalem and New Heavens/New Earth**

#### **Epilogue: 22:6-21**