

REV. 12:1–14:20

By Ashby L. Camp

Copyright © 2013 by Ashby L. Camp. All rights reserved.

IX. Spiritual summary of struggle from Christ to end (12:1-14:20)

A. Christ and church opposed by Satan (12:1-17)

1. Woman, dragon, and male child (12:1-6)

a. A great sign appears in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She is in the pain of childbirth.

(1) It is a "sign" in that the woman is a symbol of something, as is the woman on the beast in chapter 17. It is a "great" sign in that this woman is a symbol of something that has great significance in the purposes of God.

(2) She symbolizes true Israel, faithful Israel, the covenant community giving birth to the Messiah. Jesus, of course, is a Jew, meaning he was born from within that community of faith. Verse 5 leaves no doubt as to the identity of the child this woman is delivering. It says she gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. In Psalm 2 it is the Messiah who will rule the nations with an iron rod.

(3) The portrait of Israel as a woman is a familiar one in scripture (e.g., Isa. 50:1, 54:1-6; Jer. 2:2, 4:31; Ezek. 16:6-14; Micah 4:9-10). This woman's identity as Israel is reinforced by the inclusion of twelve stars, which probably is rooted in Joseph's dream in Genesis 37 where his brothers were eleven stars bowing down to him. (Joseph is not there described as a star, but the first-century Jewish writer Philo refers to him as the twelfth star in that dream.) Osborne remarks (p. 456), "In Jewish literature 'twelve stars' often refers to the twelve patriarchs or the twelve tribes." The references to the sun and moon probably speak of faithful Israel's glory in God's sight.

(4) Though the interpretation is disputed, some scholars (e.g., Andre Dupont-Sommer, G. R. Beasley-Murray, J. Massyngberde Ford) believe that one of the Qumran thanksgiving hymns (1QH 11:9-10) pictures the faithful community as a woman, Mother Zion, enduring birth pains until she gives birth to a male child, the messianic Deliverer of God's people. That obviously would be in line with what I am suggesting here.

b. Another sign appears in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns waits to devour her child. Verse 4 states: His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon

stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.

(1) The dragon is specifically identified in v. 9 as "that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan." Interestingly, Ezek. 29:3 and 32:2 refer to Pharaoh, the enemy of God's people, as a dragon. Beale remarks (p. 634), "The devil is the force behind the wicked kingdoms who persecute God's people."

(2) Satan sought to destroy Jesus from the moment of his birth. You recall how Herod was so obsessed with killing the baby Jesus that when the wise men did not return to him to inform him of the child's whereabouts he slaughtered all the children in the area who were two years old and under (Mat. 2:1-18).

(3) But Jesus was protected by God, then and throughout his earthly ministry (e.g., attempt of crowd to throw him over cliff in Lk. 4:28-39), until the time of his crucifixion, which was according to God's plan (Acts 2:23).

(a) Thereafter he was, as indicated in v. 5b, "caught up to God and to his throne." As Osborne (p. 462) and others (e.g., Beale) note, "The narrative omits all details of Christ's life, ministry, and death and moves directly from his birth to his ascension."

(b) It is that ascension, the resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of God in heaven, which summarizes Christ's victory. The dragon's attempt to thwart God's plan involving the Messiah was completely defeated. God prevented Satan from killing Jesus before God's time, and the crucifixion that Satan thought was his long-sought victory was in fact his defeat. As we might say, God beat him like a drum; God is always triumphant.

(4) The dragon's appearance symbolizes a number of things.

(a) The color red represents his murderous character, especially as expressed against the people of God. In Jn. 8:44 Jesus called Satan "a murderer from the beginning."

(b) The seven heads and ten horns are probably intended to give a picture of the fullness of the creature's evil and power. Horns are a sign of power, and evil beasts are depicted elsewhere in antiquity as having a multiplicity of heads (including Leviathan in Ps. 74:14). This may be a sign of their immense vitality. The fact the beast out of the sea in 13:1 also has seven heads and ten horns suggests that he shares Satan's nature, which fits with the understanding of that beast as Antichrist, the Satan-inspired enemy of God and his people.

(c) The greatness of the dragon's power is also reflected in his enormous size and in his ability to sweep a third of the stars from the sky.

The sweeping of the stars from the sky may also symbolize the original fall of some the angels when they, under Satan's leadership, first rebelled against God. The result of this turning from God was the perversity, viciousness, and wickedness that has since characterized demons.

