

New Testament Studies

Revelation

(RVS Notes)

Author & Occasion	2
Interpretative Approaches	2
Millennial Views	4
Postmillennialism	4
Amillennialism	4
Premillennialism	6
Guiding Concepts	8
Summary Chart and Outline	10
Bibliography	12

Revelation

Author and Occasion—The author identifies himself as John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), without further elaboration. Early Church fathers, including Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, consistently held that this John was the beloved disciple. However, in the third century, an African bishop by the name of Dionysius compared the language, style, and thought of Revelation with the gospel and epistles of John and concluded that the book could not have been written by the apostle. While there are differences in grammar, vocabulary, and theological content, there are also many similarities, including the distinctive use of terms like “word”, “lamb”, and “true” as well as the use of conflicting themes set in stark contrast with each other such as light and darkness, love and hate, and good and evil. The variations in style and vocabulary are more plausibly attributed to the unique conditions under which Revelation was composed rather than suggesting a different, non-apostolic John as its author.

The apostle John wrote this book while imprisoned on the island of Patmos late in the reign of the Emperor Domitian, in the mid-90s. There is a view that the book was written during Nero’s persecution of Christians following the burning of Rome in 64. The later date is preferable for the following reasons:

- It was the opinion of Irenaeus (a disciple of Polycarp who was a disciple of John) and other church fathers.
- John did not move to Ephesus until after the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66 and thus, the early date would not give him sufficient time to establish an ongoing ministry in Asia Minor prior to the composition of the book.
- The churches addressed in Revelation 2-3 seem to have been in existence for some time, enough to have reached a point of complacency and decline. That observation favors a later date of composition.
- Domitian’s persecution was more widespread and assaulted Christian belief more directly than Nero’s persecution and therefore better fits the time and context of the book.

The book addresses seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. The churches had existed for some time, had undergone various degrees of spiritual development and decline, and were confronting either actual or imminent persecution. There was a growing hostility between the church and the Roman state. Universal persecution may not have been the order of the day, but it was clear that there was to be no compromise between paganism and the claims of Christ. Revelation was written as encouragement for churches and as a warning to careless Christians who were tempted to lapse into an easy conformity to the world.

Revelation unveils the character and program of God. Its purpose is to reveal God’s sovereignty in the affairs of people in time and eternity. One day God will bring history to a triumphant climax in Christ. It is only the resurrected Christ who has the authority to judge the earth, remake it, and rule it in righteousness.

Interpretive Approaches—Understanding the exotic imagery of this book is central to its proper interpretation and application. We identify with plain statements asserting God’s control over history, His conflict with Satan, and His coming judgment of the created order. But trumpets? Bowls of wrath?

Fire from heaven? Mountains falling into the sea? Fantastic beasts emerging from the smoky core of the earth? Not your typical fare on the church casserole circuit. What do these phantasms mean and what application do they have for our day?

Interpretations of the book have historically fallen into one of four categories:

- ***Idealist view***—This perspective considers Revelation to be a symbolic picture of the enduring struggle between good and evil, between Christianity and the forces marshaled against the faith. The symbols in the book cannot be identified with specific historical events either in the past or the future. They simply are trends and ideals. The principles of spiritual warfare are operative throughout the ages and may have repeated embodiments. The impact of the entire message, rather than the literal details, is the point of the book.
- ***Preterist view***—“Preterist” comes from the Latin word *praeter*, meaning “past.” This view understands Revelation as describing events in the apostle’s own day. Preterists share the same disposition towards the book as those in the idealist camp, except that they limit the scope of the book to a description of the persecution of Christianity by ancient Rome and to what was expected to happen after the destruction of the Roman Empire.
- ***Historicist view***—This perspective regards Revelation as describing events from the time of John’s visions on the isle of Patmos to the end of history. Thus, interpreters speak of the breaking of the seven seals as representing the fall of the Roman Empire, locusts from the bottomless pit as standing for the Islamic invaders around the time of Mohammed, the beast from the pit as symbolizing the Roman papacy (as many in the time of the Reformation believed), and so forth. Explanations of the various symbols in Revelation have varied widely among members of this school of thought. Several Reformers subscribed to this perspective.
- ***Futurist view***—This view places the events recorded in Revelation 4-22 in the time immediately preceding Christ’s Second Coming. While the first three chapters relate to the apostolic church, the last nineteen leap forward to the end of the age. Futurists often seek to discern particular meanings behind the symbols in the book, diligently comparing them to many of the Old Testament passages from which the images are drawn, not content to merely ascertain the big picture.

