

Suffering in Revelation: The Fulfillment of the Messianic Woes

James M. Hamilton, Jr.

In Revelation, John writes as one in affliction (Rev 1:9), to churches in affliction (e.g., 2:10, 13), about the affliction that will take place before kingdom come (see esp. Rev 11–13). The contention of this essay is that John sees the affliction in which he is

a “brother and fellow partaker” (1:9) as the outworking of the Messianic Woes that must be fulfilled prior to the consummation of all things.¹ To establish this, we will begin with a summary of the indications of end times tribulation, the Messianic Woes, in Daniel, cross-pollinating this discussion with consideration of how various New Testament authors interpreted Daniel, before considering how John interprets these realities in Revelation.² In this essay, I am attempting to do biblical theology by pursuing the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors. As followers of

Jesus, once we understand the perspective he taught his apostles,³ our responsibility is to make their perspective our own.⁴

THE MESSIANIC WOES IN DANIEL AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

The idea of the Messianic Woes stems from passages such as Daniel 7:25–27, 8:9–14, 9:24–27, and 11:31–12:3. These paradigmatic Old Testament texts indicate that God’s people will be persecuted and suffer before being vindicated through resurrection to receive the kingdom. There is a four kingdom schema set forth in Daniel 2 and 7, and then Daniel 8 focuses in on the second and third of these four kingdoms.⁵ The parallels between the final kings of the third and fourth kingdoms point to a pattern that Daniel expected to see repeated and fulfilled in the final king from the last kingdom. Daniel does not call him the antichrist, but this final king informs New Testament statements about that figure.⁶ The repetition of these patterns also provides the foundation for the indications that the suffering and persecution will intensify to

James M. Hamilton, Jr. is Associate Professor of Biblical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, where he also earned his Ph.D.

He is the author of numerous articles and books such as *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments* (B&H, 2006), *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment* (Crossway, 2010), *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Crossway, 2012), *What is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible’s Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Crossway, 2014). Dr. Hamilton also serves as the Teaching Pastor of Kenwood Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky.

a nearly unbearable level under *the* antichrist (cf. Matt 24:21–25).

The final kings of the third and fourth kingdoms in Daniel 7 and 8 are both described as little horns (Dan 7:8; 8:9), both are arrogantly boastful (7:8, 11, 25; 8:25), both have a roughly three and a half year period in which to do their worst (7:25; 8:14; 9:27; 12:7, 11, 12), and the breaking of the little horn from the third kingdom “by no human hand” (8:25; cf. 11:45)⁷ typifies the sudden destruction of the beast from the fourth kingdom (7:11, 26). The repetition of this pattern of events in the third and fourth kingdoms in Daniel creates an expectation of a pattern of antichrist-style opposition to God and his Messiah, and this pattern will culminate in the rise of *the* antichrist.

This expectation is reflected in 1 John 2:18, “Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.” Similarly, Mark presents Jesus interpreting Daniel as he spoke of “the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be” (Mark 13:14). Douglas Moo notes, “The fact that Mark uses a masculine participle after the neuter *bdelugma* (‘abomination’) shows that he is thinking of a person.”⁸ Paul’s comments on the “man of lawlessness” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–10 move in a similar direction, as does the depiction of the two beasts in Revelation 13. Though only John calls this figure “antichrist,” these passages all seem to be working with a common expectation that was apparently taught to the early churches before the apostles referenced it in their letters. Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 2:5, “Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?” And John writes in 1 John 2:18, “you have heard that antichrist is coming.”

John’s statement that “we know it is the last hour” is based on the fact that “antichrists have come,” culminating in “antichrist” (1 John 2:18). John here states that the presence of those who oppose Christ means it is the last hour. John apparently does not think the last hour will begin, then, after the rapture of the church. The last hour has already begun. What

John says about the antichrists and the antichrist matches Jesus predicting that many would come claiming to be him (Mark 13:6) culminating in the personal “abomination of desolation” (13:14). Similarly, after Paul writes that “the man of lawlessness will be revealed” (2 Thess 2:3), he goes on to say that “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” (2:7). These statements reflect a common understanding that now that Christ has come and has inaugurated the fulfillment of God’s purposes, *antichrists* have arisen to oppose him. These antichrists are people in 1 John 2:18–19. In Paul’s reference to “the mystery of lawlessness” (2 Thess 2:7), the powers at work seem to be impersonal, systemic forces of the wicked world system. It would seem, then, that Mark, Paul, and John all expect the church to be opposed throughout her history by personal and impersonal antichrists, and that this opposition and persecution will culminate in the rise of *the* antichrist “whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming” (2 Thess 2:8).

Where did Jesus, Mark, Paul, and John learn these ideas? From the Old Testament: Daniel 9:24–27 sets forth a programmatic revelation of seventy weeks until the consummation of all things. After the first sixty-nine weeks, the Messiah will be cut off. Among other things, John’s interpretation of the seventieth week in the book of Revelation indicates that he understood the cutting off of the Messiah after the sixty-nine weeks to be fulfilled in the crucifixion of Jesus.

