



## THE REIGN OF SATAN

### Is It Worth It?

September 3, 2017

#### Revelation 14

##### The Lamb and the 144,000

14 Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. 2 And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, 3 and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. 4 It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, 5 and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

##### The Messages of the Three Angels

6 Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. 7 And he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

8 Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality."

9 And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 10 he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name."

12 Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God

and their faith in Jesus.

13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "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!"

#### The Harvest of the Earth

14 Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. 15 And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." 16 So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.

17 Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. 18 And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." 19 So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. 20 And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia.

**THE CHALLENGER APPEARS****Revelation 14:1-5**

**14:1-5** If this were a movie, the theme music would change dramatically as Revelation 14 opens. Instead of the climactic, warlike music that might be appropriate for the sea and earth beasts, we now hear a voice that sounds like harps and many waters and thunder, accompanied by a choir of 144,000. This would be familiar theme music to the moviegoers, because it would have occurred earlier, in 5:6-14. Both then and now, in 14:1-3, the choirs sing at the appearance of the Lamb. The scene that this theme music accompanies is also dramatic: The Lamb is standing on Mount Zion. This parallels the dragon, who took his stand on the shore (12:18) before the two beasts appeared in chapter 13. Presumably, the dragon is still there, watching the beasts.

Now the Lamb appears on Mount Zion, accompanied by the 144,000-member choir, who sing the new song. The stage is set for the conflict on earth. On the side of the dragon are his two proxies: the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth. On the side of the Lamb there is no exact parallel, for the 144,000 are not proxies in the same way. They are accompanied by the heavenly figures also encountered in earlier chapters of Revelation: the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures (4:4-5:14; 7:11-13; 11:16). Though the Lamb is on Mount Zion, he is accompanied by these heavenly figures.

Who are these 144,000? They are human beings, redeemed by the Lamb, the first fruits of the redemption achieved by the Lamb (14:3, 4), which would mean the first fruits of the work of the cross and resurrection. These redeemed have completed their earthly lives in faithfulness to the Lamb and are now with him. Are they the same 144,000 that were mentioned in 7:4-8? Those are the redeemed from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, sealed with God's seal. (Twelve is a perfect, complete number, far superior to the number 666 given to the earth beast.) The sealed ones in Israel evidently have now been redeemed, having completed their time of trial faithfully. They form a link between the people of God in Israel and the new people in the church.

The 144,000 are further described as virgins, who have not defiled themselves with women (14:4). It would be strange if this were meant literally, because the early church did not demand celibacy, though it did have a place for the widows who remained unmarried. This verse needs to be seen in the context of the imagery that begins in chapter 12, with the woman clothed with the sun. Her counterpart, the great harlot, will appear in chapter 17. The bride of the Lamb, who is related to the woman clothed with the sun, appears in chapter 19. The faithful are part of the bride of Christ. They are to keep themselves chaste, not involved with other suitors. Such imagery is used in Ephesians 5 as well as in the Hebrew scriptures where Israel is often pictured as God's betrothed or as the unfaithful wife of God. The 144,000 are the faithful who have remained part of the chaste, virgin bride

of Christ. To be unchaste is to commit idolatry, to honor other gods—in this case, the dragon and his associates.

Not only are they chaste, the 144,000 are also truthful. Their witness has been honest and true (14:5). Their words and their deeds have matched. They are martyrs in this sense of being accurate witnesses to the work of the Lamb. They may also have been martyrs in terms of their lives. In this sense also, they have followed the Lamb, even to death.

## THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF JUDGMENT

### Revelation 14:6-13

**14:6-13** The scene continues: the dragon on the shore; the sea beast and the earth beast present; the Lamb on Mount Zion; and now three angels appear, one after the other, each with an announcement related to the final judgment of the earth.

The first angel appears in midheaven—that is, in a place visible to all of the earth—proclaiming “an eternal gospel.” The content of the gospel is that all should worship the one true God, the Creator of all things. This is in clear contrast to the message of the Empire, that all are to worship the emperor. Judgment is about to begin, and the criterion for judgment is whether or not the individual worships the true God. It is God who is to be feared, to be held in awe. The great temptation is to fear the emperor, or the power of the Empire, more than God.

It is also important to note that God desires the gospel to be proclaimed even up to the point of final judgment. The church should not withdraw from mission and evangelism, and let the evil world go its way. But mission is not only a human effort; it is also a task given to an angel, to make sure that all the inhabitants of the earth are presented with the truth.

The term “gospel” is usually understood by Christians to be the message of redemption through the work of Christ, particularly the work of the cross and resurrection. Here, an eternal gospel is proclaimed that makes no mention of this. But since this gospel is being proclaimed in the presence of the Lamb on his throne, its context includes those elements. At the same time, the redemption through Christ is to lead all people to do exactly what this eternal gospel proclaims: to “fear God and give him glory.”

A second angel appears, with the message of the fall of Babylon. For the first time in this book, the term “Babylon” is used, in reference to Rome. John is not the first to use this term in that sense. Other apocalyptic literature of the period also refers to Rome as Babylon. There is good reason for this. In Daniel, the oppressive power was Babylon, and faithful Jews struggled with this empire, which sought for itself the worship due only to God (see Dan. 4:26-37). We have already seen the many images John uses from Daniel. The image of Babylon is the next. Both Rome and Babylon are cities, yet the name is used also for the empire that is ruled from the city. If the city falls, the empire falls. The first Babylonian Empire was the great enemy of Israel in the eighth century B.C. It conquered and destroyed

the Northern Kingdom of Israel centered in Samaria, but the Southern Kingdom of Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem, was left standing. In the sixth century B.C., a new Babylonian Empire captured Jerusalem and destroyed the kingdom of Judah, taking many of its people into exile. Therefore, the term “Babylon” was used to refer to any great power that was the enemy of the people of God.

John personifies the city as a woman—a sinful woman who tempts others to commit fornication with her. Those who do so are obviously not heeding the words of the eternal gospel. The words of the angel who announces judgment are very similar to the words of Isaiah 21:9: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the images of her gods lie shattered on the ground.” Isaiah was speaking of the ancient Babylonian Empire that was about to conquer Jerusalem and Judah in the sixth century B.C.

A second image is added: the cup of wine that is the wrath of God (14:8–10). John pictures the woman Babylon forcing others to drink of this cup. Yet the cup is God’s wrath against those who commit fornication with her. Daniel used a variant of this imagery. In Daniel 5, the prophet was called to King Balshazzar’s feast in order to interpret the handwriting on the wall. The handwriting began to appear while the king and his court drank wine from the cups brought as part of the booty from the temple in Jerusalem. They drank in praise of the false gods of Babylon. The words on the wall told of the fall of the king and his kingdom. The cup turned into the cup of God’s wrath. Jeremiah 25:15–29 also used the imagery of the cup of God’s wrath, but it was given to the prophet, who was to give it to various nations to drink. The closest parallel, however, is in Jeremiah 51:7: “Babylon was a golden cup in the LORD’s hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine, and so the nations went mad.”

For John, the meaning is similar: Babylon—in John’s book, Rome—has a cup of wine, and all the people, even other nations, drink from the cup. But the cup is God’s wrath, and those who drink from it receive God’s wrath. For John, the imagery is made more complex by the personification of Babylon/Rome as a woman with whom the others commit fornication because they worship her rather than the true God. Though the nations drink from the woman’s cup, it is really God’s cup from which they drink. Babylon is the unwitting agent of God in this matter. The imagery of the cup of God’s wrath may lie behind the words of Jesus in the Garden Gethsemane: “If it is possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matt. 26:39). For Christians, part of the mystery of the cross is that Jesus suffered for us the wrath of God that was our due.

A third angel appears. The sequence is important. The first angel proclaimed the gospel and announced judgment. The second announced the fall of Rome. The third announces that all who worship the beast will be condemned (14:9). In fact, those who once drank the wine of Babylon now must drink the cup of God’s wrath directly, and it will be an even more powerful wine, unmixed with water. This announcement gives a very clear choice: Worship the beast or the Lamb—but the defeat of the beast has begun and is sure. The worship of the beast is to be seen in the mark that its worshipers bear, even as the

worshippers of the Lamb are marked.