A graphic comparison of these views may be helpful:

<i>View</i>	<i>Rev. 1-3</i>	<i>Rev. 4-19</i>	<i>Rev. 20-22</i>
Idealist	Historic churches.	Symbolic of the conflict between good and evil.	Symbolic of the triumph of good.
Preterist	Historic churches.	Symbolic of contemporary conditions in John's time.	Symbolic of heaven and the Lord's ultimate triumph.
Historicist	Historic churches.	Symbolic of historical events through the ages.	Final judgment; eternal state.
Futurist	Historic churches; seven stages of church history for the more imaginative.	Future tribulation; judgment of the Antichrist; Second Coming.	Millennium; final judgment; eternal state.

Millennial Views—Differences in millennial views relate to the understanding of Revelation 20:1-6, which speaks of believers reigning with Christ a thousand years, and to the chronological relation of this passage with Revelation 19:11-21, which describes Christ's Second Coming and His complete victory over the forces of evil. Is the thousand-year period described in Revelation 20 literal or figurative? Do the events of Revelation 20 chronologically follow those described in Revelation 19 or does Revelation 20 introduce another cycle of the book which describes God's judgment leading up to the Lord's return.

Among evangelicals, there are three major millennial views:

- **Postmillennialism**—Postmillennialists (postmils) believe that the reference to a thousand years in Revelation 20 speaks figuratively of a long interval of time that precedes the Second Coming of Christ. This perspective holds that the gospel will spread throughout the world in this present age and will usher in a golden age of peace on earth followed by Christ's return. The basic tenets of this view include:
 - **Nature of the Kingdom**—The kingdom of God is primarily a present reality; it is the rule of Christ in the hearts of people.
 - **Widespread preaching of and response to the Gospel**—Postmils expect a wide-ranging conversion of people from every nation on the earth prior to Christ's return. Not everyone will convert, but a significant multitude from every walk of life and every nation will come to faith. Postmils also expect that a large number of Jewish people to be included in this worldwide awakening on the basis of Romans 11:25-26.
 - **Nature of the Millennium**—There will be an exceedingly long period of earthly peace called the millennium. This is not a literal thousand-year period, just a lengthy span of time. God's kingdom will grow gradually as the gospel is preached around the world. While premils expect a dramatic and radical in-breaking of Christ's visible rule on earth, postmils see the kingdom spreading as the gospel is preached and the millennium resulting from the spread of righteousness. For postmils, the millennium differs from the present age only in degree.
 - **Final Rebellion**—At the end of the millennium, there will be a time of apostasy and a flare up of evil in connection with the coming of the Antichrist. Evil will be revealed for what it truly is and God's just punishment will be seen as eminently deserved.
 - **Return of Christ**—The millennium will end with the personal, bodily return of Christ followed immediately by the resurrection and judgment of all people, both righteous and unrighteous, and their assignment to heaven or hell.
- **Amillennialism**—Amillennialism means "not [no] millennium." Amillennialists (amils) do not reject the teaching of the millennium, just the millennium as envisioned by premils and postmils. Most amils hold that the millennium is a figurative reference to the reign of Christ, and of believers with Him, in the present age. In essence, the millennium is being realized now.

The first resurrection of Revelation 20:4 refers either to Christians who have died and are with Christ in heaven or to life in Christ which starts with the new birth. Amils believe that Satan has been bound (as referred to in Rev 20) through the triumph of Christ in His crucifixion and

resurrection. Unlike postmils, amils do not believe that actual earthly conditions will get better and better. Sin will run its course, and Christ will return to judge the world and usher in the eternal state, including the new heavens and the new earth.

