PB056

(1984) 87 pages © Covenant Media Foundation, www.cmfnow.com

Hermeneutics in the Book of Revelation

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

Postmillennialism and Revelation

The last book found in the canonical New Testament is also the New Testament book best known for attention given to the question of "last things." Even people who are relatively ignorant of Biblical matters will be award that the book of Revelation is full of fantastic scenes which in some way or another relate to the end of the world. Among Biblical scholars, discussions of eschatology have quite naturally gravitated toward analyses of and disputes over the book of Revelation. It is the New Testament prophetic book par excellence, and for that reason alone it cannot be overlooked in our present study of postmillennial eschatology. We will want to see how the teaching of this inspired book fits into the general pattern of theological convictions and expectations regarding historical development which are characteristic of postmillennialists.

Before exploring the book itself, however, we must take time to recognize that there is not (and has not been) any uniform or agreed upon approach to the interpretation of Revelation by all those scholars, writers, teachers, preachers, and others who would identify themselves as postmillennialists. It would be inaccurate and misleading to speak of "the postmillennial interpretation of the book of Revelation." There exists no unique and consistent body of premises which answers to that description.

The first major, American commentary on the book of Revelation was published in 1845 by a very learned professor of Biblical studies at Andover Seminary, Moses Stuart. As a scholar, Stuart had addressed the strongest Biblical argument for Trinitarianism against William Ellery Channing's manifesto, "Unitarian Christianity." As a pastor of First Church in New Haven, Stuart had been a stirring leader of the Second Great Awakening. His two-volume commentary on Revelation breathed the same spirit of optimism for the progress of Christ's kingdom in the world as we find in his Andover associates Jedidiah Morse (The Gospel Harvest, 1815) and Leonard Woods (whose 1812 sermon on the kingdom's sure increase over the globe stimulated missionary interest and confidence). In his commentary Stuart offered a preterist interpretation of John's prophecy, seeing the fulfillment of most of the predictions in the early age of the church. Stuart placed the writing of the book in the earlier, Neronian (or immediately post-Neronian) period. Other postmillennial preterists have dated the book, rather, in the reign of Domitian, toward the end of the first century.

Still other postmillennialists have not taken a preterist view of Revelation at all. George T. Purves, professor of New Testament literature and exegesis at Princeton Seminary, published in 1900 his

book, Christianity in the Apostolic Age. His optimistic philosophy of history is evident from these words on the book of Revelation:

Its general subject is the coming of Christ to judgment on the enemies of God and for the salvation of his people. ...Taking the book as a whole, it is evident that the return of Christ was still the church's hope. It was not conceived, however, as an isolated event. It was, in fact, inclusive of a large and varied series of events which would lead up to it. All these were regarded as the appointed unfolding of God's decree, and over the whole process the enthroned Redeemer-King is himself presiding. That process would consist in Christ's progressive triumph, partly by proclamation of the gospel and partly by judgment on a wicked world.

At the end of the paragraph in which these postmillennial convictions based on Revelation are found, however, it is obvious that Purves departed from a preterist interpretation of the book's own prophetic intent -- indeed, from any attempt to fix specific historical referents for the details of the prophecy. He adds: "All this is depicted by means of symbols which denote principles and ideas rather than specific individuals."*2 Thus we find postmillennialists who offer the idealist interpretation of Revelation, finding in its prophecy a series of axioms or principles which generalize about historical forces and movements pertaining to the kingdom of God.

Still other postmillennial commentators on Revelation have adopted the historicist interpretation of the book, finding therein a prophetic distillation covering the entire history of the church from its founding up to the final consummation. Thus Revelation is made to predict important events in the course of the church's progressive triumph over the world. For example, E. W. Hengstenberg, the published foe of Schleiermacher's liberalism and a renowned Biblical exegete who taught at Berlin from 1828-1869, dated the millennium from the conversation of the Germanic nations or the age of Charlemagne.*3

The three previous examples indicate the impossibility of holding that there is anything like a standard postmillennial interpretation of the book of Revelation. While all postmillennialists or premillennialists or a- millennialists will find in the book substantial support for their theological convictions about the progressive triumph of Christ's kingdom on earth, they will identify this exegetical confirmation in ways which can differ widely from one another. The reader must appreciate, as Merrill C. Tenney observed, that there is "no necessary connection" between specific millennial views (postmillennial, a millennial, or postmillennial) and specific schools of interpretation regarding Revelation (preterist, historicist, futurist, or idealist).*4 The views set forth in this chapter pertaining to the book of Revelation will, accordingly, represent only one postmillennialist's perspective. These views have been gained through extensive study and diligent analysis of the issues, and I believe that they are both defensible and beneficial in understanding the book of Revelation. Nevertheless, they cannot be thought of as essential to the postmillennial school of thought. Postmillennialists, just like advocates of other millennial schools, should be held accountable to present credible interpretations of the book of Revelation, demonstrating the coherence of their philosophy of history with the exegetical results of studying the key prophetic book of the New Testament. However, the interpretation developed in this chapter is only one such effort. It is not to be imagined that all and only postmillennialists will adhere to what is set forth here, nor should it be thought that any weakness that may be discovered in my treatment of

Revelation necessarily transforms to the credibility of postmillennialism in general. Various other postmillennial treatments of Revelation would call for critical study as well.