Daniel next relates that after the cutting off of the Messiah, the destroyer of the city and the sanctuary will make a strong covenant with many for the one remaining week (Dan 9:26–27).⁹ Other passages in Daniel, dealing with the third of the four kingdoms, point to a pattern of attack on sacrifice and sanctuary accompanied by the setting up of the abomination of desolation (see 8:12–13; 11:31). This pattern is repeated and fulfilled, presumably by the last king of the fourth kingdom, when Daniel writes of this antichrist figure in 9:27, “for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who

makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.” These words communicate that after a three and a half year period the Antichrist will “put an end to sacrifice and offering,” and then for the next three and a half years of the seventieth week, Antichrist, the “one who makes desolate,” is working his “abominations,” until his “decreed end” is “poured out” on him, at which point the “one like a son of man” (7:13) receives everlasting dominion and all his saints reign with him (9:27; 7:14, 25–27).

The halving of the seventieth week in Daniel 9:27 informs the reference to the “time, times, and half a time” during which the little horn from the fourth beast, the antichrist from the fourth kingdom, “shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and shall think to change the times and the law; and they shall be given into his hand” (Dan 7:25). This same three and a half year period of intense suffering is in view in the reference to the “time, times, and half a time” in Daniel 12:7, and that verse goes on to say “that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end all these things would be finished.”¹⁰

Daniel indicates, then, that after the cutting off of the Messiah, there is one more week until the completion of the seventy weeks. In the middle of this seventieth week, the little horn from the fourth kingdom, the antichrist, will initiate a vicious persecution on God’s people that will shatter their power. At the end of his appointed time, the antichrist will be destroyed, the dead will be raised, and God’s kingdom will reign over God’s people in God’s kingdom.

Because of the way that the little horn from the third kingdom patterns the activity of the little horn from the fourth kingdom, it appears that the time of the end will correspond to earlier times: there will be opposition, affliction, and persecution for the people of God.¹¹ This opposition and persecution will intensify to fever pitch when the little horn from the fourth kingdom arises.

Daniel does not use the phrase “Messianic Woes,” but Daniel does depict the scenario that phrase seeks to capture. Daniel relates how Gabriel revealed to him a period of time, one week, remain-

ing after the cutting off of the Messiah (Dan 9:26–27). Half way through this period of time, the adversary who destroyed city and sanctuary would seek to put an end to sacrifice, which I take to refer to an attempt to stamp out the worship of God.

Mark Dubis writes that “the eschatological ordeal that Jews and Christians expected to characterize the latter days” can be referred to with descriptive phrases that

include ‘the great tribulation’ (θλιψις μεγάλη in Matt 24:21; Rev 2:22, 7:14), ‘the footprints of the Messiah’ (*m. Sota* 9:15), ‘the time of the crucible’ (עת המצרית; 4QFlor 1–3 i 19–ii 2; 4QCat^a 5+ i 3; 4QPsa 1+ ii 19), ‘the time of distress’ (עת הצרה; Dan 12:1), and ‘the hour of trial’ (η ώρα του πειρασμού; Rev 3:10). While these terms and images may vary, they nevertheless point to the same expectation of an eschatological period of suffering and trial.¹²

The Messianic Woes inform Paul’s statement that he is “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col 1:24). Going in the same direction are Luke’s presentation of Paul telling the newly planted churches that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22), his telling the Thessalonians they were “destined for this” (1 Thess 3:3), and Peter’s similar statement that Christians are “called” to suffer for doing good on behalf of others (1 Pet 2:21). As the New Testament authors present the temporary, “necessary” (cf. 1 Pet 1:6) suffering of Christians, they seem to understand that the sufferings depicted during Daniel’s seventieth week must be fulfilled before the beast can be slain and Christ can receive the Kingdom.

We turn our attention now to John’s presentation of the Messianic Woes in the book of Revelation.

THE MESSIANIC WOES IN REVELATION

How can we be sure that John means to present an interpretation and fulfillment of Daniel in Revelation? I know of no one who rejects the idea

that John's various references to a three and a half year period in Revelation stem from the halving of Daniel's seventieth week in Daniel 9:27. John writes of forty-two months in Revelation 11:2 and 13:5, of 1,260 days in 11:3 and 12:6, and of time, and times, and half a time in 12:14. Each of these designations amounts to three and a half years: 42 months is three and a half years of months ($12 \times 3 = 36, 36 + 6 = 42$), 42 months of 30 days amounts to 1,260 days ($42 \times 30 = 1,260$), and the nourishing of the woman for 1,260 days in Revelation 12:6 and for "a time, and times, and half a time" in 12:14 establishes that this "time, times, half a time" formula also refers to three and a half years. John is presenting the fulfillment of Daniel's seventieth week.

Some understand that seventieth week to be the literal final seven years of history prior to the second coming of Christ. This view is primarily associated with dispensationalism, whether of the pre- or mid-tribulational rapture variety. On this view, the "great tribulation" of Revelation 7:14 refers to this final seven years of history. The pre-tribulation rapture position holds that the church will be raptured prior to Daniel's seventieth week. The mid-tribulation rapture position holds that the church will be raptured when the beast arises at the mid-point of the seventieth week to initiate his final persecution. While I do not think the church will be raptured prior to or during the seventieth week, I agree with these interpreters that in the book of Revelation John means to present the *whole* of rather than *half* of Daniel's seventieth week. I differ with them, however, by thinking John's treatment of the seventieth week to be figurative rather than literal.