Some basic tenets of amillennialism include:

- ***Second Coming as inaugurating the eternal state***—The Second Coming of Christ will inaugurate the eternal state for both believers and unbelievers. There will be no transitional state, the millennium envisioned by the premils. The Second Coming sets in motion a number of events in close sequence—a general resurrection of both believers and unbelievers, the transformation of living believers (1 Cor 15:51-52), the rapture or catching up of believers to welcome the descending Lord to earth (1 Thess 4:16-17), final judgment of both believers and unbelievers (Mt 25:31-46), and ushering in the eternal order.
- ***Millennium as symbolic***—The thousand-year period mentioned in Revelation 20 is symbolic, not literal. The reference is not a temporal matter at all. Furthermore, the two resurrections mentioned in Revelation 20:4-6 do not require an intervening millennium. Most amils understand the first resurrection as spiritual and the second as physical. A few see both as spiritual.
- ***Figurative interpretation of Old Testament prophecies***—Old Testament prophecies are interpreted figuratively. These prophecies are fulfilled in the history of the church or in the eternal state rather than in a literal, seven-year tribulational period or during a millennial reign of Christ.
- ***Interpretation of Revelation***—The typical amil approach to Revelation is one of progressive parallelism. They believe that Revelation consists of seven sections which run parallel to each other, each depicting the church and the world between the times of Christ's first and second comings. These sections typically are as follows:
 - Revelation 1-3—Seven lampstands; messages to the churches.
 - Revelation 4-7—Seven seal judgments.
 - Revelation 8-11—Seven trumpet judgments.
 - Revelation 12-14—Seven signs of conflict; description of key spiritual players behind the unfolding drama.
 - Revelation 15-16—Seven bowl judgments.
 - Revelation 17-19 Victory and judgment of Christ; fall of the earthly order, the dragon, and the beasts.
 - Revelation 20-22—New heavens and the new earth; completion of Christ's victory over His enemies and the ushering in of the eternal state.

In this treatment, there is progression. Revelation 1-11 describes the struggle on earth, picturing the church persecuted by the world. Revelation 12-22 gives the deeper spiritual background of this struggle, describing the persecution of the church by Satan and his henchmen.

- ***Points of congruence with other schools***—Amils and postmils share common ground in their approach to Revelation, even to claiming the same significant church figures as

adherents. Both oppose the literalness and eschatological exuberance of the premils. However, amils do not anticipate a worldwide growth of righteousness as do the postmils and lack postmil optimism. They share the pessimistic outlook of the premils and a belief in the “immanence” of Christ’s Second Coming. The Lord may return at any time. There are no significant events of extended duration expected before the return. But while they share this sense of immanence, amils are noticeably less preoccupied with “signs of the times” than are premils.

- **Premillennialism**—Premillennialists (premys) believe that Christ will personally return to initiate the visible manifestation of His kingdom; that the righteous dead will be raised and join the living believers in reigning with the Lord on earth for a thousand years (usually understood as a literal time period); that subsequent to this reign there will be a final rebellion that will be immediately suppressed, the wicked judged, and the eternal state inaugurated. There are two main camps in premillennialism: pre-tribulationism (or dispensational premillennialism) and post-tribulationism (or historic premillennialism, so-called because of its affinity to the chiliasm of the early church fathers like Irenaeus).
- **Pre-tribulationists** (pre-tribbers) believe that God will completely restore the national Israel through a literal seven-year period called the Great Tribulation, described in detail in Revelation 4-19. They distinguish between God’s dealings with Israel and His dealings with the church. Dispensational premils believe that the church will be raptured (*rapturo* is Latin for caught up, translating the Greek verb in 1Thess 4:17) before the period of the tribulation described in Revelation. They believe that the events of the Great Tribulation are used of God to bring Israel to Himself and to inaugurate His millennial reign on earth. Mid-tribulationism (the church will not be raptured until the middle of the tribulation) and partial rapturism (only the “godly” part of the church will be raptured) are variations of this approach.
- **Post-tribulationists** (post-tribbers) do not make distinctions between God’s dealings with Israel and God’s dealings with the church. They teach that the people of God will be on earth during the entire tribulation period after which Christ will come in triumph to judge His enemies and to inaugurate His visible reign on earth.

Basic tenets of premillennialism include:

- **Two physical resurrections in Revelation 20:4-6**—Revelation 20:4-6 is something of a watershed passage for millennial views. The apostles and those given authority to judge and the righteous martyrs come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years. In pertinent part, the text states:

“They came to life (*ezesan*) and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

5 (The rest of the dead did not come to life (*ezesan*) until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy are those who have a part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them ...”