Having entered the preceding qualification, it can now be stated with considerable confidence that the book of Revelation constitutes a powerful, pervasive, and precious case in favor of postmillennial eschatology. H. B. Swete has commented:

The idea of a millennium was in the air when St. John wrote, but no writer had used it as the symbol of a spiritual triumph, or worked it into a scheme of the Divine ordering of history.*5

While John's explicit discussion of the millennium is confined to one chapter in his prophecy (Revelation 20), the triumphant truth about the millennium is a background light which shines through the exhortations and events of each chapter in Revelation, providing thereby a divinely inspired framework within which the entire course of history can be understood as the progressive triumph of Christ's kingdom over all foes. The churches, in the midst of inner trials and outward tribulation, are called upon to be victorious in the strength of the exalted Messiah (chapters 1-3). The intense persecution of believers by apostate Judaism, centered in the city of Jerusalem, will be answered with divine retribution as Rome destroys Jerusalem (chapters 4-11). The savage persecution of the church by the Roman Empire will, in turn, meet the same divine vengeance in the overthrow of Rome herself (chapters 13-18). With these obstacles removed the church's great commission of discipling the nations will experience tremendous prosperity (chapter 19). These various triumphs for Christ's kingdom can only be accounted for in terms of Satan's being cast down (chapter 12) and bound (chapter 20), with the result that the nations are no longer under the grip of his deception, but instead the faithful saints exercise (along with their Lord) rule over the nations. Even the final outbreak of rebellion against Christ will be crushed, as the precursor to the consummation of the kingdom and its eternal enjoyment by God's people (chapters 20-22).

B. F. Westcott gives expression to what can be described as the confident perspective taught to the early church (and to everyone else who "has an ear" to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches") by the prophecy in Revelation:

> Two Empires, two social organizations, designed to embrace the whole world, started together in the first century. . . . In principle, in mode of action, in sanctions, in scope, in history they offer an absolute contrast. . . . The history of the Roman Empire is from the first the history of a decline and fall. . . The history of the Christian Empire is from the first the history of a victorious progress.*6

Revelation draws out in dramatic detail -- with historical predictions whose fulfillment offer confirmation for -- the outlook on history provided concisely in the New Testament elsewhere: Paul asserts that Christ "must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet" (I Corinthians 15:25), and John adds that "this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith" (I John 5:4). This confidence is exposited by Revelation in a way which must brace our faith and give us great expectations. It leads us to sing with enthusiasm the heavenly chorus: "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever!" (Revelation 11:15). It compels obedience to the marching orders of the King.

The Difficulty and Value of the Book

The recommendation that we study and pay close attention to the book of Revelation is often met with not a little resistance, on the part of pastors and teachers as much as on the part of untrained believers. The universal cry seems to be: "But it is so difficult!" For so many Christians it appears futile to devote time to an enigmatic and obscure book like Revelation. The feeling that nobody could know for sure what the book means has been widespread. Inevitably, such a feeling has led to despair over interpreting this portion of God's inspired word, if not also to depreciation of the God-breathed Scripture itself.

In the fourth-century Ecclesiastical History by Eusebius, an extract from Dionysius of Alexandria (died ca. 264) indicates that already there were teachers who held a very low view of the book of Revelation. "Pronouncing it without sense and without reason," they said "that it is not even a revelation, as it is covered with such a dense and thick veil of ignorance"; as an ultimate insult they even attributed the book, not to John, but to his rival Cerinthus (Book VII, chapter 25). The Biblical translator and scholar, Jerome (died 420), said of Revelation that "as many words as many mysteries" could be found in it.*7 In a commentary on Revelation which he edited in 1522, Martin Luther's preface declared: "I judge this book to be neither apostolic nor prophetic, for more reasons than one. First and foremost, the apostles did not deal in visions, but prophesied in words, clear and direct, etc. My mind cannot suit itself to the book, and to me the fact that Christ is neither taught nor recognized in it, is good and sufficient cause for my low estimation of it." Unlike Calvin, who quoted freely from Revelation, Zwingli would derive no substantiation for doctrinal points from the book, declaring "With the Apocalypse we have no concern, for it is not a biblical book. . . . I can, if I so will, reject its testimonies." Robert South, a seventeenth century Anglican, descended to sarcasm regarding Revelation: "the more it is studied, the less it is understood, as generally either finding a man cracked, or making him so." The sentiments of many people find expression in the brief but pointed words of the "father of liberalism," Friedrich Schleiermacher (died 1834): "even a thoroughly correct interpretation of this book would be productive of but little profit." We see, then, that throughout the history of the church Revelation has frustrated many a reader, leaving the feeling that its message is not communicated to everyone who names the name of Christ. A contemporary commentator (1979), despite his published efforts to unlock the meaning of the book for his readers, still feels constrained to say: "This apocalyptic method prevents the enemies of God from understanding the message, while making it known to His people. Even so, we must admit that there is much in the book which remains veiled to us."*8