I see no indication in Revelation that John means his audience to understand that the church will be raptured prior to or during the seventieth week.¹³ Rather, in Revelation the people of God are assured that they will be preserved through the persecution of one three and a half year period (Rev 11:2–3; 12:6, 14) then given over to the beast's persecution in the second three and a half year period (13:5–8). John presents the church *enduring* the seventieth week, and, in my view, John presents this seventieth

week as a symbolic depiction of the whole of church history. This is relevant to suffering in Revelation precisely because the book is an Apocalypse,¹⁴ namely, a "revelation." An apocalypse is an unveiling of the world as it really is, and its purpose is to encourage the persecuted people of God to persevere to the end.¹⁵

The rest of this exploration of suffering in Revelation will be concerned with two things: first, we will overview the whole book and its literary structure with an eye to what it says about suffering and how it speaks to those who are suffering or will suffer. Second, we will give more attention to the symbolic timeline John sets forth in Revelation.

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THOSE WHO SUFFER

In Revelation John describes the vision that he received "in the Spirit on the Lord's Day" (Rev 1:10). God gave the revelation to Jesus, who made it known by sending his angel to his servant John to show to his servants what must soon take place (1:1). John bore witness to all he saw (1:2), pronouncing a blessing on all who hear and keep what is in the prophecy (1:3). Having called the book both an Apocalypse (1:1) and a Prophecy (1:3), John provides an opening that bears the characteristics of New Testament letters in 1:4–8. The book of Revelation is thus an apocalyptic (1:1–2) prophecy (1:3) in the form of a circular letter (1:4–5; 22:21).¹⁶

The content of the book flows out of the appearance of the risen Christ to John (Rev 1:9–20), who dictated to him the letters to the seven churches (Rev 2–3). John was then invited into the heavenly throne room, where he saw the worship of God and the Lamb (Rev 4–5) and the judgments of the seals, trumpets, and bowls issuing from the throne of God (Rev 6–16). John then saw the fall of Babylon (Rev 17–18), the return of King Jesus (Rev 19–20), and the descent of the Bride, the new Jerusalem, from heaven (Rev 21–22).

John tells us that he "was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev 1:9).¹⁷ There are other possibilities, but John had probably been exiled

to Patmos because of his ministry, an instance of persecution that fits with the way that throughout the book he is preparing the churches for the difficulties they will face.

We will consider the structure of Revelation from several perspectives because no single attempt to structure the book can exhaust the overlapping ways that John has arranged his material. John has used key phrases to mark turning points of the book, and he also seems to have used a chiasmic arrangement of the material (see further below). At points in the outline that follows, the verse numbers of sections will overlap because there are transitional sections of the book that go both with what precedes and with what comes after. Similarly, the groupings of sections on the outline will be slightly different from the groupings of material in the chiasmic structure, but I maintain that both capture accurate ways to describe the book's content.

John has tipped us off as to the structure of the book of Revelation by using the phrase "in the Spirit" near the beginning of the major sections of the body of the book (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10).¹⁸ Beginning in Revelation 1:9, John recounts the way that Jesus appeared to him in glory (Rev 1:9-20), dictated to him specific letters addressing the seven churches (Rev 2:1-3:22), and called him up into the heavenly throne room to see the worship of God there (4:1-5:14). In the throne room, John sees Jesus take a scroll from the Father, and from what happens when the scroll is opened, we can surmise that the writing on the scroll describes the events that will bring history to its appointed conclusion. Jesus opens the seals on the scroll (6:1-8:1), then seven angels blow seven trumpets (8:2-11:19). In Revelation 10, John sees an angel bring a scroll—apparently the same scroll Jesus took from the Father in Revelation 5 and opened in chapters 6-8. John eats the scroll and prophesies. John describes the conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent in cosmic terms in Revelation 12-14. Then the final seven bowls of God's wrath are poured out in Revelation 15-16. All of this gives vital perspective to persecuted, suffering Christians.

Revelation 17-22 describes the harlot, the King, and the bride. The section on the King is in the middle, and John marks off the boundaries of these three sections by using similar language at the beginning and end of the sections on the harlot and the bride. The wording of the beginning of the section on the harlot is matched by the wording of the beginning of the section on the bride.¹⁹

Matching Language Opening the Section on the Harlot and the Bride

<i>Revelation 17:1, 3</i>	<i>Revelation 21:9-10</i>
"Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you . . . And he carried me away in the Spirit ...'"	"Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls . . . and spoke to me saying, 'Come, I will show you . . . And he carried me away in the Spirit ...'"

Similarly, the wording of the ending of the section on the harlot is matched by the wording of the ending of the section on the bride.

Matching Language Ending the Sections on the Harlot and the Bride

<i>Revelation 19:9-10</i>	<i>Revelation 22:6, 8-9</i>
"... And he said to me, 'These are the true words of God.' Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, 'You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.' ..."	"And he said to me, 'These words are trustworthy and true...' ... I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, but he said to me, 'You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.'"

The harlot is a symbol for the world system that is opposed to God. She is called Babylon because in

the Bible Babylon represents settled rebellion and hostility to God and his people. Revelation 17–18 show her debased and destroyed: all her seductive power comes to nothing. By depicting the way that the wicked become like chaff that the wind drives away (Ps 1:4), the way they perish in the way (Ps 2:12), John equips the persecuted to endure. Near is the end of the persecutors.