(d) I think the royal crowns represent Satan's presumptuous claim of sovereignty over against the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords," upon whose head are many crowns (19:12, 16). Satan is called "the prince of this world" (Jn. 12:31, 14:30, 16:11), the "ruler of the kingdom of the air" (Eph. 2:2), and the "god of this world/age" (2 Cor. 4:4), because he is allowed for now to have a certain influence in this world, but he is not sovereign. He has already been defeated, and his miserable end is certain.

c. There is a brief reference in v. 6 to the fact the woman will be cared for (nourished) by God during the days of her persecution, represented by the standard figure 1,260. The image of the wilderness suggests God's providential care in times of hardship (e.g., manna during the Exodus). This theme of care in the wilderness that is rooted in the Exodus is echoed in texts like 1 Ki. 19:4-8, which deals with Elijah's flight from Jezebel. This anticipates the discussion of vv. 13-17. Verses 7-12 reveal the spiritual background of that persecution.

2. War in heaven (12:7-12)

a. The defeat of Satan effectuated by the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ is symbolized in the expulsion from heaven of Satan and his angels. This may be the victory Christ foresaw in Lk. 10:18 when he said he saw "Satan fall like lightning from the sky." In the context of the seventy-two rejoicing over Christ's power over demons, Christ alludes to the ultimate victory ahead, the ultimate breaking of Satanic power.

b. Verse 10 links this expulsion to the inauguration of the kingdom of God that Christ accomplished most fundamentally in his death, resurrection, and ascension (see Beale, 657-658). It clearly refers to the inauguration of the kingdom rather than the consummation because the expulsion of Satan that is associated with it is followed by Satan's making war against the church (vv. 12-13, 17).

c. The actual expulsion appears to be carried out by Michael and his angels, but the interpretive hymn of vv. 10-12 makes clear that this victory was won by the blood of Christ (see also, 5:9). Christ appeared to destroy the works of the devil (1 Jn. 3:8). Michael is merely executing the victory won by Christ at Calvary; his action is "a heavenly reflection of what Christ does on earth" (Beale, 657).

d. Satan apparently had some type of access to heaven and continually accused the saints of disobedience (Job 1:9-11; Zech. 3:1). Perhaps he was tolerated in that role because God recognized the justice of these allegations. With the atoning death of Christ, God's justice has been satisfied, so Satan's accusations are no

longer valid. He is thus expelled from heaven. He ultimately is powerless against Christians; the victory has already been won.

e. The angel then announces (v. 11) that Christians ("our brothers" in v. 10 showing the angel's identification with Christians as fellow servants) likewise have conquered Satan, the accuser, by means of Christ's sacrifice, which they appropriate through a steadfast faith that confesses him even at the risk of their lives. As Jesus told the angel of the church in Smyrna in Rev. 2:10: Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

f. Because of Christ's victory and the participation of the saints in it, the voice calls on heaven's inhabitants to rejoice (see, 5:8-14). But this same victory means distress for God's people on earth. The persecution that John's readers were enduring and the persecution that will arise in the end are not because Satan is too strong but because he has been defeated. He is in his death throes. He knows his "days are numbered."

3. War on earth (12:13-17)

a. Knowing that God through Christ has defeated him, that he is living on borrowed time so to speak, Satan persecutes the woman that gave birth to Christ, i.e., true Israel (the messianic community). Following Christ's coming, true Israel consisted of those Jews who accepted him as God's Messiah. In other words, the woman is the messianic community before and after Christ. She is faithful Israel, which after Christ's coming is the church. Of course, the church in the beginning was exclusively Jewish, and at the very beginning was confined to Jerusalem.

b. The original, Jewish church was the focus of persecution (by unbelieving Jews and by Herod) for a period of time (1,260 days and time, times, and a half a time) but was protected by God from destruction (though individual Christians certainly were killed). Acts 4 through 12 record this persecution. Later chapters of Acts reveal an established Christian center in Jerusalem. Satan had failed to stamp it out. Instead, it spread (reproduced) "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

c. Having failed to destroy, to stamp out, the original Christian community, Satan turned his attention to its offspring, the Christians and churches that were spawned by that original community ("those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus"). The churches in Asia to which John was writing were experiencing the dragon's war, and the final generation will experience the last great spasm of his fury. The vision now moves to that final battle.