It would be possible to understand the messages of these three angels simply as a judgment of those who have been worshiping the beast. More likely, the messages could be a call to those presently worshiping the beast to change their allegiance to the Lamb. The announcement of the gospel is a final point of decision, a final call for those worshiping the beast to see the futility of remaining loyal to one whose doom is sure. The future of those who continue to worship the beast is spelled out: They will drink directly from the cup of God's wrath and burn eternally (14:10). This is seen as part of the warning, giving more reason to make the choice for the Lamb. The vision adds that the suffering of those who worship the beast will occur in the presence of the Lamb and his angels. It is difficult to imagine anyone, most particularly Jesus, enjoying the suffering of others. As part of the warning, however, we clearly are told that the Lamb will completely defeat the beast, and therefore the beast's worshippers need to reconsider the object of their devotion.

The final part of the message of the third angel is important: "There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast" (14:11). No rest means no sabbath, no time of renewal, no imitation on a human level of the divine life. This is in contrast to the future life of the faithful, shown in the concluding two verses of this section.

The messages of the three angels are over. John adds his own comment of encouragement to those who worship the Lamb: They should continue in obedience. A voice from heaven adds a further promise: Even if the faithful die, they will rest. The Spirit affirms this promise. The deeds of the faithful are not lost, but follow them in the life to come, which evidently is why they can rest. Their time of labor is over. The worshippers of the beast, however, do not have good deeds that can follow them, and therefore they have no rest. It is not that the faithful are saved by their works, but faithfulness does show itself in action, even as the 144,000 were said not to lie, because their lives and their words were consistent (14:5).

## THE HARVEST

### Revelation 14:14-20

**14:14-20** Now the scene changes. Instead of the Lamb, John sees "one like the Son of Man," a term Christians use for Jesus but one also used by Daniel for the one who has authority in the final judgment (Dan. 7:13-14). In Matthew 25:31-46 there is also the famous final judgment scene, with the Son of Man and his angels in charge. Perhaps the most direct parallel to this section of Revelation is in Mark 13:26-27, the "Little Apocalypse" (and its parallel in Matthew 24:30-31). There we are told: "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds." The picture in Revelation 14:14 is the Son of Man, seated triumphantly on a cloud, wearing the crown of victory. He holds a sickle in his hand. It is

time for the harvest.

As we will see in this section, the harvest is of two sorts: of wheat and of grapes. The wheat represents the faithful, those who belong to Christ; the grapes represent those who worship the beast. All of humanity is incorporated in one of these two groups. On other occasions in scripture, there is a division between the wheat and the chaff (Matt. 3:12; Luke 3:17) or between wheat and weeds (Matt. 13:30), but the point is the same. Harvest is the time when the good is separated from the bad.

In Revelation, though the Son of Man has appeared, ready to carry out the judgment, this does not begin until an angel announces that it is time to begin. This angel comes from “the temple,” which evidently means directly from the presence of God. In Matthew 24:36, Jesus said that the Son does not know the time of the end; only the Father knows that. The angel declares that the harvest of the earth is ripe; the time has come to gather the wheat. The harvest is gathered from the whole earth by the Son of Man, who uses the sickle himself. The faithful have been gathered, as grain is harvested.

The judgment moves on to the worshipers of the beast. The procedure is different, but parallel. Another angel comes out from the temple, also carrying a sickle, ready for the harvest (14:17). Again, the one with the sickle does nothing until another comes with the message that the time has come. The grapes are now fully ripe, ready for harvest. The second angel who announces the time has come is specified as the angel who has authority over fire—perhaps a sign of judgment, though no fire is mentioned in this section. When the time is announced, the angel with the sickle gathers all the grapes and puts them in the wine press, which represents the wrath of God. It is clear that the Son of Man directly harvests the wheat, but an angel harvests the grapes.

There is a consistency in the imagery in this chapter: The grapes represent God’s wrath, both in the wine cup and in the harvest. The winepress as a symbol of God’s judgment is used in Isaiah 63:2–6. The final verse in that passage reads: “I trampled down peoples in my anger, I crushed them in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.” These images have been made more familiar by the words of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*: “He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.”

In 14:20, the blood from the winepress is said to flow out “as high as a horse’s bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles.” There is an added detail here: the winepress is outside of the Holy City. The image is of the Holy City, perhaps with the Son of Man there with the faithful (the grain) gathered nearby. The wicked, those who worshiped the beast, remain outside the city in the judgment carried out by the angel. Outside the city is the area that is unclean; inside the city is the area of purity.

The time of harvest has come, for both the worshipers of the Lamb and the worshipers of the beast. Yet the harvest is not a simple one. The chapters that follow continue the

display of the wrath of God upon the earth<sup>1</sup>

### Interlude: The Lamb and His Followers on Mount Zion (14:1-5)

This interlude is the counterpart to the vision of the followers of the beast. Once again we shall see that it is worship which distinguishes both communities. Their antithetical worship finds expression in antithetical life-styles. Simultaneously the Lamb's followers are designated as "first fruits for God," suggesting the image of harvest which is a metaphor for judgment. In this way the vision introduces two new series in which judgment becomes the central theme (vv. 6-11, 14-20). While the images of the first fruits and of the subsequent grain harvest refer to salvation (vv. 14-16), the image of the gathering of grapes (vv. 17-20) is used to express the wrath of God and the Lamb over the worshipers of the beast (cf. 14:8-11, 17-20). Chapters 13 and 14 are linked by the "call for the endurance of the saints" (13:10; 14:12) which forms an inclusion. Within the evolving narration of visions and auditions we can detect the following contrasts:

A 14:1-5	B 14:6-11
A' 14:12-13	B' 14:14-20
A'' 15:1-4	B'' 15:5-16:21

In antithesis to the forecast of a worldwide persecution and economic ruin of the faithful by the beast, John now presents a preview of their glorious redemption in a vision (v. 1), an audition (vv. 2-3), and an explanatory comment for the reader (vv. 4-5).

**Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads** (cf. 3:12). The saints who have endured (cf. 13:10) are gathered around their Lord, **the Lamb**, on **Mount Zion**, the symbol of God's presence and deliverance. The earthly geographic Jerusalem is, for John, part of the great city "where their Lord was crucified" (11:8) and therefore the faithful are not gathered there on the historical temple mount. Nor is Mount Zion identical with the heavenly Jerusalem, because heaven and earth are still distinguished. In the audition a voice comes "*from heaven*" and clearly distinguishes Mount Zion from heaven. In short, the 144,000 are not in heaven or in the new Jerusalem but "on Mount Zion" which has become the symbol of the persevering, conquering church, the place of Christ's presence on earth. "For in Mount Zion ... shall be those who escape" God's judgment, Joel proclaimed (Joel 2:32); and "the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion" (Mic. 4:7; cf. 2 Esdr. 2:42-47; 13:35-40). Mount Zion is wherever the Lamb is with his followers on earth. This vision recalls the sealing of the 144,000 elect before the last day,

<sup>1</sup> González, C. G., & González, J. L. (1997). *Revelation*. (P. D. Miller & D. L. Bartlett, Eds.) (pp. 90-97). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

before the apocalyptic storm of judgment breaks loose (7:1–8), and it anticipates the vision of those who have conquered the beast and who sing the victory song of Moses and of the Lamb (15:2–4). It is the fitting conclusion to the story of the woman pursued by the dragon into the wilderness (12:13–17; cf. outline) and a summary of all the promises granted to conquerors (e.g., 3:12). The vision of the Lamb on Mount Zion also anticipates the marriage of the Lamb (19:9) and his millennial reign (20:4–6). The Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, is God's eschatological agent, the anti-image of the beast rising up out of the sea to do the dragon's work; and the 144,000 are the symbol of God's people during the last days. They have endured the assaults of the beasts and refused to bear the mark 666 of Antichrist. Instead, the **name** of the Lamb and **his Father's name** (thus, the Lamb is "the Son") are **written on their foreheads**. This "seal" shows that they are God's property and are protected by him from the final judgment. They are in fact the "first fruits" of the eschatological harvest that is yet to come (14:4, 14–16). Later we shall hear that they shall reign with Christ for a thousand years and shall not be subjected to the final judgment (20:4–6, 11–15). John never tells everything at once. God's name on their foreheads also symbolizes that they are the new high priests, fit for the divine liturgy in the city-paradise of the new Jerusalem (22:1–5).