Then John depicts the hope that sustains the persecuted: the King comes, conquers his enemies (19:11–21), sets up his kingdom (20:1–21:8), and his glorious bride descends from heaven (21:9–22:9). The bride is a symbol of the people of God, the redeemed, those who trust in Jesus. She is called the new Jerusalem because Jerusalem was the dwelling place of God in the Old Testament, the city where the Lord chose to put his name, while in the new covenant God’s *people* are his dwelling place.²⁰

The book of Revelation can be broken down as follows:

- I. 1:1–8, Revelation, Blessing, and Epistolary Opening
- II. 1:9–22:9, John’s Vision on the Lord’s Day
 - A. 1:9–3:22, The Risen Christ to the Seven Churches
 - B. 4:1–16:21, The Throne and the Judgments
 - 1. 4:1–5:14, The Throne Room Vision
 - 2. 6:1–17, Six Seals
 - 3. 7:1–17, The Sealing of the Saints and Their Worship
 - 4. 8:1–5, The Seventh Seal
 - 5. 8:6–9:21, Six Trumpets
 - 6. 10:1–11:14, Prophetic Witness
 - 7. 11:15–19, The Seventh Trumpet
 - 8. 12:1–14:20, Conflict Between the Seed of the Woman and the Seed of the Serpent
 - 9. 15:1–16:21, Seven Bowls
 - C. 17:1–22:9, The Fall of the Harlot, the Return of the King, and the Descent of the Bride
- III. 22:6–21, Revelation, Blessing, and Epistolary Closing²¹

The announcement that “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Rev 11:15) comes in the middle of the book rather than at the end. Why would that announcement be made at the center of the book? The answer to that question seems to be found in the chiastic structure of Revelation. A chiasm can be conceived in terms of a picture frame: outermost is the actual wooden frame, then inside that will perhaps be a mat, and sometimes there are multiple mats of complementary colors, while inside the frame and the mat the picture will be placed. The purpose of the frame and the mat is to highlight the picture. Similarly, the purpose of a chiasm is to highlight what is at the center of the chiasm. At the very center of the chiasm in the book of Revelation is the announcement that Christ is king. Surrounding that are touches and flourishes that depict the church suffering and being rewarded:

The Chiastic Structure of Revelation

- A. 1:1–8, Letter Opening: Revelation of Jesus and the Things that Must Soon Take Place
- B. 1:9–3:22, Letters to the Seven Churches: The Church in the World
- C. 4:1–6:17, Throne Room Vision, Christ Conquers and Opens the Scroll
- D. 7:1–9:21, The Sealing of the Saints and the Trumpets Announcing Plagues
- E. 10:1–11, The Angel and John (True Prophet)
- F. 11:1–14, The Church: Two Witnesses Prophecy for 1,260 Days, then opposition from the beast
- G. 11:15–19, Seventh Trumpet: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” Worship.
- (f’) 12:1–13:10, The Church: The Woman Nourished for 1,260 Days, then opposition from the dragon and the second beast
- (e’) 13:11–18, The Deceiving Beast (False Prophet)

- (d') 14:1–19:10, The Redemption of the Saints and the Bowls of Wrath
- (c') 19:11–20:15, Return of Christ, He Conquers, Sets up His 1,000 Year Kingdom, and Opens the Scrolls
- (b'). 21:1–22:7, New Heavens and New Earth: The Church in Glory
- (a') 22:8–21, Letter Closing: Jesus Is Coming Soon

Chiasms set mutually interpretive items across from one another. Thus, Revelation 11:1–14, which describes the two witnesses, should be interpreted in light of Revelation 12:1–13:10, which describes the struggle between the woman who bears the male child (Jesus) and the great red dragon. Read this way, both sections deal with the church's struggle against Satanic opposition, and the other matching sections throughout the book are mutually interpretive.

That John is presenting his apocalyptic prophecy as the culmination of all preceding prophecy is marked in the way he has structured his book. If we were to summarize the overarching message of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve, it would be this: Israel has broken the covenant, so God will judge her by sending her into exile. Through judgment God will save for his glory: God is preparing a magnificent eschatological salvation that will come through judgment after exile. That future salvation is often likened to the exodus from Egypt (e.g., Jer 16:13–16). Thus, the prophets speak of a future mighty act of salvation that will be according to the exodus pattern and that will open the way to a return from exile, putting the people of God back in the promised land. In part this will involve God bringing judgment on those he used to judge Israel (see esp. Nahum and Habakkuk).

What does this have to do with suffering in Revelation? It is widely recognized that the judgments of the trumpets (Rev 8–9) and the bowls (Rev 15–16) are reminiscent of the plagues on Egypt, and as with the plagues on Egypt, the peo-

ple of God are shielded from these visitations of God's wrath on the wicked (e.g., Rev 7:1–3). John presents these final judgments as the new plagues that will liberate the people at the final exodus. Just as Israel was delivered from Egypt through the judgments of the ten plagues, just as the judgment of Babylon restored the people to the land, so also the people of God will be delivered from the wicked powers of this world through the seven trumpet and seven bowl judgments. Little wonder that the culmination of God's judgment is announced with the cry that Babylon has fallen (e.g., Rev 14:8). It was the fall of Babylon in 539 BC that brought Cyrus to power (cf. Isa 44:28–45:1), and it was this Cyrus who decreed the return to the land (e.g., Ezra 1:1–4). Just as Israel entered the promised land after the exodus from Egypt, so also after the fulfillment of the exodus in Revelation the people of God will enter into the fulfillment of the promised land, the millennial kingdom followed by the new heaven and new earth.