If the book of revelation is this difficult to interpret and understand, why should it be studied at all? John supplies the answer to this question in the first three verses of the book itself. Indeed, the very first word of chapter 1 describes the book as Apokalupsis, "An unveiling" or "A revelation." Instead of obscuring and covering over the truth, the book of Revelation uncovers and discloses the truth to God's servants (Rev. 1:1). In the nature of the case the book of Revelation was intended to provide insight, not confusion and ignorance. In secular authors the apokalupsis-related words pertain to making something known (e.g., Plato) or rendering it bare and naked (e.g., Plutarch). The sense of the word in Biblical usage can be discerned from a survey of the Septuagint, where it can mean "to open" (Gen. 8:13), "to expose" (Micah 1:6), "to uncover nakedness" (Ex. 20:26; cf. the euphemistic nominal form in I Kings-I Samuel 20:30), "to remove a veil" (Isa. 47:2), or "to disclose secrets" (Prov. 11:13; cf. apocryphal Sirac 22:22; 41:23). Apokalupsis brings things out into the open to be known. If nothing else, then, the first word of the book of Revelation indicates

that whatever excuse may have previously stood in the way of understanding certain divine truths has now been decisively removed. What Revelation communicates can no longer, just because of the "revelation" (apokalupsis), be deemed a secret. It is now uncovered and naked, open for all to see and know. The truth is out!

The New Testament use of the apokalupsis-related word group lays great stress on epistemological achievement, the successful accomplishment of understanding or knowing something. It is coupled with knowledge, teaching, interpretation, and wisdom (I Cor. 14:6, 26; Eph. 1:17). It can mean "to make something known" (e.g., Matt. 11:25; 16:17), "to expose" or "make evident" (I Cor. 3:13), "to enlighten" (Luke 2:32), "to make bare" (John 12:38), or "to come into the open" (2 Thes. 2:3). In Luke 12:2 the word is used to mean "to uncover," and it is placed in parallel with "to make known" what is hidden. Accordingly, the primary use for apokalupsis in the New Testament is for the "revelation" of divine truths (e.g., I Cor. 14:6, 26; Gal. 1:12; 2:2; Eph. 3:3) -- a disclosure of information through the Holy Spirit, who searches out the deep things of God (2 Cor. 2:10; Eph. 1:17). The second main use for the apokalupsis word group in the New Testament is for "manifestations of God's judgment" (Rom. 2:5), of Christ himself (I Cor. 1:7; 2 Thes. 1;7; I Peter 1:7, 13), of Christ's glory (I Peter 4:13; 5:1), or of the saints (Rom. 8:19). Any apokalupsis , whether an informative "revelation" or an evident "manifestation," will serve to enlighten or make something obvious to those who receive the apokalupsis ; matters are brought out into the open, disclosed, and made known for people to see. The naked truth is revealed or manifest. Thus the first word in the book of Revelation assures us, on the authority of God speaking through John, that the matters communicated in this book have not been rendered obscure or more difficult to understand; they have been unveiled, so as to stand before the reader as the naked truth. They are now manifest, evident, clearly seen and understood. "Revelation" is distinguished in 2 Corinthians 12:11 from "visions" (optasia), perhaps on the principle suggested by Theophylact, that a vision includes the thing seen (which may not be understood until interpreted, e.g., Dan. 7:15-23), while a revelation includes in the nature of the case its interpretation.*9 John was granted a visionary experience (e.g., Rev. 1:2, 11; 9:17), but the word most descriptive of the nature of his writing was "revelation." Repeatedly, what he saw was interpreted to him so that the "mystery" would be understood (e.g., Rev. 1:20; 17:7). In the Old Testament book of Daniel we learn that God uncovers deep, secret mysteries by way of visions which, given their divine interpretation, are a "revelation" or "unveiling" of the truth (Dan. 2:22, 28, 29, 30 LXX). Likewise in the New Testament, John has, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Rev. 1:10), communicated visions and their interpretation to us. He has granted us a great "unveiling."

If we have difficulty with the book of Revelation -- with the unveiling of the naked truth -- then our first consideration must be that the difficulty somehow lies in us, not in the book itself! When God "reveals" Himself and His message, even by means of unusual visions, those who fail to understand what they are "shown" (cf. Rev. 1:1) have this mental problem either due to the obscuring effects of sin in their lives or because they are not utilizing appropriate hermeneutical techniques for the literature involved. God is not somehow to blame for failure to communicate clearly. If "my mind cannot suit itself to the book" of Revelation (using Luther's words), then this fact does not speak well of the moral and or intellectual condition of my mind. God's word is not "without sense and reason" (as some third century teachers said about Revelation); rather, it is human thinking that is often senseless and unreasonable. If we find that the more we study the book of Revelation the less we understand it (as Robert South claimed), then we had better find

out what we are doing wrong! Let us be done with shifting blame. God has not erred or failed; His word is clear. Revelation is indeed a "revelation," even if we distort or obstruct its communication of the truth by our sin and mishandling.