**A voice from heaven** (Greek, *phōnē*; cf. 1:10; 4:1; etc.) sounded like the rushing of **many waters** and like **loud thunder** (cf. 6:1; 19:6). The heavenly liturgy becomes again audible (cf. chaps. 4–5; 8:3–5; 11:16–19). The **sound of harpers playing on their harps** is part of the worship before God's **throne** (5:9). And **they**, the heavenly host, **sing a new song**, the words of which the reader has already heard in 5:9–10, 12–13. This new song is in praise of the Lamb who is worthy to be the Lord of lords and King of kings. But this new song is heard on earth only by the followers of the Lamb. Only they can **learn** it, because they are a priestly people whom the Lamb, through his death, has **redeemed from the earth** (5:9–10). The other inhabitants of the earth know only the old song of self-glorification, idolatry, and worship of the beast (cf. 13:4, 8, 12, 15). In their worship on earth the redeemed learn to sing a new song. Their song is the absolute opposite of the blasphemies uttered by the beast worshipers.

Writing a letter requires that John also addresses his readers/hearers. He had done so in his call for endurance in 13:9–10 and will do so again in 14:12–13. Here he addresses his audience by means of an interpretive comment (cf. 1:20; 7:14), explaining to them the identity of the **redeemed**. In the first place, he makes it clear that "the redeemed" may not be limited to martyrs, which is contrary to some of his modern interpreters. In the second place, the redeemed **have not defiled themselves with women, for they are chaste**; literally, "they are virgins." Some interpreters take this characterization literally and hold that the 144,000 are unmarried male ascetics. Others hold that John here is promoting his own agenda of advocating the desirability of celibacy in the light of the imminent end. His ideal, it is argued, is to be "eunuchs" for the sake of the kingdom (Matt. 19:12), celibate because of the imminent end and its prior tribulations, unencumbered by wives and children because of the hardships experienced by itinerant prophets. However, John stated a requirement, not an ideal. Membership among the 144,000 demands virginity. The

question is, then, what did John mean by virginity here? The notion that in his view only unmarried male ascetics are members of the people of God is unconvincing, to say the least.

Still others have argued that John's requirement of (male) celibacy was inspired by Israel's holy war tradition and the priestly purity regulations found in the Old Testament and in Qumran (e.g., Deut. 23:9–14; 1 Sam. 21:5; Yarbro Collins). Participation in the holy war requires ritual purity and sexual abstention for all (male) soldiers. True enough, but irrelevant here. A *literal* understanding of *defilement with women* caused by sexual relations would imply that John required *lifelong* celibacy for *all* members of the people of God, symbolized by the 144,000. The holy war ideology with its temporary abstention from sexual relations is irrelevant to our text.

Moreover, a *literal* interpretation of v. 4 would not only expose John as being a misogynist and raise the obvious question, Why should all women be excluded from the 144,000? It would also mean that John viewed *marriage as defilement*. This would place him in contradiction to the whole biblical tradition. Above all, a literal approach to v. 4 would demand a literal interpretation of all the other images in this vision, such as “Lamb,” “Mount Zion,” and “written on their foreheads.” This would obviously be absurd. Nor do we need to take recourse to Charles's hypothesis that regarded v. 4 as an interpolation, which came about when a copyist incorporated a marginal comment into the text.

Our v. 4 *may not* be interpreted literally but must be understood metaphorically. It was not in sexual relations *with spouses* that believers **defiled themselves**. The faithful are *virgins* (RSV, **chaste**) because they **have not defiled themselves** with *idolatry*. The prophets of Israel had denounced idolatry in terms of adultery and fornication (Exod. 34:15; Deut. 31:16; Judg. 2:17; Hos. 2:14–21; 9:1; Jer. 3:20; etc.). Babylon/Rome is the “mother of *harlots*” (plural) in Revelation (17:5), and those who participate in the imperial cult commit “fornication” (18:3). In antithesis to the harlots of the imperial cult (who were male priests!), the 144,000 are called *virgins*, whether male or female. They have kept themselves pure and undefiled from idolatry in general and from emperor worship in particular, and also from the kind of immorality advocated by Christian heretics, such as the prophetess of Thyatira (2:20).

The faithful (women and men) are pictured later on as “bride” of Christ (19:7). Paul “betrothed” the Corinthians to Christ “as a pure bride to her one husband” (2 Cor. 11:2). **Virgin** is a title of honor for Zion in the Old Testament (e.g., 2 Kings 19:21; Isa. 23:12; Jer. 14:17). As *virgin*, the church resisted the seductive powers of the emperor cult, as *bride* the church belongs to and is loved by Jesus (cf. 1:5). However, the imperial cult with its festive pageantry exerted a magnetism of its own and was attractive, not merely because objection to it might spell economic ruin (13:17), but because it was the patriotic thing to do. John's hearers are challenged to resist the enchantment of the harlot Babylon/Rome and of her *male* priests who are depicted here with sarcastic irony as **women** who **defile**, that is, as prostitutes. Relations with them would exclude believers from participation in the heavenly liturgy, from learning the new song. John probably spoke of “women” rather than

of harlots, lest his hearers quickly nod with approval, thinking that defiling merely involves visiting whorehouses. This verse is meant to jolt their imagination, and it does so still!

In the third place, another characteristic of the 144,000 is that they **follow the Lamb wherever he goes** (Greek, *hypagei*). “If any one is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes” (13:10; *hypagei*). To **follow** the Lamb includes the possibility of suffering and of martyrdom as well as the promise of victory. The tense in the verb “follow” is present tense (cf. 7:14). The faithful have followed him in the past through trials and tribulations (cf. Mark 8:34; Matt. 10:38), and they follow him now and in the future. This verb, which refers to discipleship in the Gospels and Acts, occurs in this sense in the rest of the New Testament only here and in 19:14. The verb reflects John’s knowledge of the gospel tradition.

Fourth, the 144,000 are described as **redeemed from**, that is, out of, humanity, **as first fruits for God and the Lamb**. Their redemption through the blood of the Lamb (5:9) *separated* them from the rest of humanity that is ripe for the harvest of judgment (14:6–20). The redeemed are already the **first fruits** of the harvest of salvation that is to come, just as Jesus in his resurrection is “the first fruits” of the harvest of the dead (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20–23; Rev. 1:5). Likewise, the Holy Spirit, granted to the church on earth, could be viewed as “first fruits” of the future consummation (Rom. 8:23). Here the church on Mount Zion is the “first fruits” of the harvest that belongs to God and the Lamb.

Fifth, they are an offering to God. Like the sacrificial offerings brought to Jerusalem’s temple, they are **spotless**, without blemish (Exod. 12:5; Lev. 23:12–13; cf. Eph. 1:4; Phil. 2:15; Col. 1:22), because they have been redeemed *and* have kept themselves “undefiled” from idolatry (v. 4), **and in their mouth no lie was found**. Unlike idolatrous humanity which “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25), the followers of the Lamb were not deceived by the serpent/dragon (12:9), or by his minion, or by heretical prophets and apostles (2:2, 14, 20). Religion is the realm in which lies flourish, then and now, and where concern for truth is eroded by slogans.

John’s interpretive comment identified the characteristic features which are also the conditions that must be met by the church if she is to be with the Lamb on Mount Zion. The redeemed are virgins (female or male), disciples, first fruits, a spotless sacrificial offering, and people of truthfulness. This vision exhorts the church to raise its vision concerning its nature as God’s alternative community on earth.

#### *The Announcement and Execution of the Final Judgment (14:6–20)*

This unit is the counterpart to the vision of the redeemed and draws a series of sketches which are elaborated later. The section has three parts: (A) announcement of judgment by three angels (vv. 6–11); (B) encouragement to the saints (vv. 12–13); and (A’) the execution of judgment (vv. 14–20). Six angelic actors appear in this section: three angels in

vv. 6–11 prior to the call for endurance and three other angels in vv. 14–20 subsequent to it. Hence the call for endurance (B), directed to John’s hearers, is the focus of this section. Moreover, also the one “seated on the cloud” like “a son of man” is preceded and followed by three angels. He is therefore positioned as the fourth among seven heavenly agents. That means that he is the central actor, even if he apparently does nothing in six of the seven episodes.