As a way of simultaneously unpacking the chiasmic structure of Revelation and structuring these thoughts on suffering in Revelation, what follows will work through the matching sections of the chiasm depicted above.

The opening and closing sections (1:1–8; 22:8–21) stress that the consummation of all things will come soon. This teaching functions to encourage the persecuted and struggling churches to persevere, summoning them to readiness. Such encouragement, again, is a key function of apocalyptic literature.

As John depicts the resurrected Christ dictating authoritative proclamations to the seven churches (1:9–3:22), a section matched by the depiction of the church in glory in the new heavens and new earth (21:1–22:7), the churches are called to fix their minds on the exalted Christ, to abstain from sexual immorality and idolatry, and to live for what Christ has promised them, which John shows being realized in the depiction of the church in glory. These things will soon

take place, and the temptations to sin promise temporary pleasure followed by lasting destruction. Those who hold fast the word of God and the testimony of Jesus will experience temporary persecution rewarded by lasting joy.

John writes to churches in Caesar's realm, but in Revelation 4:1–6:17 those churches see who is really in control. God the Father is seated on his throne in heaven being worshiped as he rightly deserves, and Christ the slain Lamb stands, risen from the dead, reigning and being worshiped right alongside the Father. Christ's conquest enables him to seize the scroll from the Father and open its seals, setting in motion the events that will bring history to its appointed consummation. The throne room scene with the opening of the seals of the scroll in Revelation 4–6 is matched by the return of the conquering Christ, his 1,000 year reign, and the opening of scrolls before the great white throne of judgment in 19:11–20:15. John's readers have God's authority to judge reinforced, and the rainbow around the throne in Revelation 4 also points to the mercy God will show to those whose sins are covered by the blood of the Lamb.

The sealing of the 144,000 saints and the blowing of the trumpets in Revelation 7:1–9:21 is matched by the redemption of the 144,000 saints and the pouring out of the bowls of wrath in Revelation 14:1–19:10. The sealing of the saints tells the churches that God can and will protect them from the wrath he will bring upon the world. The redemption of the saints assures them that neither the trumpet nor the bowl plagues will visit his judgment upon them.

Revelation 10:1–11 enacts a scene in which John eats the scroll Christ took and opened (Rev 5–6), depicting the way that God gave the Revelation to Jesus, who made it known by sending his angel to his servant John to show his servants what must soon take place (Rev 1:1). By eating the scroll, John does exactly what Ezekiel did (Ezek 2:8–3:4), and the action designates him as a true prophet to whom the churches must listen.

The true prophet has a satanic parody in the false beast of Revelation 13:11–18, and the churches should reject the dragon in Lamb's clothing (he looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon, 13:11)—any who urge them to worship Satan's fake christ.

There are matching sections depicting the church's faithful testimony to the gospel in the midst of satanic persecution in Revelation 11:1–14 and 12:1–13:10. This is the time in which the church must resist sexual immorality and idolatry, refusing to worship Satan's false christ, even if it means they can neither buy nor sell because they refuse to receive the mark of the beast (13:16–18), even if it results in them being put to death (11:7//13:7; 13:14–15). The people of God may suffer Satan's wrath, but they will be spared from God's, and after Satan has done his worst God will raise them from the dead and reward their faithfulness.

At the center of the whole book is the blast of the seventh trumpet, when the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (Rev 11:15–19). This is the centerpiece of John's teaching: Christ is king. He will come to conquer and judge. The church must endure, persevere, hold fast. Even unto death. And when Christ comes he will establish his kingdom and reward his people.

SYMBOLIC TIMELINE

Interpreters disagree on how Revelation's symbolism is to be understood, when the events described in the book will be fulfilled, and the nature of the relationships between the events in the book (sequential descriptions of events or recapitulatory accounts that repeatedly depict the same set of events?). Are we in the millennium or is it yet future? This discussion will not be the last word on these issues, but interpreting the book of Revelation self-referentially will give us traction on each of these questions. By "self-referentially" I basically mean intra-textually: comparing what we are trying to interpret in

Revelation to other statements within Revelation. This self-referential approach can be usefully supplemented with inter-textual help from other canonical books from the Testaments Old and New (comparing what is in Revelation with what is in these other canonical books).

A self-referential reading of the symbolism in Revelation means reading the symbols in light of one another. Thus we should compare what is symbolized by the likeness of the four living creatures around the throne of God in Revelation 4:6–7 with what is symbolized by the bizarre combinations of the vicious and destructive features of the scorpion-like locusts in Revelation 9:3. Similarly, we should compare Jesus, the seven-horned Lamb standing as though slain in 5:5–6, with the seven-headed ten-horned rapacious beast of 13:1–3. Comparing these symbols helps us begin to sense the difference between God and the dragon, the Lamb and the beast, and the false prophet and the Holy Spirit. The symbols are to draw us to the holy Trinity while repulsing us from Satan's wicked attempt to make himself God in his own false parody of the Trinity. Similar things could be said about the comparison of the harlot in Revelation 17 and the bride in Revelation 21.

