

## REVELATION: BREAKING THE SYMBOLIC CODE

*“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John.” — Revelation 1:1*

The Book of Revelation is a prophetic picture of the experiences and purpose of the Christian Age. Its symbols illustrate what the true Church would suffer at the hands of the false church and the glorious outcome of patient endurance through agonizing trials of faith. As with many prophecies, these events would not be fully understood by the Church until their fulfillment. But now, at the end of the Christian Age, since many of these prophecies have been fulfilled, we should expect to have a clearer insight into what the signs and symbols of Revelation mean. Indeed, this book itself reveals that the *complete* prophetic picture written in *symbolic code* would be shown only to the *end time* Church.

### The Unfolding of the Vision

While in prison on the Isle of Patmos, the Apostle John received the “*Revelation of Jesus Christ to all of the Churches.*” As its name implies, it is a *revealing*—an *unfolding*. In his vision, John was shown amazing scenes which were prophetic *signs* of things to come.

Note the first verse: “...*he sent and signified it by his angel...*” *Signified* here means “*to put into signs—symbolic depictions.*” This book, therefore, is written in a kind of *code language*, and so, when it says “*beast,*” it does not mean a *literal* beast, and when it says “*angel,*” it may not refer to an actual spirit-being. When symbols such as these are understood, the results are inspiring—as we might expect from a book given by Jesus to the Apostle John for the Church living in *the last days*. And, while some view these signs and symbols to be terrifying, the Christian who longs for a better day finds hope for everyone in its words, as the final chapters portray.

### Time Frame One: The Christian or Gospel Age

The Book of Revelation is neatly divided into three sections corresponding to the three major time periods of God’s dealings with the Church of Christ and their role in the ages to come. Chapters 1 through 13 primarily refer to the history of the Church from Christ’s death to his second

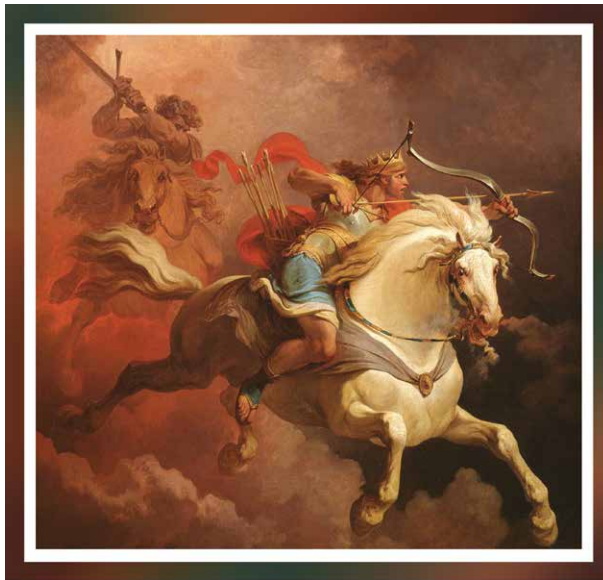
advent. This period of time was set apart for calling out from among mankind a group of people referred to by various scriptural names: *the Church, the Bride, Christians, a people for His name, the 144,000, the little flock, saints,* etc. (Acts 15:14; Acts 11:26; Philippians 1:1; Luke 12:32; Revelation 21:9) This time frame tells of the suffering of Jesus’ true followers at the hands of the powerful apostate (false) church

systems, of which the Apostle Paul warned. (2 Thessalonians 2:2-7) Jesus summed up this history in only a few words: “*the beginning of sorrows...*” Matthew 24:4-14

The history of the Church, as shown in Chapter 1, is divided into seven time periods which are each unique in both their doctrine and experiences. Jesus watches over these seven Churches as symbolized by his appearance “*in the midst of seven candlesticks... the seven Churches.*” (Revelation 1:13, 20) Recall that Jesus told his disciples they were like *candles* on a *candlestick*—“*the light of the world.*” Matthew 5:14-16

In Revelation 1:16 Jesus holds *seven stars* in his right hand. *Stars* are used in Scripture to symbolize *teachers*—both good and bad. (Daniel 12:3; Jude 13; Revelation 12:1) In Revelation 1:20, the *seven stars* are identified as the *seven angels* sent to the *seven Churches* described in Chapters 2 and 3. Note that the word *angel* has the meaning of *messenger* in the Greek, and God has sent a special *messenger* to each of the seven time periods throughout the history of the Church. The Apostle John was one such messenger.