B. Satan's agents - two beasts (13:1-18)

1. The beast out of the sea (13:1-10)

a. There are differences in the versification of the phrase "And he stood on the sand of the sea" that follows the phrase in "hold to the testimony of Jesus" in 12:17. In some translations (RSV, ESV), "And he stood on the sand of the sea" is the last clause of 12:17. In some translations (NRSV, NET, NJB, HCSB), it is 12:18. And in some translations (ERV, ASV, NASB, REB, NIV, TNIV), it is the first clause in 13:1. The KJV and the NKJV have it as 13:1 but accept as original the less likely textual variant "I stood" (*estathēn*) instead of "he stood" (*estathē*).

b. There is no time link between 12:17 and the clause "And he stood on the sand of the sea." Having shown the reason for the Satan's fury, the vision moves to the final act of history. Satan stands on the seashore awaiting or summoning the beast who will be Satan's agent in the final assault on the church.

c. John sees a beast rising out of the sea. In 11:7 the beast was said to come from the Abyss, but as I noted there, the origin of the Abyss as a place of demonic incarceration was the unfathomable depths of the sea. Thus, Osborne states (p. 490), "the two images are synonymous."

d. The beast John saw had seven heads and ten horns, like the dragon, but unlike the dragon its crowns were on its horns instead of on its heads (there thus being ten instead of seven). As Osborne observes (p. 490), "Primarily, the imagery of the seven heads and ten horns parallels the description of the dragon, showing that the beast is united with the dragon and yet has a separate role." But the symbolism of the beast's heads, horns, and crowns will be developed further in chapter 17.

e. The beast has blasphemous names on each of its heads. This is an indication that, like the little horn of Dan. 7:25, he will speak against the Most High. Osborne says (p. 491), "His blasphemous claims to deity and his demands to be worshiped in place of God and Christ form the core of his hideous work." In that regard, the "lesser antichrists" of 1 Jn. 2:18, those sharing the spirit and goals of *the* Antichrist, already were at work in the person of Roman emperors insisting on divine prerogatives.

f. John says the beast was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. The fact the beast is said to have seven heads and only one mouth is a clue that these are apocalyptic images that should be taken on their own and not be pressed into a single portrait. The picture is of a beast that is incredibly hideous and horrifying, one intended to embody all that is evil.

g. There are, however, echoes here of the four beasts that rise out of the sea in Daniel 7.

(1) The four beasts of Daniel 7 represent successive kingdoms ending with the Roman Empire, which the parallel vision in Daniel 2 reveals was the first kingdom to coexist with the opposing kingdom of God. It was in the days of that fourth kingdom that the kingdom of God appeared. So those beasts represent a series

of earthly kingdoms that culminates in a kingdom that manifests a prideful sense of sovereignty in the face of the divine kingdom's presence. The fourth beast in Daniel 7 is the Roman Empire in one sense, but it is the Roman Empire as a *type* of all worldly rule in opposition to the present kingdom of God.

(2) The combination of elements from the four beasts of Daniel in the one beast that John sees suggests that John's beast has the fearsome and destructive natures of those kingdoms combined with the hostility to God's present kingdom evident in fourth beast.

h. You can see from v. 2b that this beast is Satan's agent in a special way. Satan is behind all opponents of God, all blasphemous rulers, in some manner or form, but here the connection is intimate. Satan gives the beast his power, his dominion (throne), and great authority. He gives the beast the power to perform miracles and mighty deeds in the eyes of the world; as the god of this world/age (2 Cor. 4:4), he gives him sovereignty over the kingdoms of the world (recall his offer to Christ in Mat. 4:9-10; Lk. 4:5-6), meaning he is the supreme earthly ruler; and related to that, he gives him great authority over "every tribe, and people, and language, and nation" (13:7).

i. There are many questions about this beast, but several things seem clear:

(1) The beast is the Satan-inspired ruler of a powerful, worldwide, and violently antichristian empire (13:1-9, 17:11).

(2) He rules for "42 months" (13:5), the same period of time in which the holy city is said to be trampled by Gentiles and the two witnesses torment the world with their preaching (11:2-3).

(3) When the two witnesses have completed their mission, the beast is responsible for murdering them (conquering the saints) (11:7).

(4) He is worshiped throughout the world by those without a true Christian faith (13:4, 8, 12).

(5) This worship is fostered by the performance of miracles (13:11-15; 16:14; 19:20).

(6) He is involved in organizing the nations for the final battle against God and his Christ (16:12-16) and is destroyed by Christ (16:15; 19:19-21).

(7) He comes out of the Abyss (sea) (11:7, 13:1, 17:8) and goes to destruction (17:8, 11).

j. With early Christian interpreters like Irenaeus and Tertullian and with a fair number of modern commentators (e.g., Ladd, Morris, Thomas, Osborne), I

believe this beast represents Antichrist, the one referred to by Paul as the man of lawlessness.

(1) The idea of this final, ferocious opponent of God goes back at least as far as the little horn of Daniel 7 and the king who exalts himself at the end of Daniel 11 (see, e.g., the commentaries on Daniel by Keil, Young, Archer, Ferguson, Miller, and Steinmann).

(2) In Mat. 24:22-25 Jesus says that this age of birth pains, this age of distress – these days of wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, hatred, apostasy, false christs, and false prophets – will become so bad that if it were allowed to continue, if God in his providence did not cut them short for the sake of the elect, no human being would survive. He warns in v. 24, "For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect."