Schleiermacher asserted, as we saw above, that even if we finally arrived at a thoroughly correct interpretation of Revelation, however, it would be productive of but very little profit. So shy bother with the hard work of gaining this accurate interpretation of Revelation in the first place? John provides the answer in Revelation 1:3, where we read the first of seven beatitudes which are spoken in the book. "Blessed is the one reading and the ones hearing the words of the prophecy." This expression indicates that the book of Revelation was intended to be read aloud in the Christian assembly. Both the reader and the listeners would be blessed by that experience, Schleiermacher's arrogant opinion notwithstanding. God "gave" this revelation to Jesus Christ to be shown to His servants (Rev. 1:1), and we must not think that God gives useless or futile gifts. It is wasteful and ungrateful to neglect the book of Revelation, for God himself promises blessing for those who will hear it and heed it. The book opens with that beatitude in the first chapter, and its closing chapter repeats the thought: "Blessed is the one keeping the words of the prophecy of this book" (Rev. 22:7). So Revelation is bracketed with the promise of blessing that can come through a proper understanding and reaction to its prophecy. Whatever effort we must put into gaining a correct interpretation of Revelation -- purifying our hearts and lives, reading and research, etc. -- will be effort well spent. Our initial difficulty with the book ought not to keep us away from it and its blessed message. All Scripture, being inspired by God, is profitable: for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteous living (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Therefore, to the extent that we ignore the book of Revelation as God's inspired word we will fail to be adequately equipped as men of God.

We should notice that the book of Revelation requires, not merely exposure to a body of information, but also obedience in our lives. Blessing is for those who "keep" the things which have been written (Rev. 1:3), those who "keep" the words of the book's prophecy (Rev. 22:7). This is a perspective which is often missing in considerations of the book of Revelation. God expects that His people -- appropriately designated as His "servants" in the book's opening verse -- will respond to the revelation given in this book by obeying Him in a particular manner. Of course one cannot obey what one does not understand. Consequently, the call to keep the words of Revelation not only shows that God intended for the book to be understood correct, but also that such an understanding is crucial to living fully the Christian life.

So then, if the book of Revelation has been found difficult to understand by many people, what value is there in working to interpret it correctly? We have contended that the book itself was not meant as an esoteric secret, to curse us with headaches in attempting to discern its meaning. Revelation 1:1 describes a chain of communication: from God, by Jesus Christ, through an angel, to John and then on to us. What has been communicated is nothing less than an unveiling, a disclosure, a "revelation". Even as ancient prophets were "moved by the Holy Spirit" as they spoke God's word to God's people (2 Peter 1:21), even so the book of Revelation is the very "word of God" (Rev. 1:2) from one who was inspired by the Holy Spirit (1:10) to communicate the prophecy (1:3) based on things which he saw (1:2) and had interpreted to him (1:20). It has always been God's purpose that this inspired revelation to His servants be read, heard, and obeyed (1:3; 22:7); thus divine reward has been promised to those who comply with that purpose. The great unveiling

holds great blessing for God's people -- as well as calling them to committed service and obedience to the Lord.

John did not write Revelation in order to be misunderstood; he wrote it in order to inform our thinking and guide our behavior. In John 14:23-24 we read that keeping Christ's words is a test, a criterion, of genuine discipleship. In Revelation, Christ through John requires His followers to keep the words of the prophecy; Revelation contains imperial orders for the King's servants. Therefore, to hold that Revelation's meaning is hidden from us and not understandable is to foreclose on the blessing which God promises in the book, and it is to render full discipleship impossible by standing in the way of keeping the words of the prophecy -- an intolerable consequence. Despite any initial feeling of difficulty in interpreting the book of Revelation, true disciples of Christ will obediently seek the blessing which comes from understanding its message and living in terms of it. This is not optional or peripheral; it is the will of the Lord for His servants, those who know tribulation for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 1:1, 9).

Keys to Interpretive Success

(1) Genre Analysis

There are a number of procedures and principles which can help us to see correctly what Revelation intends to show God's people. The first and foremost is to recognize the kind or genre of literature with which we are dealing when we come to the book of Revelation. Any piece of literature will prove troublesome to a reader who takes it for something which it never intended to be. One does not read a history text like a television guide, nor poetry like history, nor a television guide like poetry. There are many different forms of literature and ways of communicating, each with its own customs, practices, intentions, and rules. Mixing these differing forms of expression and ways of understanding them is bound to create confusion and misinterpretation. Thus our first requirement will be to take Revelation in the way the author (Author) intended it to be approached, seeing Revelation for the kind of literature it is -- namely, highly figurative, dramatic, visionary, and symbolic. Revelation is not merely a newspaper narrative of some event(s) which happened to be published before the occurrence. It is not written in straightforward prose narrative, does not merely predict events, and aims to communicate in a way which will do more than simply offer historical information. Revelation is symbolic, portraying events as well as issues, and doing so in a way calculated to evoke a large range of feelings and insights, as well as to provoke a certain response and lifestyle. The first key to interpretive success in reading Revelation, then, is to recognize and take account of its symbolic and figurative literary genre.