*The Angel in Midheaven (14:6–7).* **Another angel** appears in **midheaven**, like the eagle of 8:13, with a message that concerns all **who dwell on earth**. But in contrast to the eagle that announced three woes, the angel flying in midheaven is the messenger of good news, proclaiming an **eternal gospel** for all people. According to Mark 13:10, the gospel “must first be preached to all nations” before the end arrives, and the angel of 14:6–7 does just that. The offer of repentance and salvation at the very last moment precedes the judgment. The **eternal** gospel (singular) is the opposite of the transient gospels (plural), proclaimed in edicts and inscriptions.

There is a famous inscription of a letter of the proconsul Fabius Maximus to the provincial assembly of Asia, recommending that Caesar Augustus’s birthday be celebrated as the beginning of a new era and as the beginning of the official year. The reason for this was that “he restored stability, when everything was collapsing and falling into disarray.... His birthday signifies the beginning of life and real living.” In response to the proconsul’s letter the Asian assembly noted “that the birthday of our god [Augustus] signaled the beginning of *good news* [Greek, *euangelia*, gospels, plural] for the world because of him” (Danker).

John probably knew of this decree, since it had been published in many cities of Asia Minor. The most complete inscription comes from Priene, south of Ephesus. At any rate, he used the word “gospel” only here, and he employed it in a context that sets forth his alternative vision to the imperial cult. To be sure, he must have known of the Christian usage of “gospel,” but his “eternal gospel” is a summons to turn away from the worship of the beast (13:4, 8, 12, 15). John did not identify the gospel here in terms of the kerygma of the crucified and resurrected Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:1–5). Instead, the “eternal gospel” is the final call prior to the judgment, directed to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people: **Fear God** rather than the triumvirate of beasts. **Give him glory** rather than to the transient glitter of culture. **Worship him** rather than the emperor. The central issue is worship! It will heat up, once the beast rises from the abyss. John’s gospel involves repentance, a radical break with the dominant culture. It is similar to the summons issued by John the Baptist and by Jesus: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:1; cf. Mark 1:14). Repent = fear God, give him glory; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand = **for the hour of his judgment has come**. The word “judgment” occurs here for the first time, though we have met its synonym “wrath” in the sixth seal and the seventh trumpet (6:16 and 11:18). John’s good news includes God coming to judge the world in righteousness (Ps. 9:8). “He will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgment among the nations” (Ps. 110:5–6). Judgment involves an act of sorting out, and the one who does the

sorting out is God, the creator of **heaven and earth**. This angelic announcement links up with the promise of the interlude: “no more delay” (10:6–7), and with the thanksgiving of the seventh trumpet (11:18).

History is not an endless series of cycles of days, months, years, and millennia. It has a beginning, creation, and a goal, the judgment and the kingdom of God. At the end, it will be clear to everyone who God is and what the world’s idolaters were all about. This end, however, has already made its appearance in the Lamb who was slain and who is alive among his followers (14:1–5). He stands behind this final gracious summons before the end. Through his angel, the central actor in this series of seven agents (14:14) invites us to recognize our limitations and weaknesses, to acknowledge our accountability, and to surrender to God, who has given us all that we are and have. **Worship God**. Turn to him from your neurotic pursuits of gods, godlets, and whatnots.

The second **angel** proclaims a prophetic judgment oracle. “**Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion.**” The Greek verb has *past* tense (*epesen*), even though from John’s time perspective Babylon’s fall lies in the future. But because the decision about its doom has already been made in heaven, the angel can announce it with a prophetic past tense as if Babylon’s fall had already happened. From the perspective of heaven, it is an accomplished fact. Moreover, the story of Babylon’s destruction will be told in Revelation 17–18, another indication that the sequence of visions in John’s book is not identical with the sequence of time. John narrated his visions in evolving cycles.

**Babylon** is introduced without explanation, probably because its identification with Rome was part of the tradition known to John’s churches. This code name for Rome (cf. 1 Peter 5:13) was not used in order to cause confusion about which city was meant but in order to reveal its true nature as a world power at enmity with God’s purpose. John combined prophetic oracles of Isaiah (21:9) and Jeremiah (51:7–8a), referring to it as Babylon **the great**, alluding to Dan. 4:30–31. Babylon is the beast’s capital, the opposite of Mount Zion. Rome’s self-aggrandizement, like Nebuchadnezzar’s, shall be brought low. Like Babylon of old, so Rome represents the power of godlessness, injustice, and brutality behind a glitter of culture. **She made all nations drink the wine of the wrath of her fornication** (RSV is weak here: **her impure passion**). Two ideas are combined. Rome intoxicated the Gentile nations of the empire with the idolatry of the emperor cult (= fornication). That intoxication will lead to the persecution of Christians (= the wrath resulting from her idolatry). Soon we will also hear of the wine cup of *God’s* wrath which the worshipers of the beast will have to drink (v. 10). We are reminded again that “one is punished by the very things by which one sins” (Wis. Sol. 11:16; cf. 12:23).

While the second angel pronounced a *collective* verdict against the beast’s capital, the third angel threatened *individuals* (“if any one ...”). God’s judgment will fall on **any one** who, in spite of the final summons of v. 7, **worships the beast and its image** (cf. 13:15) and **receives** the **mark** of 666 on **his forehead or on his hand** (cf. 13:16–18). Worship is

the issue! Two traditional images are blended to picture the punishment of idolaters. One is the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah through fire and sulphur (Gen. 19:24; cf. Luke 17:29). The other is the notion of hell (Gehenna) and hell fire which can be traced back to the “valley of Hinnom,” southwest of Jerusalem, where, at one time, human sacrifices by fire had been offered (2 Chron. 28:3; Jer. 7:31; 32:35). During the intertestamental period, “Gehenna” came to be used as the designation for eternal damnation; it was translated as “hell,” in distinction from “Hades,” the place of the dead. Hell, then, is pictured as a fiery abyss and place of torment (1 Enoch 90:26–27; 2 Bar. 85:13–15; 2 Esdr. 7:36 located the end-time “furnace of hell” opposite paradise). This tradition is present not only in Revelation but also in the Gospels (cf. Matt. 5:22, 29–30; 13:42, 50; 23:15; 25:41; Mark 9:43–48). The worshipers of the beast receive God’s final “No!”

Carl Gustav Jung finds “a veritable orgy of hatred, wrath and vindictiveness” in Revelation at this point (*Answer to Job*, 1972, p. 125), and for D. H. Lawrence the Apocalypse was the Judas in the New Testament (p. 66). Yet vindictiveness or an orgy of hatred is not what John sought to arouse. His aim was not to “gloat” over the fate of the opponents but rather to motivate the call for endurance addressed to Christians in the next verse. This call is, as we have seen, the literary focus of this subsection. The third angel has a wholesome message for lackadaisical, lukewarm Christians: Fish or cut bait! Of course, the idea of a final judgment is unacceptable to bourgeois writers and theologians. For John and the rest of the New Testament authors, it is God who may turn out to be the ultimate enemy. The supreme threat to our own world is not communism, capitalism, socialism, or any other ism or lie, but God, coming to judge the world and each of us in his righteousness. That is offensive, because we do not like to be exposed, stripped of our phony facades, and even less do we like to be punished for what we have done. The third angel vividly propounded the truth, that it is a disaster to reject the gospel. Worship God! (v. 7); it is a matter of life and death.

In the light of the final judgment, believers are admonished not to apostatize but to *endure*, that is, to **keep the commandments of God** (cf. 12:17) **and the faith of Jesus**; better: “faithfulness toward Jesus,” or perhaps “the faithfulness which Jesus exhibited” (cf. 2:13). The vision of the fate of those who refused the eternal gospel is not an occasion for gloating but cause for a solemn warning, not to worship our work and play with our worship. John’s call for endurance is confirmed by two witnesses, by a nameless **voice** requesting him to include the beatitude in his letter, and by the Holy **Spirit**.

**13**—The beatitude is the high point of the call for endurance. **Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth**. Since Easter, death is no longer the end of a believer’s relationship to God. Death is the reality to which, with few exceptions, the Old Testament has no answer other than this: the dead “will not live; they are shades, they will not arise” (Isa. 26:14). “For Sheol [the realm of the dead] cannot thank thee, death cannot praise thee; those who go down to the pit [the grave] cannot hope for thy faithfulness.” Only the living person “thanks thee, as I do this day” (Isa. 38:18–19). Only a few apocalyptic texts of the

Old Testament sound a different note in the face of the inevitability of death (Isa. 25:8; 26:19; Dan. 12:1).