(3) In 2 Thess. 2:1-12 Paul explicitly rebuts the claim that the Second Coming referred to in 1 Thess. 4:13-5:3 had already occurred by reminding them of what he previously had taught them, namely that Jesus will not return until the rebellion and the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction, is revealed. Since that had not occurred, the claim that Jesus had already returned was false.

(a) Paul says this person will exalt himself over any claimed deity or object of worship. In this he is, symbolically speaking, taking a seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

(b) And he explains that this person's coming is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders. According to 2 Thess. 2:8, he will be on the scene at the time of Christ's return. Leon Morris states in "Antichrist" in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (p. 49): "Paul does not use the term 'antichrist', but the 'man of lawlessness' of whom he writes in 2 Thess. 2:3ff. clearly refers to the same being."

(4) John tells his readers in 1 Jn. 2:18 that as they had heard that Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. So they had been taught about the coming of Antichrist, just as Paul had taught the Thessalonians about his coming. This was a common element of apostolic teaching in the early church.

(a) John says that *even now*, before the coming of the Antichrist they had heard about, that climactic opponent of God, many antichrists (plural) have come. He is referring to the false teachers who were threatening those to whom he was writing. They are "antichrists" in the sense they share the spirit of the Antichrist (4:3), that spirit that opposes God and his Christ. This is evident from their denial of Jesus as the Christ (2:22; 2 Jn. 7).

(b) In saying this, John is not denying the future coming of *the* Antichrist. As George Ladd states (*A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 662), "We may conclude that the spirit of antichrist manifests itself everywhere in heretical, schismatic teachers, but will be climactically embodied in a single evil person at the end of the age."

k. The major questions regarding the identity of the beast involve its heads.

(1) One of the seven heads appeared to have a fatal sword wound that had healed (13:3, 12, 14).

(a) Note that in 13:12, 14 it was the beast himself who survived the mortal wound, not merely one of his heads. If the symbolism is consistent with chapter 17, this suggests that the beast had in some sense previously appeared as a blasphemous earthly ruler (seven kings symbolizing the full number of rulers claiming divine status) who had been slain.

(b) The beast belongs to the seven (17:11) in that he shares their blasphemous claim of divinity, their opposition to God, and their persecution of God's people – he is the completion of that set of rulers – but he is "an eighth king" in the sense he is distinct from the others of that set, presumably by virtue of his greater embodiment of Satanic power. It is also possible that he is an "eighth" king in the sense he is a reappearance, a resurrection so to speak, of an earlier blasphemous king. The number eight could symbolize a new beginning based on Sunday, known as the "eighth day," being the start of a new series of days (and also being the day of Christ's resurrection).

(c) In 17:8, 11 the beast is described as one who was, now is not, and yet will come. Although the present ruler Domitian is a blasphemous king (i.e., part of the seven kings), he is not the beast. The beast had previously appeared as a blasphemous ruler and had been killed by a sword (13:14). He will, however, return again as the end-time Antichrist and be more enraged than ever. This seems to fit a reference to Emperor Nero.

[1] Nero savagely persecuted Christians in Rome in A.D. 64 to divert attention from the great fire that engulfed that city. Tacitus, a Roman historian (A.D. 56-117), reports that he rounded up all the Christians he could identify and had them eaten by dogs, crucified, or set on fire. It was so cruel that the people (not Christian sympathizers) pitied them, feeling that "they were being sacrificed to one man's brutality rather than to the national interest" (Annals XV 44).

[2] Nero killed himself with a sword in A.D. 68 after the Senate had voted to back Galba's revolt. Soon the belief arose that he had not really died but was living in retirement and would return to bring great calamity upon his enemies. Edicts were issued in his name and at least three impostors claimed to be Nero.

By the end of the first century, it was believed that he had died but would return from the dead to seize power.

[3] Nero was identified as Antichrist in the later Christian insertion in a work known as the Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah (ch. 4) and in Book 5 of the Sybilline Oracles (late first or early second century). The idea was so strong that the word Nero became and remains the Armenian equivalent for Antichrist.

[4] The number of the beast is 666 (13:18; but note there is textual support for the number being 616). If one uses a defective Hebrew spelling of Nero Caesar (a spelling that is attested in the Qumran materials), the numbers of the letters come out to 666. This is the most commonly accepted solution of this problem, but it is by no means certain.

(d) The point is not that Nero is going to be literally resurrected prior to the resurrection of the damned (Rev. 20:6, 14) but that his distinctive rage and brutality against the saints in Rome reflects the kind of satanic influence and intimacy that will again be manifested, though to an even greater degree, in the Antichrist. Antichrist will be another Nero in that sense.