Revelation communicates its message in a vivid fashion, utilizing common objects of the day as illustrative figures or symbols of further realities. We come across candlestands (Rev. 1:12), stars (1:16), costly stones (4:3; 21:19-20), a sealed book (5:1), riders of horses (6:1-8), locusts (9:3), a measuring rod (11:1), wine (14:8, 10), a reaping sickle (14:15), horns (17:16), a great stone (18:21), a white horse (19:11), and many other things which are used to represent something beyond themselves. The extent and intricacy of the mundane imagery in Revelation are nothing less than impressive. From the natural world we are introduced to animals like horses (white, red, black, and pale), a lamb, a calf, a lion, a leopard, a bear, dogs, sheep, locusts, scorpions, frogs, an eagle, a vulture, in addition to the birds of the air and the fishes of the sea. The vegetable realm presents wheat, barley, grapes, wine, olive trees, oil, a fig tree, figs, honey, spices, trees, wood, palms, grass, and wormwood. The mineral kingdom is introduced by gold, silver, brass, iron, glass, a white stone, and precious stones like jasper, sardius, emerald, pearls, and others. Aspects of geology, meteorology and astronomy appear in the mention of the sun, sun-rising, the moon, stars, day and night, the heavens, earth, sea, great waters, rivers, lake, fountains, clouds, lightening, thunder, winds, hail, rainbow, earthquake, fire, smoke, brimstone, mountains, the wilderness, and the abyss. Human anatomy and attire are often detailed: the head, hair, face, forehead, eyes, tears, ears, mouth, tongue, teeth, the breast, the heart, blood, kidneys, stomach, hands, feet, white robes, linen, priestly garments, kingly crowns, fine linen, purple, scarlet, or sackcloth. In the area of commerce we find ships, ship masters, sailors, merchants, tradesmen, craftsmen, balances, millstones, coins, goods, eye salve, medical remedies. The literary and musical worlds appear in references to writing in a book, the book of life, letters of the alphabet, seals, a small scroll, trumpets, harps, flutes, choirs, vocal and instrumental music (likened to waters and thunders), and antiphonal responses. Human life and labor are used for illustrative purposes as well; we read of kings, princes, captains, a judge, bond men, freemen, the rich, the poor, elders, servants, a bride, a groom, a harlot, a woman with child, a man-child, a thief, a shepherd, a reaper, a herald, paramours, a queen; we see keys, lamps, victory crowns, a wine-press, swords, the bow, breastplates, a prison,

a rod of iron, a two-edged sword, chariots, armor, plagues, sickness, mourning, thrones, gates, doors, and the like. The realm of religion comes before us in the appearance of prophets, priests, the tabernacle, the temple, sacrificial altar, lamp stands, incense, the synagogue, the sanctuary, pillars of the temple, the ark of the covenant, idols, images, a talking statute(??????), sorcery, false teachers. One could hardly imagine a more detailed and authentic reflection of the life of John's own day. Every department of thought and living has been drawn upon for the long list of images used to drive home the message of this prophecy.

In order to read Revelation in the natural sense intended by its author it will be impossible to interpret it "literally" (or by the explicit sense) or even by the rule of "literal where possible." If objection is made to figurative interpretation or to widespread figurative interpretation of the book of Revelation, then the book will not be correctly understood at all. Objections at this point are as futile as they are shallow and contrived. It is not a mark against a man's commitment to the utter veracity of God's word that he intelligently reads it according to the various literary genres found therein. Jesus told parables which did not strictly correspond to actual historical events at some particular place; to say this is not to cast the Savior in the role of a deceiver, but simply to acknowledge, among various pedagogies He used, a parabolic method of teaching the truth. Likewise, to recognize the symbolic and figurative character of much of what John teaches us in the book of Revelation is not to slight the book or undermine its truthfulness. One simply cannot suppress the fact that this book is not a simple narrative to be read in a matter-of-fact fashion, but is rather an ornate series of symbols and similitudes which must be understood as referring to historical events and spiritual principles which lie beyond the things explicitly mentioned in the text.

One need not be an expert theologian to recognize that Revelation is different from the other books of the Bible. Weird imagery, lurid predictions of judgment, and the final gleaming picture of the city of God arouse the curiosity of the student. No other part of Scripture has proved so fascinating to expositors, and no other has suffered so much at their hands. To many people Revelation is an insoluble puzzle, the meaning of which was forgotten long ago, if, indeed, it was ever known at all.

Notwithstanding its mysterious nature, the book was not written to frighten or to bewilder its readers, but to aid them in understanding God's program for their time. The symbols were significant, and were intended to be the vehicle of a very definite and important train of thought.*10

The important message of Revelation will only be obscured by artificial rules of interpretation which bind the reader to understand the meaning of the text non-metaphorically or non-symbolically. Nobody who is a conservative, evangelical reader of Scripture interprets the book of Revelation "according to the letter, in the primary, plain, and exact meaning of an expression" -- that is, "literally." Those who pretend otherwise, polemically placing themselves a pious step up from other interpreters, only deceive their hearers with hasty generalizations and false antitheses.

The invisible God and eternal King of the universe (I Tim. 1:17) is portrayed as sitting upon a throne in Revelation 4:3, where it is said that He was "in appearance like a jasper and a sardius stone." Literalists usually do not believe that God appears like a stone, even a precious one, and to

think that He can be seen is to create a tension with Paul's declaration that "no man has ever seen or can see" Him (I Tim. 6:16). In the case of Revelation 4:3 the literalist will imagine that he has an escape from the dilemmas inherent in believing that God looks like a stone, however. This is found in the word "like" (homoios): God was "in appearance like" the two precious gems -- quite explicitly a comparison and not, after all, an explicit description. Things are not so easy, though, when elsewhere the book of Revelation says that John saw a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes (Rev. 5:6) who is meant to be Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. In Revelation 22:16 Jesus Christ explicitly declares "I am the bright and morning star." These are not said to be comparisons or figures of speech, even though every orthodox interpreter will take them as such. Jesus is not literally a mutant form of lamb or the planet Venus, nor is the Holy Spirit literally seven fiery lamps (Rev. 1:4; 4:5).