A self-referential approach to the question of the nature of the relationship between the seals, trumpets, and bowls, will also help us determine whether these three sets of judgments are meant to represent the same set of events three times or whether they are three different accounts to be taken in succession. Close analysis reveals a high degree of similarity between the trumpets and the bowls, with each judgment affecting the same areas in the same ways, reminding John's audience of the exodus plagues.²² This suggests that the trumpets and bowls are different descriptions of the same judgments. The opening of the seals, by contrast, corresponds more to the sequence of events in the Olivet Discourse²³ (discussed below) and less to the trumpets and the bowls. From this, it seems likely that the opening of the

seals reflects the outworking of the events leading across church history to the consummation of all things, at which time history will culminate in the judgments at the end of history symbolized by the trumpets and bowls.

A self-referential approach to understanding the 1,000 years of Revelation 20 would suggest that while the round numbers of the references to time in Revelation may mean they are symbolic, that does not mean that each different symbolic time refers to the same period of symbolic time. Thus the ten days of persecution and the three and a half years of testifying and the short while of the dragon's wrath may all be symbolic, but that does not lead to the conclusion that they refer to the same symbolic period of time represented by the 1,000 years during which the dragon is bound.

A self-referential approach will also help us arbitrate the question of when the fulfillment of what is depicted in the book will take place. Some see fulfillment of all, or at least most, of what John depicts in Revelation as taking place in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed the temple. This view is termed the "preterist" position because of the way that it views fulfillment in the past. There are certainly things in Revelation that would have resonated with John's audience, things that would have sounded to them like the worship of the emperor spreading across the Empire. Against the preterists, however, the most natural understanding of Jesus coming with the clouds of heaven, every eye seeing him, is not the temple being destroyed by the Romans in AD 70 but the return of Jesus on the clouds, just as he was seen to go (Acts 1:9–11), in fulfillment of Daniel 7:13. Others take an idealist approach to interpreting the symbolism in the book, with the result that, in my judgment, all the symbols are flattened into meaning the same thing. We can grant that the book contains a great deal of symbolism without reducing all the symbols to a least common denominator understanding of them. Still others advocate a futurist approach to

the book, holding that most of what is depicted in Revelation describes what takes place at or during the final seven years of human history. While there are no doubt ways in which Revelation depicts what will take place at the end of history, there are also ways in which what the book depicts corresponds to the events of AD 70, and symbolic ways in which the book resonates with what has taken place across church history.

The most persuasive approach is to maintain the strengths of each position, recognizing that these views are not mutually exclusive. The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 can function as a type of the judgment God will visit at the end of history. As noted above, John speaks in 1 John 2:18 of antichrist coming while many antichrists have come. This seems to indicate that there will be a number of installments in the antichrist pattern, culminating in the final antichrist who will arise at the end of history, acknowledging a futurist and idealist fulfillment of the beast persecuting the church.

Finally, the self-referential approach will help us determine how to understand Revelation, and this approach to interpreting Revelation demands a thorough grasp of the whole book, a bringing to bear of everything the book says in the interpretation of its details.

What, then, of the symbolic timeline in Revelation? It can be depicted briefly²⁴ below in Fig. 1:

John does not present these things in chronological order. His presentation, as seen above, is driven by thematic and literary concerns. The order can be pieced together from literary cues in the text. Here is a brief summary and defense in prose, noting the location of these events in Revelation itself.

In the symbolic depiction of the birth of the male child to rule the nations with the rod of iron in Revelation 12:1–5, John depicts the birth and ascension of Jesus, thereby invoking his life, death, and resurrection in collapsed form. On the basis of Christ’s triumph, Michael drives Satan from the heavenly field of battle, casting him down to earth so that he can no longer accuse the brethren. Satan’s accusations have no standing in the heavenly court because of what Christ accomplished, but he has a short time to persecute the church on earth (Rev 12:7–17).

Meanwhile, John has earlier shown the ascended Christ in the heavenly throne room fulfilling Daniel 7:13, presented before the Father, seizing the scroll, taking the reigns of history. As he opens the scroll, the correspondences between what happens when he does that and the Olivet Discourse show that these events are unfolding across church history to the time of the end.

In both the Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24 and Revelation 6 deceivers go out. These are people who look like Jesus in some ways, but they are not Jesus. In both the Olivet Discourse and in Revelation 6,

Fig. 1. Symbolic timeline in Revelation

Jesus Ascends	Church Persecuted and Protected	Church Persecuted and Overcome	Trumpets and Bowls	Jesus Returns	Millennium	New Heaven and New Earth
	Opening of the Seals Rev 6–8, 11–13					
	3 1/2 yrs	3 1/2 yrs				

wars are prophesied, and Matthew 24:6 notably says “the end is not yet,” then 24:8 says these events are the beginnings of birth pains. So neither false-christs nor wars are an indication of the end. In both the Olivet Discourse and in Revelation 6, famine, difficulty, and death follow the messianic pretenders and their wars. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus says the gospel has to be proclaimed to the whole world, then the end will come (Matt 24:14).