(2) The seven heads are said to represent seven kings, five of which have fallen, one is, and the other, who must remain a short time, is yet to come (17:9-11).

(a) If the seven kings are symbolic of the full number of blasphemous earthly rulers (those claiming divine status), which set culminates in Antichrist, then I think this is an apocalyptic way of indicating that Christ is at the door. Though the time of his coming is uncertain, Christians are to live in the expectation that the end is always near. Being to the sixth king of the complete set of blasphemous earthly rulers means that the seventh and final one, Antichrist, who will stay only a short time before being taken out by Christ, may arise at any time.

(b) Mounce writes (p. 315): "John is not interested in a careful tabulation of the past but is declaring the nearness of the end by the commonly accepted use of a numerical scheme. For John seven is the number of completeness. Five kings have fallen, one is, and the last one remains only for a short time."

(c) As I said, though Antichrist is "of the seven" (17:11), he is an "eighth king" in the sense he is a unique embodiment of satanic power and/or he is a reappearance of Nero, albeit on steroids.

1. The ten horns with crowns symbolize the kings of the earth that align with Antichrist in the last days to make a final great assault against the Lamb (17:12-14). Christ defeats this final assault with his return in judgment.

m. The need for faithfulness during the ferocious opposition of Antichrist that is expressed in vv. 9-10 is a call for faithfulness in persecution in every generation. The church will not then or now be delivered *from* suffering and death but *through* it.

2. The beast out of the earth (13:11-18)

a. John next sees another beast, this one rising from the earth. It had horns like a lamb but spoke like a dragon. This second beast is a deceiver (v. 14). Elsewhere he is called the false prophet (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). His lamblike horns represent gentle harmlessness, but he speaks with the cunning of the dragon (e.g., serpent to Eve).

b. The role of the second beast is to bring humanity to worship the first beast, Antichrist. Toward that end, he exercises the authority of the first beast, authority derived from Satan. He performs miracles (like Elijah calling down fire from heaven - 1 Ki. 18:38) to deceive the people into worshipping the first beast. In that regard, he is even granted the power to breathe life into the idolatrous statue of Antichrist so that it spoke. This speaking image in some way caused those who would not worship the image to be killed. ("The subject is not the false prophet but the idol itself that causes the execution of all who refuse to worship it" – Osborne, p. 516, n. 7).

c. As there have been many "antichrists" in history, lesser manifestations of the ultimate Antichrist, so there have been lesser manifestations of the false prophet. In the province of Asia at this time, there was a council called the Commune of Asia that represented the major cities of the province. It promoted participation in the imperial cult and demanded that citizens participate in it. Osborne remarks (p. 513), "While this council was not the 'false prophet,' it provided background imagery for the portrayal of his idolatrous practices, as Nero did for the Antichrist, and the original readers would certainly have seen the parallel."

d. Note that only the "inhabitants of the earth," those opposed to God and thus predisposed to embrace the lie, are deceived. As Paul indicated in 2 Thess. 2: 9-12, it is only those who "refuse to love the truth" who ignore the warning of Deut. 13:1-3 and thus follow the false prophet to their condemnation. The signs serve in part to reveal the true believers.

e. The second beast requires everyone be marked with the name of Antichrist or the number that represents his name.

(1) According to 3 Macc. 2:28-29, in 217 B.C. Egyptian Jews were forced by Philopater I to be branded with an ivy leaf design of the god Dionysus. Those who refused were killed. As Osborne notes (p. 518), "The purpose of such a mark is to signify both the rejection of former loyalties and the absolute acceptance of a new allegiance."

(2) This mark of Antichrist is essential to buying and selling, to carrying on necessary functions in the society. So going underground will not insulate Christians from the hardships.

f. There seems to be a satanic parody of God's plan in all of this. As Christ received authority from the Father, so Antichrist receives authority from the dragon. As the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ, so the false prophet glorifies Antichrist. As God's elect are sealed on their foreheads as assurance against his wrath, so the followers of the beast escape his wrath against the church by bearing his mark.

g. The mark of allegiance is the name of the beast or the number of its name. As noted, this may be a reference to Nero Caesar as a prior incarnation of Antichrist, but it also may simply be a name that represents the beast's continuing failure to accomplish his purpose, the trinity of imperfection. It apes the holy trinity (777), but always falls short.

