

Reading Revelation

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What is Revelation?

Revelation is bracketed by a prologue (1:1-8) and an epilogue (22:6-21), which share many features. The prologue gives important insight into how to read the book.

Correct interpretation of a piece of writing requires that we know what type of writing it is. Revelation identifies itself as three types of literature: an apocalypse (1:1), a prophecy (1:3), and a letter (1:4).

Apocalypse

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. (1:1-2 ESV)

Two stages:

1. John saw: God sent his angel to show/signify to John things he could otherwise not see. How could he see these things? By being “in the Spirit.”
2. John bore witness: John told to write what he has seen (1:11, 19). “Then I saw...” 32×; “after this I saw...” 5×. This = “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

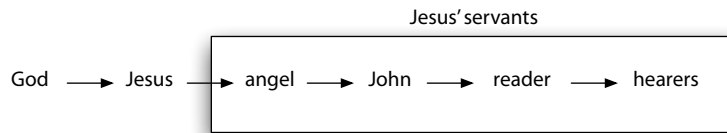


Fig 1. The Chain of Revelation

The Things Which Must Happen

This revelation concerns the things which must soon take place, ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει, 4×:

1. The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει (1:1).
2. Jesus to John: “Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα” (1:19).
3. Interpreting angel to John: “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα” (4:1).
4. Interpreting angel to John: “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει” (22:6).

What are these things that *must* happen? They must happen *soon*; when do they happen? What is the chronology? Four major interpretations, hinging on a major hermeneutical question.

1. Chronology concerns the things seen in the visions: the seven seals, trumpets, bowls, unfold chronologically. Preterism, historicism, futurism.
 - a. *Preterism*: nearly everything has already happened. These things must happen “soon” and so they did:
 - i. in destruction of Jerusalem Temple in AD 70. Implies John must have written the book before, during the reign of Nero or Vespasian. Babylon = Jerusalem. Temple (11) is Second Temple in Jerusalem. 3½ years = the Jewish War (67-70).

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- ii. Fall of Roman Empire (sack of Rome 410; deposition of last emperor 476). Babylon = Rome.
- iii. Blended: 4-11 refer to Fall of Jerusalem; 12-19 to Fall of Rome.
- b. *Historicism*: the events which must happen do so throughout course of church history. Popular during Reformation which identified Beast = Pope; Babylon = Papacy. No serious support today.
- c. *Futurism*: the dominant American view. 1:19 shows basic structure of book:
 “Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this (ἃ εἶδες καὶ ἃ εἰσὶν καὶ ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα)” (1:19). Jesus tells John to write about three things:
 - i. the things you have seen (ἃ εἶδες): the vision of Jesus (1:9-20)
 - ii. the things which are (ἃ εἰσὶν): the messages to the churches (2-3). The church age. Many futurists interpret these seven churches as representing seven stages of church history.
 - iii. the things which are about to take place after these (ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα): after the church age.
 - 1. Rapture: angel’s invitation of John into heaven symbolizes rapture of church. First secret return of Christ.
 - 2. 1st seal begins the 7-year Tribulation, the 70th week of Daniel 9:26 commences. Church does not go through Tribulation because it has been raptured from earth to heaven.
 - 3. Armageddon: armies gather; Christ returns (19:11), ushering in the Millennial kingdom (20:1-6).
- 2. Chronology = seeing visions, “Then I saw...”
 - a. *Idealism*: symbolically presents the situation of the world throughout the Church Age. Sometimes seen as 6 or 7 cycles. “Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this” (1:19); the things which you have seen = all the visions = the revelation.

What Revelation itself says: The accomplishment of these things is celebrated three times:

1. “The kingdom of the world has become (ἐγένετο) the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (11:15). The climax of the first half of the book, at the blowing of the 7th Trumpet.
2. “It is done!” γέγονεν (16:17) at the pouring out of the 7th Bowl which unleashes the great earthquake which topples Babylon, the world city.
3. “It is done” γέγοναν (21:6), following the declaration, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (21:3). The climax of the second half of the book, after all that is opposed to God is thrown into the lake of fire.