In Revelation 6:11 the martyrs are told that the full number of appointed martyrs has to be fulfilled before the end. The gospel will go to the ends of the earth through the sacrifices of the martyrs, and the fact that there is an appointed number of martyrs in Revelation 6:11 means that their deaths are not accidental. In both the Olivet Discourse and in Revelation 6, apocalyptic imagery accompanies the coming of Jesus (Matt 24:29; Rev 6:12–17).²⁵

The whole of church history is symbolically presented in Revelation as Daniel’s seventieth week. The three and a half year protection of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:1–6, until “they have finished their testimony” (11:7), matches the indications that the gospel must go to all nations (Matt 24:14) and that the full number of the Gentiles will be brought in (Rom 11:25). Once that has happened, so all appointed martyrs will be slain (Rev 6:11), the beast rises to slay the two witnesses (11:7; cf. 13:7), and for the second half of Daniel’s seventieth week the beast viciously persecutes and almost entirely wipes out the church.

If I am correct that the first half of Daniel’s seventieth week is depicted as the two witnesses prophesy in Revelation 11, that first half also seems to be depicted as the woman is nourished in the wilderness in 12:6 and 12:13–16. At the appointed time, the beast receives his three and a half year period of authority (Rev 13:5), at which point the heat is turned up (13:6–18).

This means that John depicts the whole of church history as a time of persecution, with the end being worse than the beginning. There are some indications of a prophetic foreshortening of the beast’s three and a half year period, indications that the time of intense persecution will not last as long as the time

in which the church was protected to proclaim the gospel. One of these is seen in the three and a half *day* period during which the bodies of the two witnesses lie in the street unburied (Rev 11:8–11). At the end of this three and a half day period of the beast’s triumphant season, the resurrection of Ezekiel 37 is fulfilled as the “breath of life from God” enters the two witnesses and they are raised from the dead (11:11), then the last trumpet sounds and Christ becomes king (11:15–19). Another indication of a prophetic foreshortening of the second half of Daniel’s seventieth week is the reference to the beast enjoying power “for one hour” in Revelation 17:12.

Seeing *both* halves of Daniel’s seventieth week depicted in Revelation matches the details of Revelation itself, where the church is protected through persecution to proclaim the gospel (11:1–6; 12:6, 13–16), then handed over to the beast (11:7; 13:7). It also matches the details of Daniel 9, where in the middle of the seventieth week the enemy seeks to stamp out the worship of God. The protection of the church through persecution for the first half of Daniel’s seventieth week is also depicted in imagery drawn from Daniel, as the trampling of temple courts and holy city in Revelation 11:2 sounds like “the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled underfoot” in Daniel 8:13. This depiction in Daniel 8 comes from the third kingdom not the fourth, again indicating that there is a pattern that will be repeated throughout the history of God’s people. The temple itself, representing the people of God in Revelation 11:1–2, is measured and protected through this period of persecution, not slain as the witnesses and saints will be once the midpoint of the seventieth week is reached.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that Revelation describes the entire inter-advental age. Throughout this age the church suffers and is persecuted. Revelation teaches the church precisely what many in the world now experience: that the people of God will suffer *and* see the triumph of the gospel as it makes its long march to the ends of the earth.

John depicts the world as it really is: Christ has conquered. Satan has been driven from the heavenly field of battle, and his accusations have no standing in the heavenly court. He is pursuing his persecution of the church through his deception of the nations (Rev 12:9; 13:14). God shields his own from his wrath, though Satan's wrath may result in their death. God will raise them from the dead. John means to enable the faithful to persevere through persecution, a point that stands whether the interpreter thinks the temple in Revelation 11, for instance, is a literal temple or a symbol of the people of God.

The job of those who would exposit the text of Revelation is to explain to the people of God the relevance of the simple message that though their experience may not seem to reflect it, in reality God is in heaven reigning on his throne, Christ has been raised from the dead, he has taken control of history, while the dragon has a short time in which to pursue his purposes. A day will come soon when Christ will return on a white horse to judge the wicked and reward the repentant who remain faithful to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For a summary of references to the Messianic Woes in the Bible, see Table 6.2, "The Messianic Woes in the Old and New Testaments," in James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 493. For discussion of "Messianic Woes in Early Judaism and Christianity," see Mark Dubis, *Messianic Woes in First Peter: Suffering and Eschatology in 1 Peter 4:12-19* (Studies in Biblical Literature; New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 5–36.
- ² For my attempt to exposit Revelation, see James M. Hamilton, *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Preaching the Word; Wheaton: Crossway, 2012). For my attempt to explore Daniel's theology, see James M. Hamilton, *A Theology of Daniel* (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, forthcoming).
- ³ For the view that the understanding of the Old Testament reflected in the New is the one that Jesus taught

his followers, see E. Earle Ellis, "Jesus' Use of the Old Testament and the Genesis of New Testament Theology," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 3 (1993): 59–75.

⁴ For the idea that biblical theology is the attempt to understand and embrace the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors, see James M. Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014).

⁵ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 534.

⁶ The term "antichrist" only occurs in the Epistles of John (see 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7), but what John says about "the antichrist" and "antichrists" in 1 John 2:18 matches what the Synoptic Gospels present Jesus saying about "false christs and false prophets" (e.g., Matt 24:24), what Paul says about the "man of lawlessness" (2 Thess 2:1–12), and what Revelation depicts in the two beasts (Rev 13:1–18). Cf. Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John* (New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 114–15, 267–70.

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV.

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, "The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position," in *Three Views on the Rapture* (Counterpoints; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 246 n. 4.