C. Christians again assured (14:1-5)

1. John sees the Lamb standing on Mt. Zion with 144,000 who have his name and his Father's name on their foreheads. As I said in connection with chapter 7, I see this number as a symbolic reference to the entire church represented in terms of its Jewish root. It is the number of the tribes of Israel (12) squared and multiplied by a thousand, which is a three-fold way of emphasizing completeness.

a. The 144,000 stand in contrast to the followers of the beast who bear his mark (666) on their right hand or forehead (13:16-17). So, as in chapter 7, the 144,000 symbolize at the first level the totality of faithful Christians *in the last generation*, the time of the beast when the wrath of God's final judgment falls on the inhabitants of the earth. But at another level, the faithful of that last generation represent that faithful of all generations in that they exhibit the true nature of the faith they all share. All Christians of all time are exempt from the wrath of God's final judgment, which in the case of the final generation includes the punishment on earth with which that final judgment begins.

b. Mt. Zion had long been associated with divine deliverance (e.g., Joel 2:32). The point of the imagery is that not one Christian has been lost; the full number stands victorious with the Lamb. This vision corresponds to the innumerable multitude in the second vision in chapter 7. It is a preview of the blessings of the faithful before another reference to the judgment ahead.

2. John hears a voice from heaven that is like the roar of rushing waters, meaning it was powerful; that is like the sound of loud thunder, meaning it was loud; and that is like the sound of harpists playing their harps, meaning it was melodious (not that it was accompanied by the playing of harps).

a. He is hearing the anthem of redemption sung in God's presence by the choir of 144,000 (with angelic orders as an audience). It is the "new song" of 5:9, but it is now being sung in first person, by the very ones who have been purchased by the blood of the Lamb. As in so many of the "new songs" in Psalms (96:1; 98:1; 144:9), the theme is deliverance.

b. Only the 144,000, those specifically identified as "redeemed from the earth," could learn the new song. Only they who experienced redemption could sing about it in first person.

3. The 144,000 are described in v. 4 as virgins who have not defiled themselves with women. This is not to be taken literally, as sexual relationships within marriage are not defiling (Mat. 19:4-6; Heb. 13:4).

a. John is using symbolism. Virginity is ascribed to the people of God in the O.T. (e.g., 2 Ki. 19:21; Jer. 18:13; Lam. 2:13; Amos 5:2), and unfaithfulness is likened to improper sexual relations (e.g., Jer. 18:13; Ezekiel 16; Hos. 2:5, 5:4). In 2 Cor. 11:2 Paul states that his goal is to present the Corinthian church "as a pure virgin to Christ."

b. The 144,000 are the promised bride of Christ (21:9) who, while awaiting their marriage (the consummation), kept themselves from defiling relationships with the pagan world. They resisted the seductions of the great harlot with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication (17:2) and the seductions of all lesser manifestations of the great harlot.

4. John says the 144,000 follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have surrendered the leadership of their lives to the Lamb. They have taken up their cross and followed him (Mk. 8:34).

5. He says the 144,000 were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. They were purchased by Christ's blood, as stated in 5:9. This is John's only use of the word "firstfruits," and here, as noted by various commentators (e.g., Ladd, Mounce, Beale, and Johnson), it seems to represent simply separation and sanctification to God without an implication of there being more to come. For example, Jer. 2:3 speaks of "*all* Israel" as the firstfruits of the Lord's harvest, and Jas. 1:18 speaks similarly of the church.

6. No lie was found in their mouth. They had a strict regard for the truth of God and especially rejected the lie that Antichrist or any of his lesser manifestations were entitled to worship (see, Rom. 1:25; 1 Jn. 2:22). Notice that in 21:8, 27 and 22:15 liars are excluded from the eternal kingdom and thrown into the lake of fire (Osborne, 531).

7. They are "without blemish," meaning they are acceptable to God. They had appropriated Christ's cleansing through a genuine faith, a faith that was steadfastly

loyal in the face of all the pressure to compromise. (Note that the "for" in ESV's "for they are blameless" in v. 5 probably is not original.)

D. The end (14:6-20) – The arrival of God's final judgment, which completes this sweep of spiritual history, is now indicated by the message of three angels and the imagery of two harvests.

1. The angels' messages (14:6-13)

a. The first angel John sees is flying overhead with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on the earth within every people group in the world.

(1) This is a proclamation that addresses God's opponents throughout the world. That they exist among every people group is evident in 11:9 and 13:7, as well as here. Verse 6 literally says to "those *sitting* on the earth," but there is wide agreement that this is a synonym for "those who dwell on the earth," which as I have noted is consistently used in Revelation for God's opponents.

(2) The proclamation is called "*an* eternal gospel" rather than "*the* eternal gospel," and its content, as indicated in v. 7, is not God's redeeming grace in Christ but the fact God's judgment *has come* and with it the time for his enemies to be forced to pay homage.

(a) The proclamation is objectively good news, however it may be perceived by God's enemies, because God's people will be vindicated and his righteous purpose will be fulfilled. The defeat of Satan and his allies will be finalized and the eternal state of glory will ensue.