Between Chapters 2 and 11, these seven periods of Church history are illustrated three times under different symbols. The *seven Churches* are listed in Chapters 2 and 3; the *seven seals* are listed in Chapters 5 through 8; and the *seven trumpets* are found in Chapters 8 through 11. Each period of the Church has its corresponding concurrent *seal* and *trumpet*. For instance, the first *Church*, first *seal*, and first *trumpet* all refer to events in the same historical period. The following four examples illustrate just a few of the



“Vision of the White Horse” 1798, by Philip DeLouthembourg, Tate Gallery, London

many parallels between the Churches, seals and trumpets: **1.** “*Four angels*” are mentioned in both the *sixth seal* (7:1) and the *sixth trumpet* (9:15). **2.** An *earthquake* is shown in both the *sixth seal* (6:12) and in the *sixth trumpet* (11:13). An *earthquake* pictures, in symbol, the shaking up of earth’s society through discontent and revolution. **3.** The return of Jesus is mentioned in both the *seventh Church* (3:20—he is “*standing at the door*”) and the *seventh trumpet* (11:15—his “*reign*” begins). **4.** Increased enlightenment is shown in both the *seventh Church* (3:20—Jesus promises to serve the evening meal—“*sup*”) and in the *seventh trumpet* (10:7—enlightenment clears up “*the mystery*”).

One fascinating example of symbols related to the *seals* of Chapter 6 is the picture of the *four horses*. *Horses*, in symbol, often represent *doctrines*, and the *horsemen*, therefore, would represent the *teachers* who bring forth those doctrines. The first, a *white horse*, pictures the *purity of doctrine* delivered to the early Church by the twelve Apostles. The second, a *red horse*, aptly illustrates how the *doctrine began to be polluted with sinful heresies* by the developing apostate church. The third, a *black horse*, represents a dark period in Church history brought about by *dark age doctrines*. The fourth, a *pale* (Greek-greenish) horse, symbolizes doctrine so *sick and devoid of any life-giving qualities* that the rider that sat upon him was even given the name “*death*.” This sad history portrays how the beautiful truth once given to the early Church was increasingly corrupted by the traditions of men. But, as will be seen in Chapter 19, the *white horse returns with a valiant rider*—Christ in glory—who brings back life-giving truths to the end-time Church. These truths prepares the true Church for the final victory over the apostate systems.

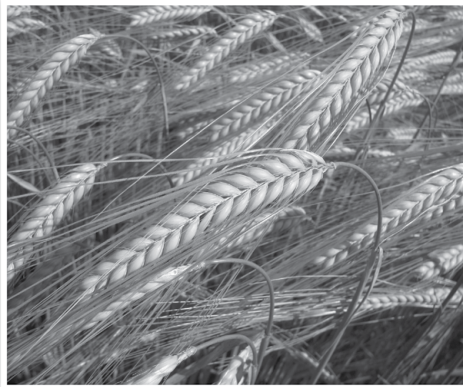
### Time Frame Two: Harvest of the Christian Age

Chapters 14 through 19 focus almost exclusively on the events which impact the close of the Christian Age—the *Harvest*. A careful examination of Jesus’ parable of the *wheat and tares* helps in understanding this *Harvest* time. (Matthew 13:24-43) During the *Harvest*, the world at large is experiencing troubles it cannot handle, and the Christian world in particular is faced with the kind of scrutiny that destroys all false doctrines and practices. “*Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven [the Christian world]... that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.*” Hebrews 12:27-29

In the *Harvest*, three works are progressing at the same time: **1.** The unseen presence of Jesus is actively maneuvering the affairs of the true Church and the world in preparation for the *peaceable Kingdom*. 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 16:15; 14:15 **2.** False Christianity is being judged by God and also by man based on both doctrine and conduct. Revelation 14:8,15; 18:1-9 **3.** A great increase in understanding Scripture is fed to sincere, truth-hungry Christians. Revelation 14:6; 17:1; Daniel 12:4, 9, 10