These features show the top-level structure of the book:

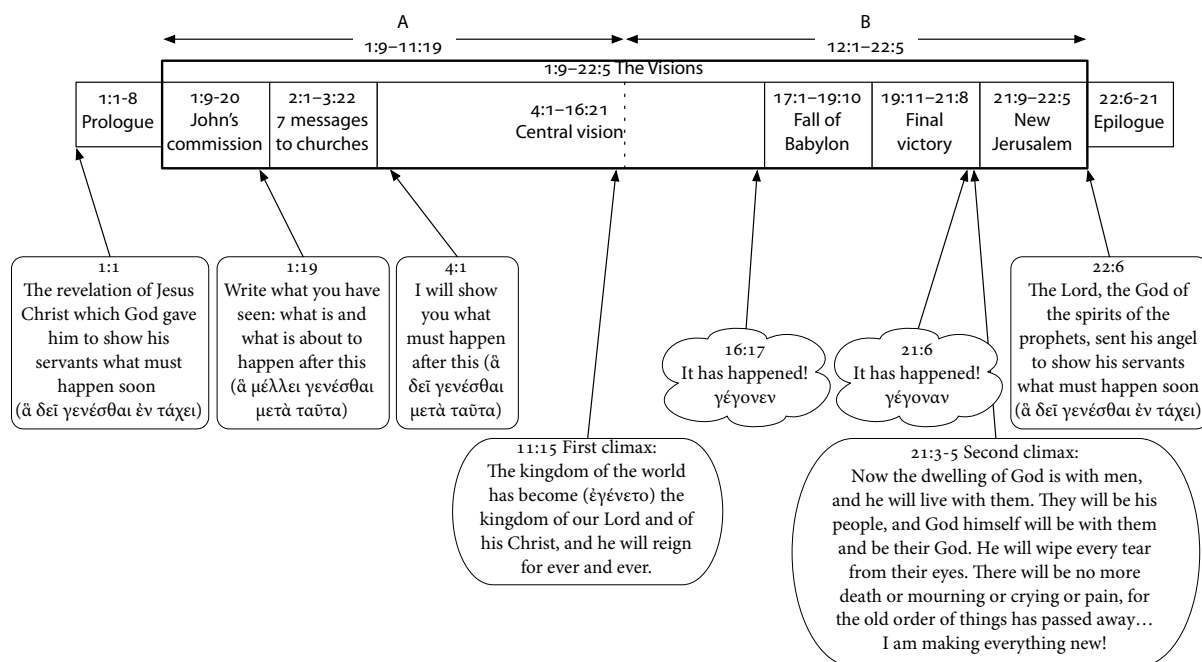


Fig. 2: What must happen

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These things *must* (δεῖ) happen: God is the Pantocrator (1:8), ruler of all; his enemies cannot thwart his purposes. They must happen *soon* (ἐν τάχει); the time is near (1:3, cf. 22:10).

What John is Shown

The verb “show” δείκνυμι is used 7×:

1. Prologue and Epilogue: God gave the revelation and sent his angel “to show his servants the things which must soon take place” δείξαι τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει (1:1; 22:6). In addition, the alternate form δεικνύω is used once in the epilogue to refer to “the angel who had been showing me these things” ὁ ἄγγελος ὁ δεικνύων μοι ταῦτα (22:8).
2. Three times during the visions the interpreting angel summons John, “Come, I will show you (δείξω σοι)”:
 - a. “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this” ἀνάβα ὧδε, καὶ δείξω σοι ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα (4:1).
 - b. “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute” δεῦρο, δείξω σοι τὸ κρίμα τῆς πόρνης τῆς μεγάλης (17:1).
 - c. “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb” δείξω σοι τὴν νύμφην τὴν γυναῖκα τοῦ ἁρνίου (21:9).
3. Yet only twice is John actually shown something: “then he [the angel] showed me” (καὶ ἔδειξέν μοι):
 - a. the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God (21:10).
 - b. the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb (22:1).