Premils insist that the two resurrections mentioned are bodily in nature and of different groups of people separated by an interval of time (the thousand years of the millennium). They point out that the same word (indeed, the same form and tense of the same word –

ezesan) is used in both references and insist that the word used elsewhere refers to a physical resurrection. While it is possible in principle for one or both resurrections to be spiritual, the literary context needs to suggest this. Premils see nothing in the context to indicate that the two resurrections are different in kind. In addition, they think that the passage also implies that those who participate in the first resurrection do not participate in the second, for the passage makes a contrast between those raised at the beginning of the millennium and those raised at the end.

Amils argue that the language concerning the second death in 20:6 suggests a contrast between the first and second death, the first being bodily and preliminary and the second being spiritual and final. Likewise, the first and second resurrections are preliminary and ultimate as well, only this time, the first resurrection is spiritual and the second is physical.

- ***Nature of the Millennium***—Although there are important variations, premils view the millennium as having certain common elements:
 - Jesus Christ will have absolute control. Overt opposition will be confined or eliminated.
 - It will be a period of truly righteous rule. Torah on the heart as taught in the Sermon on the Mount will be an experiential reality.
 - Christ's reign will be a political reality, ushering in worldwide peace.
 - In its character, the millennium will be clearly distinct from the rest of history.
 - There will be harmony in nature. All hostility within the forces of nature and among its creatures will cease.
 - The saints will reign with Christ. Faithfulness in small things in this age, renders opportunities to co-labor with God on a larger page in the next age.
- ***Israel and the Millennium***—Premils see a significant moving of the Spirit of God among the physical descendants of Abraham in the End Times. But with this general description, agreement ends.
 - Pre-tribbers (dispensational premils) hold that the millennium itself will have an Jewish flavor and that there will be a virtual restoration of the Old Testament economy (understood as fulfilled in Christ). According to this perspective, when God has accomplished His purpose with the church (His New Testament people), He will renew His concern for national Israel. In the millennium, God will restore national Israel to a favored place in His program and will fulfill each of His prophetic promises to Israel. Thus, from this perspective, passages like Ezekiel 40-48 are to be literally fulfilled (e.g. in the building of a millennial temple).
 - Post-tribbers (historic premils) place little emphasis on national Israel, believing that the prophecies and promises to Israel are fulfilled in the church. However, most post-tribbers see a significant awakening among the Jewish people at the end of the age based on such texts as Romans 11:25-26.

Guiding Concepts

- ***Sovereignty of God***—Revelation conveys a sense of the majestic sovereignty of God as no other book in the New Testament. The vision of God on His throne and the worship which is His due is an immense help in getting us beyond our own immediate circumstances to a new understanding of the Lord of heaven and earth. It reminds us that it is God alone who rules, He alone who disposes. It is God alone who is worthy of our devotion and praise. It is God alone who will deal with human sin and who will bring to consummation the salvation of those who are His own and the final judgment which is His alone to render.
- ***Eschatology***—Nowhere in the Bible are we given a more detailed description of the events of the end of the age. Revelation reminds us of the reality and severity of evil forces active throughout history and in the world today. Knowing how history ends helps us fit into it. A proper understanding of the focus of Eschatology thrusts us to the present to live godly lives in Christ Jesus now in expectation and hope of our full and complete deliverance in the future (see 1 Jn 3:2-3).
- ***High Christology***—Jesus Christ is portrayed throughout the book, from the opening vision (1:12-20) to His triumphant return (19:11-16), in terms only appropriate to God. He is called the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler over the kings of the earth (1:5), the First and the Last (1:17), the Living One (1:18), the Son of God (2:18), the holy and true (3:7), the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the ruler of God's Creation (3:14), the Lion of the tribe of Judah (5:5), the root of David (5:5; 22:16), the Lamb (5:6), Faithful and True (19:1), the Word of God (19:13), the King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16), and the Bright and Morning Star (22:16). Both God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ are called "the Alpha and the Omega" (compare 1:8; 22:13). John makes it clear that the sovereign God is accomplishing His purposes on earth through the Son, very God Himself.
- ***Portrait of evil***—Revelation paints an alarming portrait of evil. It contains no hint that the world at large will improve or that all people will turn to God in repentance and faith. The depiction of human civilization at the close of the age is one that is highly prosperous, culturally advanced, grossly unjust, and thoroughly materialistic and godless (18:2ff). The last act of unredeemed humanity is armed rebellion against the rightful Sovereign of the universe (20:7-10). The final doom of sin is described in a way that makes your skin crawl (20:15), but the justice of which is indisputable.