(b) The noun for "gospel" or "good news" in 14:6 is εὐαγγέλιον. The verb for announcing such good news is εὐαγγελίζω, which also is used in 14:6. In 10:7 the verb for announcing good news is used in reference to the fulfillment of the mystery of God that takes place with the sounding of the seventh trumpet. In other words, God's judgment is there viewed as good news. The announcement of God's judgment on the enemies of his people is also called "good news" in Nah. 1:15.

(c) Commentators who think the good news here refers to the announcement of the arrival of God's judgment include Ladd, Ford, Beale, and Keener. Beale states (p. 752-753):

The command in 14:7 is not one that primarily applies during the whole course of the age before the parousia. It is, rather, an edict that directly precedes and inaugurates the last judgment itself. The immediately following ὅτι clause indicates that the commencement of the judgment is the reason the command is issued. The time for repentance is gone when the final judgment approaches. Those addressed are not warned to give

glory *before* the time of punishment arrives but "because" (ὅτι) the time has arrived. For it is only when "the hour of his judgment *has come*" that those hitherto immovable in their rebellious spirit *will be made to confess* that God is their sovereign judge, who glorifies himself by judging them. They will acknowledge him not only as their judge but also as their almighty creator . . . Consequently, the angel is not telling the earth-dwellers to repent in order to avoid judgment, but is issuing a decree that, at last, they acknowledge the mighty hand of their maker.

b. A second angel announces that Babylon the Great has fallen.

(1) "Babylon the Great" is an allusion to Dan. 4:30 where Nebuchadnezzar boasts, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" It was at that moment (vv. 31-33) that God's judgment fell on Nebuchadnezzar and he went insane. Babylon the Great represents the final and ultimate expression of human pride and rebellion, the heart of Antichrist's empire, which pulls people from the worship of God.

(2) Babylon made "all nations drink of the passion of her sexual immorality." She was a corrupting influence on the world (17:2; 18:3), and this corruption brings upon itself the wrath of God. R. H. Charles comments, "The nations, having drunk the wine of the fornication of Babylon, have really therein drunk the wine of the wrath of God."

(3) The fate of the end-time, ultimate Babylon, which will be expanded upon in chapters 16-18, implies God's hostility toward and rejection of all lesser Babylons. Rome is the Babylon of John's day, and as such its ultimate fate is subsumed or encapsulated in the fate of the final Babylon. And because Rome is the Babylon of John's day, the ultimate Babylon, the center of Antichrist's empire, gets portrayed as Rome on steroids.

c. The third angel warns of the eternal punishment of all who worship the beast and its image and receive the beast's mark.

(1) They will receive the undiluted wrath of God. They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb, meaning they will be consigned to that fate by the judgment that is meted out in the presence of the Lord Jesus and the holy angels. In other words, the angels and the Lamb will be present at least when the described punishment begins, but vv. 10-11 do not require that they be eternally in the presence of the tormented.

(2) The Lamb's presence when they are tormented with sulfur and fire is probably mentioned as one more element in the pain of the lost. Beckwith says the Lamb is mentioned after the angels for emphasis, "as if the most poignant factor in the pain of the wicked would be the sight of the triumph of the Lamb, against whom as worshipers of the Beast they had made war" (quoted in Osborne, 541).

(3) The torment of those who side with the beast is specifically described in v. 11 as lasting forever and ever, and they are said to have no rest day or night. This certainly is one of the most sobering and frightening passages in all of Scripture. As with all descriptions of hell, there is ample room for symbolism, but in my judgment one drains too much from the imagery if one denies the absolute horror of the condition or one's conscious experience of it for eternity.

(4) Verse 12 is a reminder that Christians must remain steadfast in obedience and faith, even in the face of the demands to worship the beast. The price of apostasy would be far greater than the temporary suffering of fidelity. The relevance to Emperor worship being forced on John's readers is obvious.

d. A voice from heaven tells John, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord [from now on]." ["Blessed indeed,"] says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!"

(1) Although faithfulness to Christ may result in martyrdom, those who die in a state of spiritual union with Jesus Christ are blessed. They stand in sharp contrast to pagans and apostates.

(2) Note that "from now on" may not be a correct reading. Instead of *ap' arti*, the word may be *aparti* (certainly or truly) (see Aune, 788). This only works if *nai* (yes) at beginning of 13b is omitted, because *aparti* makes it redundant, but *nai* is omitted in the oldest manuscript. V. 13b then reads (Aune's translation), "Truly, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors, for their works follow after them."