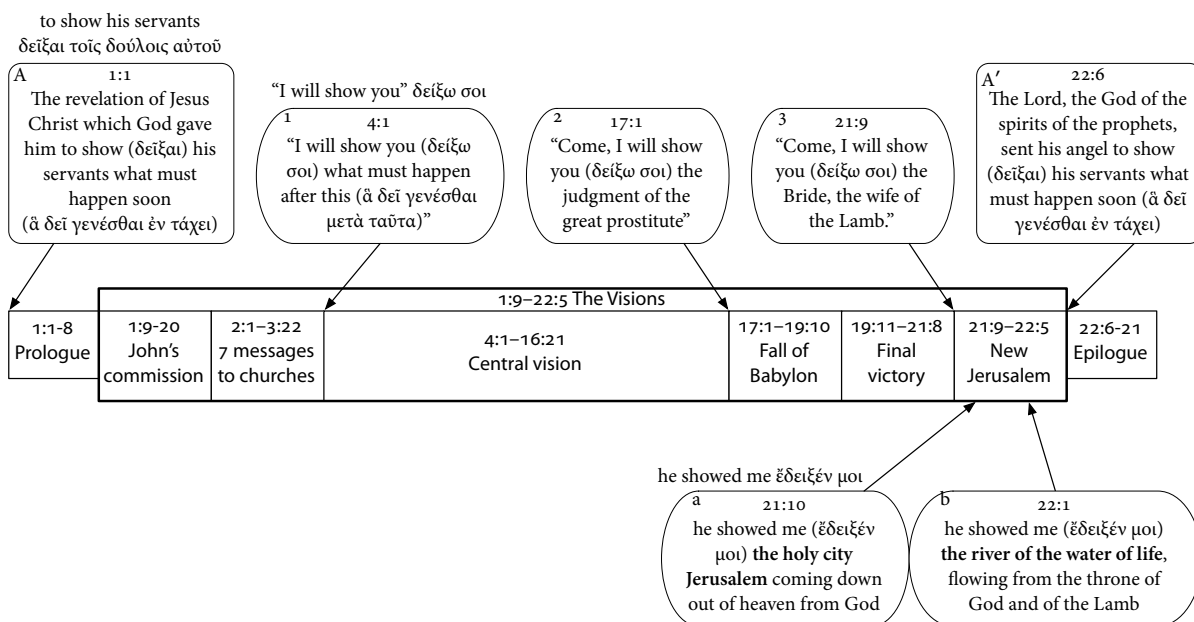


Fig. 3: What is shown

Prophecy

...John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. (1:2-3)

The book is also a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19).

Jesus: “Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book” (22:7)

Angel: “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.” (22:10)

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Prophet forth-tells, not foretells. Prophets declare, “Thus says the Lord.” A prophet is God’s mouthpiece, proclaiming his word for the present.

Blessing on the one reading (aloud) and the ones listening. Context = worship service.

2× blessing on the one keeping the words of prophecy.

Like all prophetic words from God this one comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

7 prophetic messages to the churches: from Jesus and from Spirit.

1. Jesus: “Thus saith...”

2. Spirit: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Letter

John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace, from him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (1:4-5)

...

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen. (22:21)

An epistolary framework (1:4-5; 22:21) marks the whole book as a letter to seven churches of Asia Minor.

It is a pastoral letter from a shepherd (John) to his seven-fold flock.

Who’s Who in Revelation

There are two, and only two, sides. Everyone is on one side or the other.

	God’s side	God’s enemies
Leadership	God, Jesus Christ, Spirit	Dragon, beast, false prophet
Supernatural beings	4 living creatures, 24 elders, angels	demonic spirits
Human beings		
City	New Jerusalem	Babylon
Status	True	Counterfeit

God’s side

Leadership: God, Jesus Christ the Lamb, Spirit.

The second half of the prologue (1:4b-8) tells us a lot about God.

1. The Greeting (1:4b-5a)

the only trinitarian greeting in the NT:

Standard NT greeting

Rev 1:4a-5b

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Grace and peace to you
from God our Father and
the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace and peace to you
from him who is and who was and who is to come, and
from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and
from Jesus Christ
the faithful witness,
the firstborn of the dead, and
the ruler of kings on earth. (1:4b-5a).