But through Easter a new language concerning death and resurrection exploded within the church. Christ can be honored and glorified through life *or* through death (Phil. 1:20–23; cf. Rom. 8:38–39; 14:8–9; John 5:24; 11:25–26; etc.). A whole new perspective on life and death developed, finding expression in a new language of faith and praise and in a new attitude toward dying. Because the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did a new deed by raising Jesus from the dead, breaking at this one point the wall of death that surrounds all of us, death has been thoroughly relativized. To **die in the Lord** or “in Christ” means that our dying is determined by Jesus’ death and by his resurrection. To “die in the Lord” also suggests that faith in the Lord Jesus has been kept to the end of one’s life (cf. 1 Cor. 15:18; 1 Thess. 4:16; Phil. 1:21, 23). From **henceforth** refers to Christians who die between Easter and the parousia. From John’s perspective it points especially to those who die under persecution caused by the beast. The beatitude is part of the closing bracket (inclusion). The opening bracket is the prophetic oracle of 13:10. What is stated negatively in terms of predestination in 13:10 is stated positively as beatitude in 14:13. The reader therefore hears that God does not surrender his own to the brutality of the beast (13:10) but grants salvation (14:1–5) and a beatitude (14:13) to all who “die in the Lord henceforth.”

**“Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit**, speaking through the prophet John, and he adds a reason. They are blessed because **they may rest from their labors**. The dead believers are not in torment, having “*no rest*” (14:11), nor is theirs a shadowy ghostlike existence in Sheol. They enter God’s “rest” (Heb. 4:1–11), and **their deeds**, their works, **follow them** as witness either in the first resurrection (20:4–6) or in the final judgment (20:12–13). Their works disclose whether or not they followed the Lamb (14:4). God does not forget their **labors**, be it their daily toil, or their faithful endurance under pressure. This has nothing whatsoever to do with legalism or calculation of merits. For a Jew, like John, a saying like would have been acceptable: “In the hour of death, it is not silver or gold or precious stones or pearls that accompany him, but Torah and good works alone.” John would have added “faithfulness toward Jesus” to Torah (cf. 14:12).

It had been announced by each of the three angels. Now it is being executed by **one like a son of man** in the company of three other angels. This vision consists of two scenes—the grain harvest (vv. 14–16) and the gathering of the vintage (vv. 17–20). A difficult question arises at this point. Do these two scenes portray one and the same judgment in different images, or do the two scenes refer to two aspects and two different results of the final judgment? To put it another way, does the grain harvest signify the gathering of the righteous, while the vintage discloses the destruction of the beast worshipers in “the wine press of the wrath of God”? We shall sketch four different approaches to this vision.

First, the image of the harvest can be used for the gathering of the elect (e.g., Matt. 9:37). John implied it in 14:4 when he spoke of the redeemed as a “first fruits” offering. It is

indeed probable that the harvest image is meant to be understood positively. It would interlock on one side with the vision of the followers of the Lamb who are “first fruits” and who learn a new song (14:1–5). On the other side of the harvest, we hear of the praise of the redeemed who sing the song of Moses and the Lamb (15:2–4). Also in favor of making a distinction between the grain harvest of the righteous and the vintage of the idolaters is the omission of gory details as well as the absence of a reference to God’s wrath in the description of the grain harvest (vv. 14–16). These verses could be John’s interpretation of a Christian apocalyptic tradition such as Mark 13:27. “And then he [the Son of man] will send out the angels and gather his elect from ... the ends of the earth” (cf. Mark 4:29; Matt. 13:36–43). John’s vision in two parts would, in this case, portray two kinds of eschatological judgments for two kinds of people. The followers of the Lamb as well as those who heeded the summons of the eternal gospel are gathered like grain. The worshipers of the beast are thrown into the “great wine press of the wrath of God.”

Second, many of John’s symbols and images are ambivalent and defy exact identification. The two images are borrowed from Joel 3:13, where they refer to only one judgment over the same people. “Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great.” We also note that John’s text does not speak of the elect in vv. 14–16 but only of the harvest. **The earth was reaped.** Moreover, the parallels in the two scenes (“the sharp sickle,” the state of the grain and the grapes being “ripe,” the identical command, “Put in your sickle and reap”) would seem to indicate only one judgment theme involving only God’s enemies to whom the judgment had already been announced. The two scenes would be mere variations on the same theme.

Third, if we take both the similarities and the differences between the two scenes into account, then the first scene may merely relate the harvest in general, by one like a son of man at the appointed hour. This harvest may include believers and unbelievers alike. Nothing is said of their fate in the first scene (vv. 14–16). What happens to the harvest of the beast worshipers after the reaping is of no concern in the first scene. Only the event of reaping, and its agent, are important. Thus one could understand it as a harvest that includes all humans. Later on we hear that the conquerors of the beast will sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb (15:2–4), while the followers of the beast have entered into the winepress of God’s wrath (14:17–20).

Fourth, still another approach to this vision would take into consideration that chap. 14 is a preview anticipating 20:4–6 as well as 20:11–15. If this were granted, then the followers of the Lamb on Mount Zion (14:1–5) are the candidates for the millennial reign with Christ (20:4–6). They are clearly not subjected to the general judgment in 20:11–15, as we shall see. One might then draw the conclusion that the followers of the Lamb in the preview of 14:1–5 will not be subjected to the general judgment of 14:14–20 either. In that case the harvest and the vintage take place for all human beings, including those who responded at the last minute to the gospel (14:6–8 cf. 11:13), *except* the followers of the Lamb. Their future is “the first resurrection” and the millennial reign with Christ (20:4–6),

not the final judgment of 14:14–20 and its parallel in 20:11–15. John, however, does not tell us everything at once.

Our approach will be that John’s vision presents a preview of salvation (grain harvest) and of judgment (vintage harvest). There is no need to regard vv. 15–17 as another interpolation, as Charles suggested. The harvest image connects with the gospel of the first angel (14:6–7) and with the conclusion of the interlude (11:13). This theme is taken up in 15:3–4 when God is addressed as “king of the nations” to whom “all nations shall come” and whom all “shall worship.” These are “all” who have been gathered in the grain harvest. The question concerning the judgment of the followers of the Lamb is left open for the time being in the letter.

John brought together several threads in order to articulate this vision: the Synoptic apocalypse (Mark 13:10, 27), Dan. 7:13, and Joel 3:13; and, for the vintage, he is dependent on Isa. 63:1–6.

**14–16**—The figure of the **one like a son of man** is the central actor in 14:6–20. The reader’s attention is prodded by the introductory exclamation **and lo** (cf. 4:1; 14:1). The title Son of man is avoided by John both here and in the inaugural vision (1:13). The comparison “like a son of man” comes from Dan. 7:13, where it symbolizes “the saints of the Most High” in contrast to the beastlike nature of pagan empires. The Son of man appears as an individual eschatological agent of salvation in the *Similitudes of 1 Enoch* (37–71; cf. 2 Esdras 13); in the Gospels this title is used exclusively by Jesus himself. Why John avoided the titular usage of Son of man, even though it had its firm place in Christian apocalyptic traditions (Mark 13:26; Luke 9:26), can only be surmised. (See below.) Christians would, of course, recognize Jesus in the son of man-like person. The **golden wreath** (RSV, **crown**; Greek, *stephanos*) on his head (also worn by the 24 elders, 4:4) shows him to be superior to ordinary angelic agents. The **sharp sickle in his hand** designates him as judge of the earth. Moreover, he is **seated** on a **white cloud**, which is the vehicle for his parousia (cf. Mark 13:26; Acts 1:9–11). His *sitting* on a cloud recalls the theme of John’s letter: Behold he is *coming* with the clouds (1:7). Yet, oddly, John’s visions never refer explicitly to Jesus’ “coming” at all (cf. Dan. 7:13). This may be due to the influence of Joel 3:12, where it says that Yahweh will “sit” to judge the nations. Also it is odd that **another angel**, coming **out of the temple**, should give a command to him, ordering him to commence the harvest. Other visions picture the immediacy of Jesus and God without an intermediary. This has led some interpreters to suggest that an angel, not Jesus, is the one like a son of man. A better hypothesis would propose the use of a Jewish-Christian tradition by John. In it, “son of man” was not a title. The tradition did not speak of his “coming” on a cloud but of his sitting on one, and, without embarrassment, it advocated an “angel Christology.”