This *Harvest* parable first summarizes the Gospel Age by stating that Jesus sowed seeds of truth which, springing up in the hearts of his disciples, transformed them to newness of life, thus becoming true Christians—*wheat*. Once the Apostles died—*while men slept*—Satan sowed seeds of error which created false Christians—*tares*. This tendency toward imitation Christianity was active in the Apostles Paul’s day and developed into what he called the *mystery of iniquity* and the *man of sin*. John referred to this as the developing *Antichrist*. (2 Thessalonians 2:7; 1 John 4:3) Revelation calls this *that great city, Babylon*. Revelation 14:8

Jesus taught that this combination of true and false Christianity would exist together until the close of the Christian Age, at which time a separation—a *Harvest*—would occur. The



work of destroying the *errors* of the false church systems would cause true Christians to *come out of Babylon* and gather together where truth is being served. The central theme of Chapter 14, then, is the time for *harvesting* two groups: The *Harvest of the earth* (*wheat*—verses 15 and 16) and the *Harvest of the vine of the earth* (*tares*—verses 18 and 19). See also Luke 17:34-37

The central theme of Chapters 15 and 16 deals with the *plagues* upon Babylon—the false church system. In Chapter 18:4, God warns the *wheat—my people*—that if

they do not *come out* from Babylon during the *Harvest*, they will be subject to these *plagues* which are to be brought upon Babylon. These *plagues* are a series of seven events against the false church which, step by step, force truths to her attention and destroy the lies upon which Babylon grew. Just as God wore down the Egyptian Pharaoh by a series of plagues which ultimately delivered Israel, so here, God wears down apostate Christianity by plagues, so that all the world may be delivered from the influence of Babylon’s falsehoods and practices.

In the midst of the plagues of Chapter 16 appear three symbolic characters unified in one final attempt to deceive mankind and preserve their control over the world—the *beast*, the *dragon* and the *false prophet*. The *beast* is the product of civil governments uniting with religion in one dominating, oppressive apostate system. The *beast* receives its power from the *dragon*—Roman civil power under the influence of Satan. The third character, the *false prophet*, represents the other false religious systems which have long oppressed and misled their congregations. Together, these three symbolic characters *croak like frogs*, boasting of their church and state power over the people. (It is important to note here that *beast*, when associated with God, in passages such as Revelation 4:6-9, is translated from a different Greek word and would be better rendered *living creatures*, as it is in most translations. These four beasts represent the *living attributes* of God’s character: *justice, wisdom, love and power*.)

In Scripture, the true Church is often represented by *virgins* (Matthew 25:1-13), and so, by contrast, we see in Chapter 17 that Babylon is pictured as a *harlot*. The harlotry of the apostate church is due to her having a unification (adulterous marriage) with the governments of this world. The true saints, on the other hand, strive to keep themselves separate from all entanglements

with the world. In highly symbolic language then, Chapter 17 shows how the apostate church throughout history amassed political power to further her interests and virtually rule the western world—called *Christendom*. This Chapter shows the steps by which both the *harlot* and the worldly powers she ruled—the *beast*—will meet their ends (as systems, not as people) in the *Harvest* period.

Chapter 18 begins when *Babylon is fallen* from God's favor, and it ends with her total destruction as detailed in verse 21. The focus here is on the manner in which Babylon's destruction will affect various segments of society which have become dependent upon her for their subsistence. These elements of society are symbolically called: *the kings of the earth* (18:9); *the merchants of the earth* (18:11); *every shipmaster, all the company in ships, sailors, and as many as trade by sea* (18:17). This illustrates that the world, as we know it, functions on a political/commercial basis, and the weakening of that international economic system, according to this chapter, will soon cause it to fall apart.

Chapter 19 could well be two chapters. The first ten verses deal with "*the marriage of the lamb*," while the remainder jumps back to the beginning of the *Harvest* to give us yet another perspective on how the current social order will meet its end. (Note that, for emphasis, the Revelator often jumps back to a point in time, re-telling the story from another point of view.) This "*marriage of the lamb*" is a symbol for the time when Jesus' Church, his *Bride*, is complete—when he has gathered all of the *wheat into the* (heavenly) *barn*. While the *Harvest* work of completing the true Church progresses, the additional work of destroying the false church, Babylon, progresses (19:11-21). Thus, Chapter 19 confirms what we saw in Chapter 14 that the *Harvest* has two works—harvesting the *wheat* to glory and harvesting *the vine of the earth*—the system of Babylon—for burning. Compare also 14:19, 20 with 19:15—depicting the same event.