1. God: “the one who is and who was and who is coming” (1:4, 8; 4:8; cf. 11:17; 16:5).
 - a. “the one who is and who was,” ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν, is a reference to God’s personal name, יהוה Yahweh. ὁ ὢν “the one who is” is LXX translation of אֲנִי ’ehyeh “I am” in Exod 3:14.
 - b. Instead of ἔσομαι, “I will be,” John uses ὁ ἐρχόμενος (present participle), “the one who is coming.” In OT the verb אָבָה “come” is used of God coming in eschatological judgment and salvation (e.g. Isa 40:10). ὁ ἐρχόμενος used in NT of Messiah, “the Expected One” (Matt 11:3; 21:9; 23:39; Mark 11:9; Luke 7:19, 20; 13:35; 19:38; John 6:14; 12:13). The beast who “was and is not and will be present,” ἦν καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν καὶ παρέσται (17:8; cf. 17:11) is a Satanic parody. John clearly avoids ascribing the title ὁ ἐρχόμενος, “the one who comes” to the beast.
2. The Spirit: The seven spirits, or seven-fold Spirit, before God’s throne are also seven lamps (4:5), and are sent out into all the earth (5:6). The Spirit mediates between heaven and heaven’s colony on earth, the Church. The Spirit gives John vision into otherwise-unseen spiritual realities (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10).
3. Jesus: John applies to Jesus three terms from Psalm 89, a Messianic psalm.
 - a. The faithful witness (Ps 89:38[37]): bore faithful testimony to God, even unto death.
 - b. Firstborn from the dead (Ps 89:27[28]): passed through death into new life. As firstborn, he is the first of many who will follow.
 - c. Ruler of the kings of the earth (Ps 89:27[28]): exalted to heaven as King of kings and Lord of lords.

God’s people are called to follow Jesus wherever he goes (cf. 14:4): in faithful witness, even unto death; through death into new life; and exaltation to heaven to reign with Christ.

2. Doxology (1:5b-6)

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1:5b-6)

The 3-fold description of Jesus Christ’s status (5a) produces praise (δόξα) for his 3-fold actions to us:

1. loves us
2. has delivered us from our sins by his blood
3. transferred us into God’s kingdom to be his priests (to serve him)

True dominion now belongs to Christ. Therefore Jesus is worthy to receive both the scroll (and open it) and worship (5:9, 13). No one else is worthy.

3. The Coming of Jesus (1:7)

Behold, he is coming with the clouds,
and every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him,
and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.
Even so. Amen. (1:7)

The doxology to Jesus leads John to eager anticipation of the coming of Jesus, combining Dan 7:13 (behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man) and Zech 12:10 (when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him).

The coming of Jesus is a major theme:

1. The coming of God ὁ ἐρχόμενος “the one who is coming” will be to the world in judgment. The coming of Jesus will be to his churches in either judgment or salvation.

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2. Jesus himself says 10× “I am coming”: 7× ἔρχομαι, 3× ἦξω. He says this to five of the churches:
 - a. negative warning of judgment (I will come to you): Ephesus (2:5), Pergamum (2:16), Sardis (3:3).
 - b. positive call to endure (hold on to what you have): Thyatira (2:25), Philadelphia (3:11).
3. Jesus says 5× ἔρχομαι ταχύ “I am coming soon” (2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20); 2× ἦξω/ἔρχομαι ὡς κλέπτης “I am coming as a thief” (3:3; 16:15).
4. The book ends on this note, repeating ναί, ἀμήν (“Even so, Amen” 1:7): Jesus says, ναί, ἔρχομαι ταχύ “Yes, I am coming soon,” to which John replies, Ἀμήν, ἔρχου κύριε Ἰησοῦ “Amen. Come Lord Jesus” (22:20). If this is not our response at the end of the book, then we have misread the book.

4. God’s Self-declaration (8)

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” (1:8)

God himself speaks only twice in the book (1:8; 21:5-8).

God identifies himself as “the Alpha and the Omega.” one of three synonymous titles used in the book:

1. “the Alpha and the Omega” τὸ ἄλφα καὶ τὸ ὦ: the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet
2. “the First and the Last” ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος
3. “the Beginning and the End” ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος.