Evil's most prominent and deceitful characteristic is its Satanic counterfeits of God Himself and of His church. Satan, the beast, and the false prophet form an unholy trio that counterfeits the Holy Trinity. Note the following parallels:

- The beast is the image of Satan (13:1ff) as Christ is the perfect image of God (Col 1:15).
- The beast wears many foul crowns (13:1) as Christ wears many worthy ones (19:12).
- The beast is empowered by the dragon (13:2) just as Christ has power and authority from the Father (12:10; Jn 5:21-23).
- The beast counterfeits Christ's resurrection (13:3) and usurps Christ's rightful position as the object of human worship (13:4, 8).

- The beast wars against the saints (13:7) as Christ wars with the saints against the godless (19:11-21).
- Babylon the great harlot counterfeits the bride of Christ (17:1ff) complete with a false ministry (the false prophet) and a godless idolatry that makes a mockery of true worship.
- **Apocalyptic**—Revelation belongs to the category of apocalyptic literature. Such literature is characterized by—
 - Symbolic language, dreams, and visions.
 - Intense despair over the present circumstances and pervasive hope of future divine intervention.
 - Celestial powers (angels and demons) as messengers and agents working out God’s purposes.
 - The catastrophic judgment of the wicked and the supernatural deliverance of the righteous.

Revelation’s imagery is largely derived from the Old Testament prophetic books. The outlook of this type of literature is pessimistic in the sense that the world is lost and corrupt. The book calls the people of God to persevere and sinners to repent for the old age is groaning to a close and a divine cataclysm will usher in a new age which is completely different.

- **Restoration**—Note the parallels between the first three (Gen. 1-3) and the last three (Rev, 20-22) chapters of the Bible:

<i>Genesis 1-3:</i>	<i>Revelation 1-3:</i>
God created the heavens and earth (1:1)	New heavens and new earth (21:1)
Darkness he called night (1:5)	There is no night there (21:25)
God made the sun and moon (1:16)	No need for sun or moon (21:23)
Death comes with eating of the tree (2:17; 3:19)	There shall be no more death (21:4)
Satan appears as humanity’s deceiver (3:1)	Satan disappears forever (20:10)
Garden of Eden defiled (3:6-7)	City of God never defiled (21:27)
Walk of God with people interrupted (3:8-10)	Dwelling with people resumed (21:3)
Initial triumph of the serpent (3:13)	Ultimate triumph of Lamb (21:3; 22:3)
Sorrow greatly multiplied (3:16)	No more sorrow (21:4)
Cursed is the ground (3:17)	No more curse (22:3)
Adam’s dominion broken (3:19)	Christ’s dominion restored (22:5)
Eden closed and people barred (3:23-24)	Paradise opened and people welcomed (21:24-25)
Access to the tree of life denied (3:24)	Access to tree reinstated (22:14)

People driven from God's presence (3:24)	They shall see His face (22:4)
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- **Significance of numbers**—A distinctive feature of Revelation is the frequent numbers with symbolic significance. **“Seven”** appears over fifty times and is often understood as symbolic of completeness. Revelation has seven beatitudes (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14), seven churches (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14), seven spirits of God (1:4; 4:5), seven golden lampstands (1:12; 4:5), seven stars (1:16), seven seal judgments (5:1; 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 12; 8:1), seven trumpet judgments (8:6, 7, 8, 10, 12; 9:1, 13; 11:15), a Lamb with seven horns and eyes ((5:6), seven thunders (10:3), seven bowl judgments (16:1, 2-4, 8, 10, 12, 17), seven signs (12:1, 3; 13:13-14; 15:1; 16:14; 19:20), a dragon with seven crowns (12:3), seven hills (17:9), seven kings (17:10), and a number of other sevens as well. The numbers **“four”** and **“twelve”** figure prominently as well. There are four living creatures (4:6), four horsemen (6:1-8), four angels (9:14), as well as multiples of four such as the twenty-four elders (4:4) and the one hundred and forty-four thousands of the redeemed (7:4; 14:1). There are twelve gates with twelve pearls to the city of God (21:12), twelve foundations with the names of the Lord's twelve apostles (21:14), and twelve kinds of fruit on the tree of life (22:2). Other numbers beg for interpretation, including the number **“ten”** and the notorious **“666”** (13:18). The speculations of the numerologists have been with the people of God since the early days of the interpretation of this book.