Literalism in the case of the book of Revelation is not sensitive to the genre of the literature involved and cannot be squared with the theology of Scripture, as we have noted. It is just this theological disconfirmation that the literalist will often seize upon, however, to refine and protect his commitment to literal interpretation. Since Scripture elsewhere would prevent us from taking Jesus to be a literal lamb, the literalist feels that he has justification for departing from his principle of literal interpretation when he comes to Revelation 5:6. That hermeneutical principle, by taking into consideration matters in the local context (e.g., homoios in Rev. 4:3) or broader Biblical and theological context (e.g., the incarnation mitigating the description of Jesus as a lamb in Rev. 5:6), eventually is refined into the slogan, "literal where possible." Two examples of this are helpful.

J. B. Smith used the word "literal" in the sense that a literal expression has "an objective reality perceptible to the physical senses and especially to the eye."*11 Regarding the interpretation of Revelation, he wrote:

Since so much importance is attached to the words contained therein, it would appear that they should be interpreted in their plain literal sense unless, or in case, evidence in the book itself appears to the contrary. . . . In the interpretation of symbolism and figurative language as well as in any portion of the Scripture one may well observe that it is best to take the literal sense, where it will stand, remembering that the farthest from it will likely be the worst. A recent statement is, "If the literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense." . . . One observes that many of the symbols of the book are explained. There are other symbols whose use and meaning are explained in the light of other Scriptures. For instance, Lamb is a symbolic word, but no one would think of a quadruped when he meets with the word here. . . . Therefore the conclusion may be drawn that symbols occurring in the book are either explained in the text or may be understood from their use in previous Scriptures. The inference follows that whatever is not thus explained is to be taken as literal.*12

Smith's operating assumption, we see here, is that the text of Revelation should be literally understood; exceptions to that assumption will be granted only where expressions are actually explained as symbolical in character, either in the local context of the book or the broader context of Scriptural teaching elsewhere. That is, Revelation should be taken as "literal where possible."

A second illustration of commitment to this hermeneutical approach to the book of Revelation, one showing the lengths to which one can go with the qualification "where possible," is found in Hal Lindsey's study of the book of Revelation. He writes in his "introduction":

I'm sure the imagery and symbolism of the book are what scare most people away. However, I believe we need to see that the Book of Revelation is the "Grand Central Station" of the whole Bible. Nearly every symbol in it is used somewhere else in the Bible, but finds its ultimate fulfillment and explanation in this final prophetic book of the Bible.

However, when a symbol is not explained in the book of Revelation or some where else in the Bible, Lindsey's interpretive approach is literalistic -- with a special twist. He continues:

Some writers have chosen to interpret each symbol quite literally. For example, a locust with the face of a man, the teeth of a lion, a breastplate of iron, a tail that can sting, and wings that make the sound of many chariots would have to be specially created by God to look just like that description.

I personally tend to think that God might utilize in his judgments some modern devices of man which the Apostle John was at a loss for words to describe nineteen centuries ago! In the case just mentioned, the locusts might symbolize an advanced kind of helicopter.*13

(Later, when he comments on the mutant locusts mentioned here from Revelation 9:1-11, Lindsey takes the view that they are the kind of Cobra helicopters used in Viet Nam, with nerve gas sprayed from their tails; likewise, his opinion about the strange horses of Revelation 9:17-19 is that John was "describing some kind of mobilized ballistic missile launcher.") John's description of these fearsome locusts is not explained as symbolic anywhere in Revelation or the remainder of the Bible, and thus one would appear committed to taking them literally on Lindsey's approach. The difference is that John is thought to have been restricted in his capacity for describing something transcending his own day and culture. What he saw was literally a cobra helicopter, Lindsey would have us believe, but he described it in terms of various creatures common to his experience in the ancient world. Consequently, the mutant locusts are not viewed as symbolic of something else (e.g., a fierce conquering army demonically encouraged), the are -- "literal as possible" -- taken to be the appearance of an advanced form of military aircraft.

The "beast" (or "monster") of Revelation 13 is perhaps a persuasive test-case for the "literal where possible" approach to the book of Revelation. This beast is unique to Biblical literature. Similarities exist between it and the beasts from Daniel 7, but in Daniel's prophecy, after all, there are four separate beasts, rather than the one of Revelation 13:1-2; the latter had seven heads, unlike any of the beasts described in Daniel's prophecy. The only account given of this "beast" as such (rather than as a "man of lawlessness" or anything else) is in the book of Revelation. To assume automatically that this beast is to be identified with some other character differently described in