These titles, in different and escalating combinations, are used by both God and Jesus in self-identification, either side of the central visions. The allocation of these titles, formerly used of God alone, reaches a climax in the epilogue. The sum total of instances is seven!

A 1:8 end of prologue God	B 1:17 beginning of vision Christ	A' 21:6 end of vision God	B' 22:13 beginning of epilogue Christ
Alpha and Omega	first and last	Alpha and Omega beginning and end	Alpha and Omega first and last beginning and end

True vs Counterfeit

2 sets of people:

False	True
Babylon	New Jerusalem
worship beast	worship Lamb
mark of beast	seal of Lamb
inhabitants of earth	dwellers in heaven

Revelation is a book of worship (vb. “worship” 24×). Everyone worships.

The Battle

What is the battle in Revelation?

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Armageddon

The most famous battle is the one fought at Armageddon (16:14, 16). But the battle isn't actually fought. As soon as the army assembles it's over and the climactic cry rises, "It is done!"

This "battle" seems to occur 3 times:

1. Demonic spirits assemble the kings of the earth for battle (16:14)
2. The beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against the rider on the white horse and against his army (19:19). But beast and false prophet seized and thrown in lake of fire.
3. After the thousand years, Satan released from his prison to gather the nations, Gog and Magog, for battle; as numerous as sand on seashore; surrounded camp of the saints and the beloved city. But fire from heaven; dragon thrown into lake of fire (20:7-10).

In each case, forces of evil gather/assemble to make war against God and his side (3×).

This is not the battle of Revelation.

The Lion-Lamb

The seals, trumpets, bowls are introduced by a double vision of heavenly throne room.

1. The throne (4): center of cosmos; it's occupied. God's sovereignty. Worship: God worthy as Creator. But also another throne: Satan's which he gives beast. False prophet deceives whole world into worshipping beast. Competing kingdoms.
2. The scroll (5): God's purposes. No one found *worthy*. John weeps. Identity of heard-seen:
 - a. *hears*: the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David has *conquered*. Conquer (νικάω) is a key word: 17× of 28 in NT.
 - b. *sees*: a Lamb standing as though slain.

The Dragon's War on the Saints

ch 12: woman about to birth child; dragon. Dragon wages war:

1. Against child (12:4): seeks to devour the child.
2. Against Michael and his angels (12:7-9): war in heaven.
3. Against woman
4. Against rest of woman's offspring (12:17): "those who obey the word of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

God frustrates the first three efforts, but allows the fourth, the war against the saints.

The Christians

Christians are engaged in a battle.

Battle vs beast

1. beast conquers saints (11:7; 13:7)
2. saints conquer beast (12:11; 15:2) by blood of Lamb and word of their witness (12:11)

Battle over worship: mark of beast vs seal of God.

Call for endurance/wisdom

4 calls for wisdom/endurance: here is endurance (13:10; 14:12), here is wisdom (13:18; 17:9); "This calls for..." (ESV).

1. Ὡδέ ἐστὶν ἡ ὑπομονὴ καὶ ἡ πίστις τῶν ἁγίων the endurance and faith/faithfulness of the saints (13:10).
Context: all earth-dwellers worship the beast, except those whose names are written in the slain Lamb's book of life; they will suffer for not worshipping the beast.
2. Ὡδέ ἡ σοφία ἐστίν. ὁ ἔχων νοῦν... (13:18): false prophet (second beast) makes all to be marked on right hand or forehead, the mark of the beast. Wisdom: the one with understanding let him calculate the number of the

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beast: 666.

3. Ὡδε ἡ ὑπομονὴ τῶν ἁγίων ἐστίν, οἱ τηροῦντες τὰς ἐντολάς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν πίστιν Ἰησοῦ the endurance of the saints, those who keep God's commandment and faith in Jesus (14:12). Context: worshipers of beast, bearing mark of his name, have no rest. Endurance: keep God's commandments and faith.
4. ὧδε ὁ νοῦς ὁ ἔχων σοφίαν the mind having wisdom (17:9). Context: earth-dwellers whose name not written in book of life will marvel (θαυμάζω) at beast who was, is not, and will be present. Wisdom: beast will again be present but only to go to destruction.