Summary Chart and Outline:

Revelation: God on His Throne—The chart below presents a common amillennial outline of the book. The outline that follows presents a sequential premillennial approach.

Son of Man: --Letters to churches	Heavenly Throne: --1-6 Seals --Interlude --7 th Seal	Prayers of the Saints: --1-6 Trumpets --Interlude --7 th Trumpet	Woman & child; Beasts from the sea; Lamb & people; Heavenly angels	Plagues; 7 Bowls of wrath	Harlot & Beast; Babylon; Feast of the Lamb; Second coming	Judgment; New heavens & earth; River and tree reappear
Rev. 1-3	Rev. 4-8	Rev. 8-11	Rev. 12-14	Rev. 15-16	Rev. 17-19	Rev. 20-22
Vision 1: 7 Lamps	Vision 2: 7 Seals	Vision 3: 7 Trumpets	Vision 4: 7 Signs of conflict	Vision 5: 7 Bowls	Vision 6: Judgment; Victory of the Lamb	Vision 7: New heavens and earth

Revelation: God on His Throne—

I. Source of the Message: Vision of the Exalted Lord (1:1-20)

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- A. Introduction (1:1-8)
- B. Vision of the exalted Lord; John commissioned to write (1:9-20)
- II. Messages to the Seven Churches: Present Endurance (2:1-3:22)
 - A. Ephesus: Regain your first love (2:1-7)
 - B. Smyrna: Persevere in suffering (2:8-11)
 - C. Pergamum: Hold to the truth (2:12-17)
 - D. Thyatira: Do not tolerate immorality (2:18-29)
 - E. Sardis: Complete your deeds (3:1-6)
 - F. Philadelphia: promise for patient endurance (3:7-13)
 - G. Laodicea: Stern but loving rebuke (3:14-22)
- III. Vision of the Heavenly Throne: Glory and Judgment (4:1-5:14)
 - A. Vision of glory: Throne room of God (4:1-11)
 - B. Seven-sealed scroll: Worthy is the Lamb (5:1-14)
- IV. Seven Seals Opened (6:1-8:15)
 - A. First six seals (6:1-17)
 - B. Interlude—Sealing of 144,000; white-robed multitude (7:1-17)
 - C. Seventh seal: Silence preceding the trumpets (8:1)
- V. Seven Trumpets Sounded (8:2-11:19)
 - A. First six trumpets (8:2-9:21)
 - B. Interlude—Little scroll; two witnesses (11:1-13)
 - C. Seventh trumpet: Heavenly temple opened (11:15-19)
- VI. Characters of the Final Drama (12:1-14:20)
 - A. Woman and the dragon (12:1-19)
 - B. Dragon's two beasts (13:1-18)
 - C. Lamb and 144,000; Harvest of the earth (14:1-20)
- VII. Seven Bowls of Wrath (15:1-18:24)
 - A. Prelude: Seven angels with seven plagues (15:1-8)
 - B. Bowls poured out (16:1-21)
 - C. Judgment on Babylon (17:1-18;24)
- VIII. Second Coming, Judgment, Millennial Reign (19:1-20:15)
 - A. Marriage supper of the Lamb (19:1-10)
 - B. Return of the King and destruction of the beast (19:11-21)
 - C. Millennial reign and final judgment (20:1-15)
- IX. New Heavens and New Earth (21:1-22:21)
 - A. Vision of the new heaven, new earth, and new city (21:1-22:5)
 - B. Hearing and heeding: Readers exhorted (22:6-21)

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