The command of the other angel to Jesus uses the language of Joel 3:13a and declares that **the hour to reap**, that is, the hour of judgment (14:7), **has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe**, whether in terms of the “endurance of the saints” (14:12) or in

terms of worship of the beast (14:9). **So he who sat upon the cloud swung his sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped.** What happened to the harvest once reaped is told in the next two scenes (vv. 17–20 and 15:1–4).

**17–20**—The Grapes of Wrath: The vision of the previous verses continues without interruption. The harvest scene had not spoken of a separation, a sorting out, of wheat from tares (Matt. 13:30). Neither does the vintage vision, but it presents a picture of violent destruction which is a preview of 19:11–21 (19:15 uses the same imagery of treading “the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God”). The absence of any reference to Jesus Christ in these verses should not mislead us into thinking that he has nothing to do with the carnage portrayed here. A reading of 19:11–20 will refute such notions.

**And another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle**, just like that of the one seated on the cloud (v. 14). And just as the one seated on the cloud was commanded to commence the harvest with the words, **Put in your sickle and reap** (vv. 15 and 18; cf. Joel 3:13), so the same command is now given by yet another angel (v. 18). This last one came **out from the altar**, the place where the martyrs wait for justice (6:9–11), where “the prayers of the saints” ascend to God’s throne (8:3–4), asking for the coming of the kingdom and for justice. The execution of God’s judgment is related to the church’s worship. This is indeed surprising.

This angel is further designated as the one **who has power over fire**. Assignments of different elements of nature to particular angels are found in *1 Enoch* 60:11–21 (cf. Rev. 16:5). Also, this particular angelic job description suggests the use of a Jewish-Christian tradition. An angel who has power over **fire**, a symbol of judgment (cf. 2 Thess. 1:1–7; Matt. 18:8), tells another angel to begin the judgment. **So the angel swung his sickle on the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth.** Thus far the parallelism is more or less maintained with the previous image of the harvest. Now, however, comes something new which constitutes the climax of this scene. First the angel threw the vintage **into the great wine press of the wrath of God**. Second, **the wine press was trodden outside the city**, and, third, **blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse’s bridle, for one thousand six hundred stadia**, which is about 180 miles, the approximate length of Palestine.

The image of the winepress is taken from Isa. 63:3b–6, where Yahweh speaks: “I trod them [the nations, especially Edom] in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their lifeblood is sprinkled upon my garments, and I have stained all my raiment.... I trod down the peoples in my anger, ... and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.” In Isaiah it is Yahweh, in 19:11–21 it is Christ, and here it is an angel who executes this carnage of **blood flowing as high as a horse’s bridle** (cf. *1 Enoch* 100:1–3: “the horse shall walk through the blood of sinners up to his chest”). The dimension of this bloodbath is 1,600 stadia. This is to be interpreted either geographically, the length of Palestine from Tyre to El-Arish, or, more likely, symbolically. Sixteen hundred is the square of four (the number of the world and its four corners, 7:1) multiplied by the square of ten which signifies totality. If so, the carnage

of condemnation covers the whole world. More important is the comment that the winepress **was trodden outside the city**. Caird's interpretation that outside the city was the place of martyrdom of the faithful does not commend itself. This **city** is the elect with God and the Lamb in their midst (cf. 20:4–6, 9; 21:1–22:5, 14–15). The faithful people of God are not touched by the vintage of wrath, as John had already conveyed on several occasions (interlude of chap. 7; 11:1–2; 14:1–5). **Outside the city** means outside the new Jerusalem, as we shall see.<sup>2</sup>

#### f. The Lamb on Mount Zion (14:1–5)

From the forces of evil John turns to those of good, to the triumph of the Lamb. Some see seven short oracles here, but it is perhaps better to see the sevenfoldness in the seven angels of verses 6–20.

1. The scene is vivid (*I looked, and there before me ...*). John sees on Mount Zion *the Lamb*, and with him 144,000 with his *name* and that of his Father *written on their foreheads*. These marked with the mark of God form a contrast with the followers of the beast who bore his name on their foreheads or right hand (13:16). Mount Zion is sometimes associated with deliverance (Joel 2:32) and this is in mind here. God's people are finally triumphant. Some take the words to refer to the earthly Zion in which case we must interpret them of the millennial reign. But this seems unlikely. In the first place, the Lamb would have made the transition from heaven to earth without any comment being made on it. And in the second, John appears to be referring to the final triumph and not an intermediate victory. We should not overlook the fact that the Lamb is standing on the mountain, whereas the beast stood only on sand (13:1).

For the number *144,000* see the note on 7:4. Here, as there, it is unlikely to stand for a spiritual elite of any sort, such as the martyrs. This number of completeness stands for the whole church of Jesus Christ. We should not miss the note of fulfilment. 'A hundred and forty-four thousand were sealed, a hundred and forty-four thousand were saved' (Kiddle). There they were on earth confronted by enemies. Now they are in heaven and not one of them has been lost.

2. As often, John hears an unidentified voice from heaven. He is fond of this device. It indicates in a general manner that the voice is of divine origin, but leaves it open whether it comes from God himself or from one of his angels or from some other source. This voice seems to have impressed John, for he describes it with a threefold simile. It is *like the roar of rushing waters* (cf. 1:15), i.e. like the voice of Christ. It is *like a loud peal of thunder* (cf. 6:1), i.e. very loud indeed. And it is *like harpists playing their harps*. The voice was not only

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<sup>2</sup> Krodel, G. A. (1989). *Revelation* (pp. 260–276). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

loud, but melodious and attractive. The voice is probably that of the 144,000.

3. For *a new song* see note on 5:9. The name of God is not mentioned but the song is sung *before the throne*, so that it is sung in his very presence. The use of the term *throne* may be a way of emphasizing God's sovereignty. It is not explicitly said why only the 144,000 *could learn the song*. But since John immediately refers to them as *redeemed from the earth*, it is a fair inference that the song is connected with this fact. Without the experience of redemption no-one could sing the song. Redeemed *from the earth* indicates redemption from worldly things and worldly people. They are God's.

4. The triple *these* (NIV alters the last two to *they*) draws attention to three distinguishing marks of this group. The first is that *they did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure* (better is AV, 'they are virgins'). This is surprising, in the first instance because the 144,000 stands for the whole church and it is not easy to apply the first part of the saying to women members nor the second part to men, and in the second instance because the New Testament does not regard sexual relations as defiling. This idea was found in the ancient world and in time became prominent in the church. But in the New Testament marriage is a state to be commended and sexual relations are a necessary part of the married state (1 Cor. 7:3ff.). The most the New Testament writers say is that there are some pieces of Christian service that can be better carried out by the unmarried (1 Cor. 7:32–34). Some suggest that *defile* means improper sexual relations (so BAGD). But our passage seems to mean that the 144,000 had no sexual relations at all ('they are virgins').

The answer to the difficulties seems to be that here, as so often, John is using symbolism. Virginity is ascribed to the people of God in the Old Testament (e.g. 2 Kgs 19:21; Jer. 18:13; Lam. 2:13; etc.), and unfaithfulness to God is likened to improper sexual relations (Ezek. 16; Hos. 5:4; etc.). So also Paul sees the church as the bride of Christ. He says, 'I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him' (2 Cor. 11:2). Later John sees 'the bride, the wife of the Lamb' (21:9). But the marriage is at this point future; the bride must be chaste. So she is described as having no sexual relations at all. John is saying that the 144,000 were not unfaithful to their Lord. They glorified God in their bodies (1 Cor. 6:20).

This is reinforced by the term 'virgins'. If *did not defile themselves with woman* is a strange expression to use of women, this is an unusual one for men. A few passages are cited where it is used of men, but none appears to be as early as this. This is the only one of fifteen New Testament occurrences where it refers to males. We should see the term as symbolical. The people in question have kept themselves completely free from intercourse with the pagan world system. They have lived up to what is implied in their betrothal to Christ. We thus have one expression which strictly applies to men balanced by another which (as far as our knowledge goes) was used of women only right up to this time. In each case John is concerned with spiritual truth.