⁹ Pace the interpretation of this passage put forth in Peter J. Gentry, "Daniel's Seventy Weeks and the New Exodus," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14:1 (2010): 36–40. Gentry and I disagree on the following points: he holds that the "people of the prince who is to come" who will "destroy the city and the sanctuary" (Dan 9:26) are the Jewish people, the prince being Jesus (38–39). In view of the other instances of attack on the sanctuary and sacrifice in Daniel 8:12–13 and 11:31, I maintain that the prince in view is not "Messiah the prince" from Dan 9:25 but an enemy. Gentry holds that the "strong covenant with many for one week" is the new covenant (38), whereas I would see it as an agreement made not by Jesus but by the enemy, the antichrist. I am not persuaded by Gentry's arguments against the conclusions I hold (40). Aside from these differences in particulars, however, Gentry and I approach the typological significance of

these passages and their relevance for how we understand the end unfolding in very similar ways.

¹⁰In *ibid.*, 40, Gentry objects to the view that the attacks on sanctuary and sacrifice in Daniel 9:26–27 should be interpreted as another instance of the same kind of attack on sanctuary and sacrifice seen in Daniel 8 and 11. As he puts it, “it is problematic to relate 7:8, which belongs to the fourth empire, to 11:31 and 12:11 which belong to the third.” The use of the three and a half year period from Daniel 9:27, however, explains the “time, times, and half a time” formula in both 7:25 and 12:7 (third kingdom, according to Gentry), as well as the roughly three and a half year periods in 8:14 and 12:11–12. The reuse of this three and a half year period is part of the common pattern of events seen in the third and fourth kingdoms, suggesting that Daniel intended them to be interpreted in light of each other, with Daniel 9:26–27 depicting something that is along the same lines as what we find in 8:13–14, 11:31, and 12:7–13.

¹¹I do not hold to the pretribulation rapture, but it is worth observing that Paul D. Feinberg writes, “Pretribulationists agree among themselves ... that the *whole*, not just a part, of the seventieth week is a time of divine wrath” (“The Case for the Pretribulation Rapture Position,” in *Three Views on the Rapture* [Counterpoints; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 58). I do not hold to the midtribulation rapture, but it is worth noting that Gleason L. Archer writes, “If the Great Tribulation is to be identified with the second half of the final seven years prior to Armageddon, during which the bowls of divine wrath will be poured out upon the earth, then the view we are about to advocate is really a form of pretribulation Rapture. It simply regards the first three and a half years, during which the Antichrist will increase his power and mount his persecution against the church, as a lesser tribulation, not nearly as terrifying or destructive of life as those fearsome plagues that will dominate the last three and a half years” (“The Case for the Mid-Seventieth-Week Rapture Position,” in *Three Views on the Rapture* [Counterpoints; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 139).

¹²Dubis, *Messianic Woes in First Peter*, 3–4.

¹³See the decisive essay by Moo, “Posttribulation Rapture.”

¹⁴The apocalyptic features of Revelation include its focus on the consummation of all things—the end of the world, its heavy use of symbolism, and its depictions of otherworldly intermediaries who reveal mysterious signs to John and interpret them for him. The book of Revelation is not pseudonymous, however, as inter-testamental apocalyptic literature typically is, nor does it present historical reviews in the form of future predictions the way those do.

¹⁵As Revelation 1:3 also indicates, Revelation is an apocalypse *and* a prophecy. Apocalyptic literature often deals more directly with the end of the world, while Prophecy typically addresses the flow of history, encouraging people to repent and mend their ways.

¹⁶Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–2.

¹⁷Irenaeus, who was from Smyrna, one of the other churches addressed in Revelation 2–3, claimed to have heard Polycarp, who had interacted with John son of Zebedee in person. Irenaeus testified that John wrote Revelation “towards the end of Domitian’s reign”—Domitian reigned from 81–96 (*Adv. Haer.* 5.30.3). This date is not the only one to be attested in the ancient world, but it has the earliest and strongest support (cf. Origen on Matt 16:6 and Eus. *H.E.* 3.18).

¹⁸My thoughts on the structure of Revelation have been significantly influenced by Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993).

¹⁹The following two tables were developed for my book, *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*, and can be found on pages 25 and 26 therein.

²⁰For more on this theme, see James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments* (NAC Studies in Bible and Theology; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006).

²¹Revelation 22:6–9 goes with the section that spans from 17:1–22:9, and this passage also transitions into the concluding section of the book, 22:6–21, so there is no typo in the listing of the verses at this point in the outline.

²²See Table 15.3, “The Trumpets and the Bowls,” Table 19.1, “Revelation’s Trumpets and the Exodus

Plagues,” and Table 19.2, “Revelation’s Bowls and the Exodus Plagues,” in Hamilton, *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*, 168, 211.

²³See Table 15.2, “Parallels between Daniel, the Olivet Discourse, and Revelation,” in *ibid.*, 167.

²⁴For a more detailed presentation of Revelation’s Sym-

bolic Timeline, see Table 33.3 in *ibid.*, 371–72.

²⁵So also, independently, Eckhard J. Schnabel, *40 Questions About the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 70. See Table 15.2, referenced above, “Parallels between Daniel, the Olivet Discourse, and Revelation” in Hamilton, *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*, 167.