### Time Frame Three: The Messianic Age

Although most of the prophecies of Revelation focus on the *Harvest* of the Gospel Age, Chapters 20 through 22 relate to the grand and promising outcome of the previous nineteen chapters, which portray the end of the old world order and the beginning of the new. We are now living in that transition time. These last three chapters of Revelation basically refer to the Messianic or Millennial Age. This age is referred to in the Scriptures by various names: *the Kingdom*, *the thousand years*, *the Day of the Lord*, *the Day of Judgment*, *the regeneration*, *the times of restitution of all things*, etc. Matthew 26:29; Acts 1:6; Revelation 20:2-6; 2 Peter 3:7,8; Matthew 19:28; Acts 3:20,21

Revelation 20 illustrates several events of the thousand-year Messianic reign of Christ with his Church: Verses 1-3 show that the *actual devil* will be bound as well as a *symbolic devil*—the systems built upon his lies. Thus, all stumbling blocks in the way of the *peaceable Kingdom* will be removed. This is the reason for not only binding the literal devil, but also binding the

influences of the *bestly* governments which have made life so difficult for the human race. Verses 4-11 show: **1.** The reward of the true Church who will reign with Christ; **2.** Satan's *little season* of testing upon the world of mankind at the close of the thousand years— the end of mankind's period of education; and **3.** The everlasting destruction of Satan, his followers and the corrupt civil and religious systems.

Verses 12-15 of Chapter 20 show the final judgment of earth's billions *at the end* of the Messianic reign. This will be the last judgment event of history where God will destroy in *everlasting death* all those not in full harmony with His perfect law of love. Both *hell* and *death* are consigned to *fire*—complete destruction, oblivion—*this is the second death* (20:14). By contrast, *everlasting life* will be the reward for all who progress to perfection through the thousand years and who stand the test of the *little season* because of their faith and obedience.

The *Left Behind* series of novels promote an overly dramatic, literalistic and sadistic view of Revelation, telling of the horrors of a vindictive God destroying three billion people by literal fire and earthquakes. These *fictional* depictions of prophecy ignore the last three chapters of Revelation—the *Good News* of the Bible. They ignore that Jesus gave his Revelation to John in symbolic language. The Scriptures do speak of a momentous time of trouble coinciding with the return of Christ and

culminating in *Armageddon*, however, as we have seen, the true purpose of *Armageddon* is to cleanse the earth of the corrupt ecclesiastical and civil systems under the control of Satan and his servants. These evil *systems* will be destroyed—not the people misled by these systems. God does not intend to burn in eternal flames billions of good-hearted people just because they have not known and accepted Jesus now. The conversion of these people—"*the remainder of men*"—will be after the cleansing work of *Armageddon* which prepares the way for the righteous Kingdom of Christ and his Church. (See Zephaniah 3:8-9; Acts 15:14-17) Then, under their benevolent reign, "*the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness*" without the fetters of devilish, selfish and oppressive powers. Isaiah 26:9

Chapters 21 and 22 describe the *new heavens*—Christ's righteous government—which will uplift and educate the *new earth*—the world of mankind—thereby bringing them back into harmony with God. What joy to know that Jesus' return means *the restitution of all things!* (Acts 3:19-22) All of the loss suffered in the opening three chapters of Genesis is here undone in the last three chapters of Revelation. It is a glorious ending, worthy of a merciful God. All that was lost when sin entered the world—life, health, happiness, freedom from fear and a loving relationship with God—will be restored to mankind. The *healing of the nations* occurs because of *the fruitage of the trees*. These *trees* are the Church glorified. (Isaiah 61:3) Jesus and his *Bride* offer the *water* (truth) *of life* to all who thirst, without the deceptions of Satan to hinder them. "*Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.*" This is the true hope of the Gospel when it is finished.



Apostle John Receives the Vision

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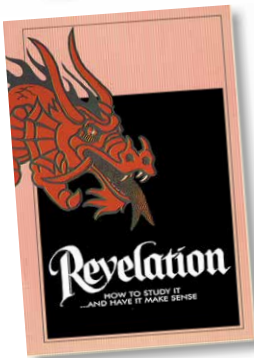
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