The second point about the redeemed is that they *follow the Lamb wherever he goes*. They do not and cannot lay down the place where their service will take them. He leads; they follow. The third point is that they were *purchased from among men as firstfruits* (the Greek does not have *offered*). For *purchased* see note on 5:9. *From among men* means that they no longer belong to the world. *Firstfruits* were the first part of the harvest and were holy in a special sense. They could not be put to ordinary secular use for they belonged to God (Exod. 23:19; Neh. 10:35; Prov. 3:9). Even when the word did not refer to the harvest in the strict sense it usually meant a gift made to a deity (see MM). The thought of belonging to God is the primary idea. James sees the church as ‘a kind of firstfruits of all he created’ (Jas 1:18) and it is something like this that John has in mind. The church belongs to God. Her calling is to be consecrated to him. There is a close connection between *God and the Lamb* as often (see note on 5:13).

5. Complete truthfulness is a further characteristic of believers (cf. Zeph. 3:13); *no lie* is found with them. The world of the day does not seem to have been exactly overburdened with people who had a strict regard for truth, and Christians must have stood out (cf. Eccus. 20:24). Especially did they reject *the lie*, the lie of the antichrist. They are summed up as *blameless*. This adjective is sometimes used of sacrificial victims, so there may be a hint that Christian service is sacrificial.

### **g. The harvest of the earth (14:6–20)**

Though John gives it no special emphasis, this seventh sign is itself septiform. Seven angels either proclaim judgment or take some part in bringing it about. The series culminates in a dreadfully final picture of the earth as drenched in blood. We may regard the messages of the three angels and of the voice from heaven as an interlude between the sixth and seventh signs (cf. the interludes between the sixth and seventh seals and between the sixth and seventh trumpets).

#### ***i. Three angels proclaim judgment (14:6–12)***

As three angels in succession proclaim judgment, the saints are assured once more that the triumph of evil will be short-lived. God will certainly bring judgment upon evil-doers, but in his own good time.

6. *Another angel* is difficult since there has been no preceding angel since 12:7. Perhaps it differentiates this angel from those mentioned later, and *another* is common in this chapter (vv. 8, 9, both omitted in NIV, and 15, 17, 18). Earlier an eagle flew ‘in mid-air’ (8:13, where see note) proclaiming a threefold ‘woe’ to earth’s inhabitants. Now an angel proclaims there an (not *the*) *eternal gospel*. This is the only occurrence of *gospel* in this book.

At first sight there is not much of the ‘good news’ about the message this angel brings. But first, judgment is a necessary implication of the gospel (cf. Rom. 2:16). The words in

fact form a last appeal for repentance from those about to be judged (cf. Mark 1:15; Acts 14:15; etc.). Secondly, the gospel means the final overthrow of evil and that is certainly 'good news' (Hoeksema sees it as 'the gospel that God is sovereign'). Thirdly, John was writing to Christians facing persecution. For them it was indeed good news that everyone, their persecutors included, would be called upon to give account of themselves, and that the time of the power of evil was determined. Torrance comments, 'It is impossible for the Church at any time to come to easy terms with the contemporary order ... as long as the Cross is in the field and the everlasting Gospel is preached, God's love will strike in judgment at all the defence-works of evil thrown up in state and society and history by the banding of men together in massive reaction and perverted self-defence against the will and Word of God.'

*Eternal* points to a message that is permanently valid, while *those who live on the earth* (see note on 6:10) and *every nation*, etc. (see note on 5:9) show that it is universally applicable.

7. The angel speaks *in a loud voice* for his words go out to all mankind. He calls on people to *fear God*. Evil-doers have much to be afraid of (cf. 6:15–17; 11:11, 13). But the angel's message is not basically negative and he calls on people to *give ... glory* to God and to *worship* him. God is characterized as Creator and *the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water* are singled out for mention. Everything that exists comes from the hand of God. Those who oppose him are in a hopeless position. The worshippers of the beast had been impressed by his power (13:3, 7–8, 13, 15). Now they are compelled to recognize real power. 'Here is the bitter irony of their lot: though they damn themselves eternally by their refusal to face the truth, one day they will be *forced* to face it. Sooner or later the "glory" they refuse to "give" the Creator willingly will be torn from them by the spectacle of His wrath' (Kiddle).

8. A *second angel* announces that *Fallen! Fallen is Babylon* (cf. 18:2), where the position of the verb and its repetition put emphasis on *fallen*, and the aorist marks completed action. All this gives the impression of imminence and certainty. There can be no doubt about the fall of the city. This is the first mention of *Babylon* in this book (again in 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21); in every case Babylon is called 'great'. There is no reason for holding that John means the Mesopotamian city of this name (though he may well have in mind Jer. 51:7–8). The first time the Bible mentions Babylon (Gen. 11:9; but cf. Gen. 10:10) we read that after the Flood people tried to scale the heights of heaven by building a mighty tower. The name thus stands for the pride of mankind and for the heathen city-empire. For John, Babylon is the great city, the symbol of mankind in community opposed to the things of God. Sometimes in other writings Babylon means Rome (2 Bar. 11:1; Sib. Or. 5:143, 159, 434; possibly 1 Pet. 5:13). John does not go as far as this, though doubtless to first-century people there was no better illustration of what Babylon means than contemporary Rome. John is looking forward to the overthrow of all the evil that Babylon stands for.

The reason for her fall is her bad influence. She made all nations 'drink of the wine of

the wrath of her fornication' (AV; again in 18:3; NIV has taken *thymos* in the sense *maddening*). John is combining two thoughts: first, that Babylon makes the nations drink the wine of her impurity (she corrupts them with her evil ways), and second, that this impurity brings down on it the wrath of God (cf. Jer. 25:15). 'The nations, having drunk the wine of the fornication of Babylon, have really therein drunk the wine of the wrath of God' (Charles).

**9–10.** *A third angel spoke in a loud voice.* He concerns himself with those who worship the beast and his image and who have his mark (13:16). They will be the objects of the divine wrath. John uses two words for wrath here: *thymos* (NIV *fury*) and *orgē* (*wrath*; see note on 6:16). The two words do not differ greatly in meaning, but *orgē* more readily denotes the kind of anger that arises from a settled disposition and *thymos* anger of a more passionate kind. It accords with this that in the New Testament *orgē* is the usual word for the divine wrath. Indeed, outside Revelation *thymos* is used of the divine anger only once. But as it is the more vivid word it is not surprising that it occurs often in this book (12:12; 14:8, 10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 18:3; 19:15). Stählin can say, 'But one might very well say that *thymos*, to which there clings the concept of passionate outburst, was well adapted for describing the visions of the seer, but not for delineating Paul's concept of the wrath of God.'

The wine of God's wrath is *poured full strength*, where *poured* really means 'mixed'. The word is used for preparing wine for consumption by mixing it with spices, water, or whatever was needed. It is paradoxical to say 'mixed without mixing', but this is John's way of saying that it is not broken down in any way. The wrath of God will be visited on these sinners with no mitigation (cf. Ps. 75:8, and for this verb and adjective Ps. Sol. 8:15). The effect is torment *with burning sulphur*. This is, of course, to be taken symbolically, but seriously. The modern vogue for dispensing with hell has no counterpart in Revelation. John is quite sure that the consequences of sin follow sinners into the life to come. Here on earth they may rejoice over their misdeeds. There they will suffer for them. This will take place in the *presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb*. Christians who suffered for their faith did so in the presence of crowds of onlookers. Ultimately their tormentors will be punished in the presence of more august spectators 'in keeping with many other scenes of this book where the deepest sting that bitter conscience is dealt is that it must suffer while utter purity is looking on' (Love).

**11.** The *torment* in verse 10 is eternal (Sweet sees it as 'the most terrible' picture in the book). The beast's worshippers have *no rest day or night*. They contrast with the four living ones of whom exactly the same expression is used to describe their unceasing worship (4:8). John spells out the identity of the sufferers: *those who worship the beast and his image and anyone who receives the mark of his name*.