(3) But even if "from now on" is correct, it does not deny the same reward to saints who previously died. It is simply an allusion to the more active persecution John anticipates.

e. The Spirit emphatically affirms the truth of v. 13a. They will rest from the painful toil of this life, including the hardships of faithfulness, because the fruit of their faithfulness (their deeds) will follow them. Death for faithful saints is but a passage to unspeakable blessings.

2. The "end" is symbolized by two harvests (14:14-20)

a. Harvest of the earth (14:14-16)

(1) John sees one like a son of man who is seated on a white cloud. He has a golden crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand.

(a) There is some debate about the matter, but I am with the majority of commentators in thinking this refers to the Lord Jesus. The background for the imagery is Dan. 7:13. That verse had rightly come to be associated

with the Messiah under the title "son of man," and the other allusions to Dan. 7:13 in Revelation clearly refer to Jesus (Rev. 1:7, 13). Indeed, Jesus used this same imagery in referring to his return in judgment in Mat. 24:30.

(b) That he is seated on the white cloud may be an echo of Joel 3:12 which speaks of God sitting to judge the nations. The gold crown or wreath is a victor's crown, so it may symbolize Christ's victory that is most fully expressed at his return. However, emperors would sometimes wear wreaths as symbols of victory, so it is possible, especially given the allusion to Dan. 7:13, that the gold wreath here includes connotations of sovereignty.

(c) The sickle in his hand is a symbol, as in Mk. 4:29, of reaping at the final harvest, the final judgment. Its sharpness emphasizes its effectiveness for the task.

(2) John sees yet another angel of the many in the vision. This one comes from the heavenly temple, meaning from the immediate presence of God, and calls out to the Lord Jesus "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." The angel is simply delivering from God the Father, who alone knows the time of the final judgment, the command to begin the harvest.

(3) Jesus harvests the earth at God's appointed hour, when the "earth is fully ripe."

(a) This harvest may symbolize the positive side of the judgment, the gathering of the righteous, the faithful, at the return of Christ. In that case, Christ being the reaper may signify his close connection with the redeemed. In the N.T. the figure of a harvest is normally (but not exclusively) used of the gathering of people into the kingdom of God (e.g., Mat. 9:37-38; Mk. 4:29; Lk. 10:2; Jn. 4:35-38). And in this harvest, unlike the harvest of the grapes in vv. 17-20, there is no indication of God's wrath or rejection.

(b) Others think this harvest provides a general picture of the coming judgment that includes the recompense of both the good and the bad, the redeemed and the lost, as pictured in Mat. 13:30, 39. (Jesus could be pictured in Rev. 14:16 as the one reaping instead of the angels in Mat. 13:39 to indicate he stands behind the angels' activity.) Verses 17-20 are then seen as narrowing the focus to the negative side of that general picture.

(c) In other words, the question is whether the first scene focuses on the fate of the redeemed who are pictured as being received by God and the second scene focuses on the unsaved being rejected by God, or whether the first scene symbolizes the judgment in its totality, encompassing both the redeemed and the unsaved, and then the second scene focuses on the unsaved. Either is possible, and I do not think it makes much difference to the overall point.

b. Harvest of the grapes (14:17-20)

(1) Still another angel comes from the temple in heaven, and he too has a sharp sickle. And then another angel with authority over the fire comes from the altar and commands the angel with the sickle to harvest the grapes because they are ripe. The angel who comes from the altar may be the angel of 8:3-5 who filled his censer with fire from the altar and cast it to earth, but even if it is a different angel, the fact he comes from the altar may suggest a connection between the prayers of the saints and God's final judgment (see, 6:9; 8:3-5).

(2) The angel, God's agent of wrath, harvests the grapes from the earth and casts them into "the great winepress of God's wrath."

(a) Treading of grapes was a familiar figure for the execution of divine wrath on the enemies of God (e.g., Isa. 63:3; Lam. 1:15; Joel 3:13). That the winepress was trodden "outside the city" is a symbol of the absolute rejection, the eternal banishment, of the damned by God. They will have no part in the holy city of God.

(b) The completeness and horror of God's judgment is depicted by the amount of blood flowing from the winepress. It flowed as high as a horse's bridle for a distance of about 1,600 stadia (about 184 miles). This distance may result from the fact 40 was a traditional number of punishment (Num. 14:33 - Israel's 40 years in the desert; Dt. 25:3 - 40 lashes for a criminal) and 1,600 is 40 squared. Others think it may have some other symbolic significance or that it simply is a hyperbolic image emphasizing the exceptional nature of the slaughter.

(c) In Rev. 19:15 Jesus is the one who treads the winepress of the fury of God's wrath. Part of the imagery there in chapter 19, drawn from Isa. 63:1-6, is that his robe is dipped in blood, soaked in the blood of his enemies trodden in the winepress.