Context for all 4: beast-worshippers vs those written in slain Lamb's book of life. Context = worship. Battle.

The Millennium

Two visions (20:1-3, 4-10)

1. During thousand years (1-6)
 - a. Satan bound in Abyss (2)
 - b. Satan can no longer deceive nations (3)
 - c. martyrs come to life and reign with Christ (4) = first resurrection
2. After thousand years (7-)
 - a. Satan released for a little while to deceive nations and gather for war (3, 7-10), but he is destroyed.
 - b. rest of dead come to life (5)

Millennial views:

1. Historic Premillennialism
2. Dispensational premillennialism
3. Postmillennialism
4. Amillennialism

Who are the people in v4? Four descriptions:

1. seated on thrones with judgment given to them.
2. those martyred for their faithful witness
3. those who do not worship beast or bear his mark; i.e. worship God and Lamb, bear his seal
4. they live and reign with Christ

All the same people. Chiastic.

Saints delivered from death to life to be priest and kings to God (1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Cry of the martyrs: 5th seal: under the altar those slain for word of God and testimony of Jesus. Cry: how long till you judge and avenge our blood? (6:9-10).

This is the prayer of the saints offered up on the altar (8:3); 7 trumpets is answer.

How will God judge? What is his verdict? 20:4.

Seven promises to the victor

Prophetic messages to churches: Promise to the victor/conqueror.

1. Ephesus: "to the one who conquers I will allow him to eat from the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God" (22:2, 19).
2. Smyrna: "the one who conquers will in no way be harmed by the second death" (20:6, 14; 21:18).
3. Pergamum: "to the one who conquers I will give him some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white pebble, and upon the pebble a new name written which no one knows except the recipient."
4. Thyatira: "and the one who conquers and keeps my works until the end, I will give him authority over the nations, and he will rule them with an iron rod, as earthen vessels are shattered, as I also have received from my father, and I will give him the morning star" (22:16)
5. Sardis: "the one who conquers will in the same way be clothed in white robes, and I will in no way blot out his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before my father and before his angels."

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6. Philadelphia: “the one who conquers I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will never ever go outside again, and I will write upon him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which comes down out of heaven, and my new name” (21:2, 11; 22:4).
7. Laodicea: “the one who conquers I will allow him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat with my father on his throne.”

God: “the conqueror will inherit these things” (21:7)

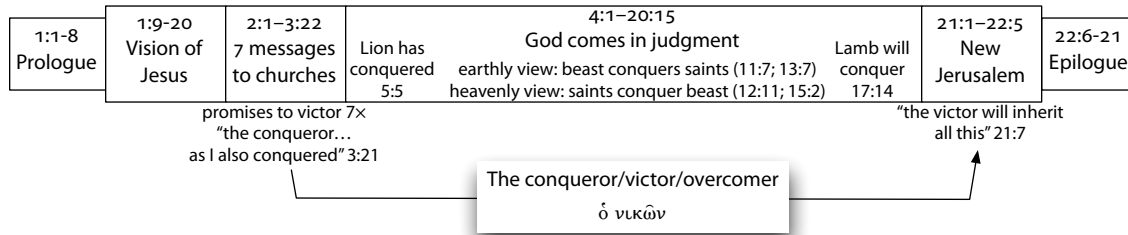


Fig. 4: The conqueror

How do they conquer?

1. blood of Lamb
2. by heeding what Jesus and Spirit say to churches; hearing and keeping word of prophecy (1:3).
3. by endurance
4. by loyalty and devotion to the Lamb in midst of society that has been deceived into loyalty and devotion to beast.

Seven Beatitudes

Beatitude: the person whose life is heading in right direction (cf Ps 1; Sermon on Mt). These are the people who are conquering.

1. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. (1:3)
2. “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!” (14:13)
3. (“Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”) (16:15)
4. “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” (19:9)
5. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years. (20:6)
6. “And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.” (22:7)
7. Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. (22:14)

Conclusion: Churches are lampstands, colonies of heaven on earth.