Some complain about John's handling of this theme, feeling that the topic should not be dwelt upon. But John is not gloating over the suffering of the wicked as some later Christians have done. Nor is he describing suffering for suffering's sake in the manner of

the horror thriller. He has a sense of serious purpose. Motives of self-interest impelled many to try to escape martyrdom; they thought they would be better off if they denied the faith. John wants them to be under no illusions. They must reckon with ultimate realities. And, despite our modern hesitation, we must reckon with them, too. We may shut our eyes to facts, but this does not do away with them.

**12.** A consideration of ultimate realities sustains the people of God. They must pass through troubles, but they know that their troubles are temporary whereas those of their tormentors will be eternal. This sense of values keeps them calm. It issues in steadfastness (see note on 2:2). *The saints* are characterized by their obedience to *God's commandments* and their faithfulness to *Jesus*. Both ethical conduct and reliance on the Saviour are important.

### ***ii. The dead who die in the Lord (14:13)***

An interjection details the blessedness of those who die in Christ. Our natural tendency is to think of blessedness in terms of this life. But in a persecution situation John wants it to be clear that there are more important things than this life.

**13.** Once more John hears from heaven a voice he does not identify. It has the highest authority, but whether it comes direct from God or through an intermediary he does not tell us. It pronounces blessed those *who die in the Lord* (for the seven beatitudes in this book, see note on 1:3). This is a noteworthy piece of encouragement in a situation where the steadfastness of the saints was most important. God's people may be grossly maltreated even up to and including the death penalty. But they, and not their tormentors, remain blessed. It is not easy to see whether we should take *from now on* with what precedes or with what follows. Grammatically it could go with either, but the difficulties of attaching it to 'Yes,' says the Spirit leads most to take it with the preceding (as NIV). Yet those who die in the Lord are always blessed and not only from now on, so some suggest we should link it with resting from their labours. This would be attractive were it not for the intervening words. They are absent from some MSS (see the textual note in *GNT, TCGNT*), but most accept them, as NIV. We could, however, take *ap' arti* (*from now on*) as *aparti* ('assuredly') and translate "Assuredly," says the Spirit, "they will rest ..." (see NEB mg.). That the speaker is *the Spirit* adds solemnity to the words. The Spirit does not often speak in this book, but he does in the letters to the churches (2:7, 11, etc.) and in the final invitation (22:17).

The word *labour* (*kopos*) means 'labour to the point of weariness' and sometimes merely pain. It is in this latter sense that we should understand it here. Heaven is not so much a place where no work is done as one where pain has ceased. Believers rest from their *labour*, but their *deeds* (*erga*) go into the life beyond the grave. This gives dignity to all the work in which Christians engage. They are occupied in no insignificant task.

**iii. The reaper on the cloud (14:14–16)**

John sees an angel with a sickle sitting on a cloud. The harvest of the earth is ripe and is reaped. This vivid way of speaking about the end of the world would come home with great force in an age when people were more familiar with agricultural processes than they are now. The harvest is the climax. Three angels have already pronounced judgment. This builds up to the moment when the angel sitting on the cloud plunges his sickle into the earth's harvest. There is drama and finality about the action.

**14.** For *I looked, and there before me* see note on 6:2. John sees the scene vividly. Many see the one *like a son of man* as Christ. The name, the fact that he sits on a *cloud* (cf. Dan. 7:13), and his wearing of a *crown of gold* favour the identification, and the holding of a *sharp sickle* would not be out of character. But the Greek means 'a son of man', not 'the son of the man', which is the form used of Christ in the Gospels. And a command is given him in rather peremptory terms (v. 15), which is very hard to reconcile with this identification. We could regard the command as coming from God and the angel as no more than a messenger, but the command is still peremptory and no-one seems to have explained why the angel is closer to God than is the glorious Christ. On earth, it is true, Jesus did not know the time of the End (Mark 13:32); he said that this is a matter for the Father himself (Acts 1:7). Yet when full allowance is made for this it remains curious that the exalted Christ should receive a command couched in the terms of verse 15. And it is more than curious that the Lamb who is 'in the centre of the throne', and who throughout this book is depicted as in the closest communion with the Father, should need an angel to tell him of the Father's will. That the incarnate Jesus should be ignorant of the time of the End is explicable. That the Lamb who is 'in the centre of the throne' should be ignorant of it (and need an angel to tell him that the time has come) is not.

It is also unlikely that John would depict the glorious Christ as doing essentially the same thing as an angel does (v. 19). A small point is that if this were Christ we would have six angels in the series, whereas it is much more in keeping with John's method that we should have seven. We should also bear in mind that, whereas to modern Christian ears, 'one like a son of man' sounds like a reference to Christ, it is not a strange designation in apocalyptic. There it is a normal way of referring to an angelic being, men being usually symbolized by animals of some sort. It is best to think of the holder of the sickle as an angel, albeit an important one.

**15–16.** The familiar description, *another angel*, introduces the fifth in the series. He comes *out of the temple* (or 'sanctuary') which means from the very presence of God. His words are addressed to one person alone, the angel *sitting on the cloud*, but he *called in a loud voice*, as befits an angel. *The time* (lit. 'the hour') *has come* is not unlike some passages in the Fourth Gospel, where 'the hour' is an important concept. It denotes the inevitability with which things come to their climax. There, however, the cross is meant. Here it is the end of the world, as *the harvest of the earth* makes clear.

*Is ripe* (*exēranthē*) points to the drying off of plants when the crop is fully ripe. The time for the intervention of him who bore the sickle is not chosen arbitrarily. He puts in the sickle at exactly the right moment. Persecuted believers may know that if God's intervention is delayed this is only because it is not yet the right moment to reap. Reaping is certain as soon as the harvest of the earth is ripe. Some take this to refer to the gathering in of the righteous with the symbolism of wheat harvest (cf. Matt. 13:30, 38; Mark 4:29). They see the wicked in the next section where the grape harvest, with its treading out of the grapes, is more suitable imagery for the judgment of the wicked. This is possible. But it is usually supported by seeing Christ as the Reaper who gathers in the saints, a suggestion which, as we have noticed, is not soundly based. Moreover, there is nothing in the context to show that the righteous are in view. Wheat is not even mentioned, for example. It is better to see the harvest as general.

The angel on the cloud did as he was told. He reaped the earth. This is not explained and we are left to apply the imagery for ourselves.

#### ***iv. The vintage (14:17–20)***

We move on to grape harvest, a very suitable figure of judgment with its treading of the grapes.

**17.** There now appears *another angel*, the sixth in the series, and he too has a *sickle*. Like his predecessor he came out of the sanctuary. And, as with the first-mentioned reaper, it is specified that his sickle was *sharp*.

**18.** The seventh angel came *from the altar* (see note on 6:9). The altar has earlier been associated with the prayers of the saints and with judgment (8:3–5, where see note). This may well be in mind here also. John sees the judgment as God's final answer to the prayers of his suffering saints. This angel has *charge of the fire*, an unusual expression which is not explained but fire and judgment are often closely connected. He commands the angel with the sickle to *gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine*, adding *its grapes are ripe* (cf. v. 15). *Drepanon* may denote a pruning-knife as well as a sickle, but the point here is its grim overtones. John may have in mind the words of Joel 3:13: 'Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness!'

**19.** The angel obeyed. He reaped the earth's vine and hurled what he gathered *into the great winepress of God's wrath* (cf. 19:15), a vivid description of the judgment of the wicked.

**20.** John does not say who trod the *winepress*, nor what was the *city* outside which it took place; presumably neither is of great concern. For treading the winepress, cf. Isaiah 63:3, and for action outside the city we might compare 'outside the city gate' (Heb. 13:12). John's major concern is to show that there will be a cataclysmic destruction of mankind at the end of the age. The vast quantity of blood (cf. *1 Enoch* 100:3, 'the horse shall walk

through the blood of sinners up to his chest') points to the blotting out of all mankind. The earth has come to a final end. John is doing no more than allude to this at this point. He develops the idea later.

*1,600 stadia* is a distance of about 184 miles (300 kilometres). But John's interest is rather in the number than in the precise distance it represents. Of the explanations suggested perhaps best is that which sees it as the product of sixteen (the square of four, the number of the earth which is the abode of the wicked) and one hundred (the square of ten, the number of completeness). It is also the square of forty, a number associated with punishment. Blood stretching for 1,600 stadia thus stands for the complete judgment of the whole earth and the destruction of all the wicked.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Morris, L. (1987). *Revelation: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 20, pp. 169–179). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.