Scripture is to impose theological preconceptions. All we know from a literal reading of the text itself is that this beast from the sea had seven heads and ten horns, was likened to other creatures, spoke blasphemies, was empowered by a great red dragon, etc. Does anything in the local context of Revelation indicate to us that this "beast" should be interpreted symbolically of something else, for instance a man? Revelation 13:18 informs us that this beast's number is the number of a man, but it does not tell us that the beast itself is a man in reality. For all we know, being "literal where possible," this was a very terrible form of beast incorporating special man-like qualities, such as a mouth that could speak blasphemies and a mark which could be taken as the 666-number of a man. If one wishes to be literal, we must acknowledge that it is indeed possible that there be a seven-headed, ten-horned creature which one day would arise from the sea and carry on in the way described by John. Since this possibility is not explained away in light of other Scriptures (following J. B. Smith), and since John may simply have been utilizing concepts from his ancient experience for a modern-day creature or entity which God allowed him to see (following Hal Lindsey_, we have no justification from the principles of literalism for taking the "beast" figuratively. The objective reality perceptible to John's senses was a "beast," and thus in accord with the primary meaning of the word, literalism should insist on taking the referent of this expression as indeed a beast -- the description of which in Revelation 13 being logically "possible" and empirically imaginable (something like it was pictured in fact on an ancient seal which portrayed the Egyptian dragon of chaos).*14 The fact that the proponents of literalism, both Smith and Lindsey (and others like them), by-pass this opportunity to read Revelation literally and offer a figurative interpretation of the beast (taking it to denote a politician rather than a creature from the sea) discloses how unacceptable is the dictum, "literal where possible." Some may promote that principle, but none keep it honestly.

From a literary standpoint, of course, nobody should be concerned to follow such a dictum concerning the book of Revelation anyway, for it is entirely inappropriate to the pervasive imagery and symbolism of the prophecy. To avoid confusion, however, we must take note of the fact that there are at least two widely different ways in which the expression "literal interpretation" can be taken. Usage from the time of the Reformation -- which is still technically correct yet archaic, and thereby misleading in popular usage today -- takes "literal interpretation" to be philological exegesis over against allegorical or mystical understanding of the Biblical text. The Reformers did not overlook figures of speech and symbols in the literature of the Bible, but they insisted that expressions found in this literature first be given their ordinary designation and customary use, and then be interpreted according to the author's intention (as explicit, figurative, symbolic, etc.); that is, they called for reading the Bible in its normal and natural sense, rather than construing fanciful and imaginative allegories for its expressions and stories. This is, among theologians and exegetes, one use for the phrase "literal interpretation"*15; however, it is not the usus loquendi (or customary usage) which popularly prevails today. Ordinarily people will understand "literal interpretation" to be the opposite of "figurative interpretation," whereas the Reformation use of the expression was inclusive of figurative interpretation. Today when we take the referent of the word "bear" to be a large, furry, forest animal, we are interpreting the word literally; but understanding a "bear" to be a speculator in the stock market is interpreting the word figuratively. Likewise, a literal interpretation of the "beast" of Revelation 13 would see it as a creature from the sea actually having seven heads, ten horns, etc., whereas taking John's words to refer to a political personality would be figurative interpretation. In the first (Reformed but now archaic) sense, we must insist on literal interpretation of the book of Revelation, lest subjective imagination and preconceptions carry the

day theologically. In the second sense for the word "literal," however, we would insist that literal interpretation not be the norm for the book of Revelation, lest imagination and forced barbarisms obscure the true meaning of the book.

With this clarification in mind, we can return to the observation that the dictum "literal where possible" is entirely inappropriate for the prophecy of Revelation with its abundance of figures of speech and symbolism. Ray Summers states that the presumption should be just the opposite of that in the slogan, "literal where possible." He says, "In this book, presented in pictorial form, one must assume that the symbols are to be taken figuratively unless there is good reason for regarding them as literal. There are few places where literal language is used in the midst of symbolical, but these stand out in bold relief. . . ."*16 This would be a far more reliable hermeneutical guideline, although we must constantly bear in mind the crucial matter really is the nature and evident intention of each individual passage in Revelation (rather than an automatic tendency to prefer literal or figurative interpretation). The context and literary genre of Revelation (rather than an automatic tendency to prefer literal or figurative interpretation). The context and literary genre of Revelation 12 should plainly indicate to a reader that the warfare between Michael and his angels on the one hand and the Dragon and his angels on the other should not be interpreted in the same way that we would understand the warfare between David and Goliath in the Old Testament narrative. On the whole, Revelation contains much more of the former kind of literature than of the latter kind of literature.

Hence the justice of Summers' remark: "The interpreter who starts out to understand Revelation, so far as possible, to be literal, starts in the wrong direction, and the further he proceeds in this direction the less he will understand the book."*17 Among the main diversions which have created mistakes and misunderstandings concerning the meaning of Revelation, then, literalism must rank high on the list. To quote Summers again:

The symbolism of this book is often weird and grotesque. Wild beasts with characteristics quite untrue to nature are used to represent heathen worldly powers. Why should an animal have seven heads, or ten horns, or the feet of a bear and the mouth of a lion? (13:1-2). Surely there was never such a literal animal. All the combined efforts of P. T. Barnum and Robert Ripley could not have produced such a creature. The animal is so presented to symbolize a powerful and vicious antagonist met by the cause of righteousness in spiritual battle. No method of interpretation can get to the real message of Revelation unless it recognizes and follows this symbolism.*18

Some commentators see in the very first verse of the Book (Rev. 1:1) an announcement of the symbolical character of the communication. The word used to describe the disclosure made known to John is "signified" (semainein), which appears only five other times in the New Testament (three of them in John's gospel). Sometimes it means nothing more than to "indicate" or "report" something (e.g., Acts 25:27). Yet at other points it is used for prophesying through the Spirit (e.g., Agabus "signified" an upcoming famine, Acts 11:28). Jesus gave a somewhat cryptic, prophetic sign for the way He would die, "signifying" it by a phrase that could also refer to one's exaltation: "lifted up" (John 12:33; 18É32); similarly He prophesied the death of Peter, "signifying" it in less than a plain and explicit fashion (John 21:19). In the ancient world, this Greek verb was a technical term for supernatural pronouncements in dark sayings, riddles, and symbolic hints. Plutarch reports a saying of Heraclitus, "that the ruler whose prophetic oracle is located a Delphi neither declares nor conceals, but communicates by symbols (semainei)," and according to Socrates (Xenophon wrote) the gods know all things and make revelations, that is "grant signs (semainein)." Tenney concludes:

This term evidently meant a kind of communication that is neither plain statement nor an attempt at concealment. It is figurative, symbolic, or imaginative, and is intended to convey truth by picture rather than by definition. . . . If the language of Plutarch and Xenophon forms any fair index of the current meaning of the term in the first century, "signify" implies a divine communication to man in symbolic terms.*19

The use of this verb in the opening verse of Revelation tells us from the outset that the literature to follow will not be run-of-the-mill, garden-variety prose narrative. It will be a message communicated by signs or symbols, to be interpreted not literally, but figuratively. The "literal where possible" hermeneutic is simply out of place here, as John seems to warn us from the start. Mounce recognizes this:

The revelation is said to be signified to John. The Greek verb carries the idea of figurative representation. Strictly speaking it means to make known by some sort of sign. . . . Thus it is admirably suited to the symbolic character of the book. This should warn the reader not to expect a literal presentation of future history, but a symbolic portrayal of that which must yet come to pass.*20

Having been convinced of the symbolic and figurative character of the book of Revelation, we can note a few further principles which will aid our interpretation of the book. When it comes to understanding the figures and symbols of Revelation, we should keep in mind that each figure or symbolic indicator has a self-contained meaning -- a literary life of its own -- so that we resist the tendency to run together automatically the various scenes laid out by John for us, and so that we recognize that the same figure of speech does not necessarily portray the same thing in each instance of its use. For example, in Revelation 1 we read that the glorified Christ "had in His right hand seven starts. . . (which) are the angels of the seven churches" (vv. 16, 20). In the same chapter we also read that, when John fell prostrate at Christ's feet, the Lord "laid His right hand" upon him (v. 17). The fact that the same hand that held the angels of the churches reached down to lift up John does not warrant our construing some special meaning or relationship, as though the angels of the churches were of some assistance, benefit, or encouragement to John. Nor are we to run together the allusions to Christ's right hand in such a way that one continuous picture stands before us, necessitating that we "read between the lines" that Christ somehow put down the seven stars in His hand at some point so that it would be free to touch prostrate John. The allusions to Christ's right hand each have a purpose of their own, so that we need not be forced to drawn some inner connection between them.

Likewise, it cannot be presumed that the meaning, use, or purpose of a common figure or symbol will be uniform throughout the book of Revelation. We have just seen that "stars" are mentioned in Revelation 1; they are found in Christ's hand and represent the angels of the churches. In Revelation 8:12 the "stars" are in the sky, but a third part of them are darkened; in Revelation 6:13 the "stars" have all fallen to the earth. Then again, in Revelation 12:1 a crown of "stars" is upon the head of the woman clothed with the sun. Just three verses later the tail of the great dragon is said to wipe a third of the "stars" out of the sky (Rev. 12:4). It would be precarious to run together each mention of stars in Revelation on the assumption that they always represent the same thing or serve the same literary purpose. Stars in Christ's hand, in the woman's crown, in the sky, on the earth, a third darkened, a third knocked from the sky, all fallen from the sky -- these images are not meant to be integrated. Each allusion is to be taken on its own and read in its own context.

It is true, of course, that some figures or symbols do retain a common interpretation over a series of verses or passages -- such as the "dragon" (mentioned in many separate pericopes: e.g., Rev. 12:4; 12:7; 12:16; 13:2; 16:13; 20:2) -- but this fact must be determined by a separate literary analysis; such uniformity may not be a priori imposed on every figure or symbol used in the book. In short, we should not automatically run together into one picture, or automatically give the same meaning to, every mention or allusion to the same word or object in Revelation (e.g., "right hand," "stars," etc.). Continuity and discontinuity between the figures or symbols in Revelation -- just like literal and figurative use of expressions -- cannot be determined in advance, but can only be discerned by study of each phrase and passage one by one. Each must speak for itself.

A further principle to remember in interpreting the symbolism of Revelation is that not every detail of a picture drawn by John is to receive a separate, interpretive referent. One does not try to find special significance in all of the details are often given solely for the purpose of embellishing the general picture; they merely contribute to the vividness, power, and general effect of an overall picture. This practice of using embellishment that carries no special, symbolic denotion in itself is readily found in the telling of parables by Christ. While we cannot bind ourselves to the artificial

rule that parables have but only one point -- consider the way Jesus authoritatively interpreted his own parable of the sower (Matt. 13:18-23) -- we can easily see that there are many aspects of Jesus' parables which serve only to "fill out the picture" and have no allegorical meaning in themselves; many details are portrayed which do not serve the interpretation of the parable's main point(s), but simply serve the colorful telling of the parable's story. The fact that the fishermen "sat down" to sort out their catch (Matt. 13:48), that the prodigal son sought to eat "the husks" (Luke 15:16), and that poor Lazarus had "the dogs lick his sores" (Luke 16:21) are still graphic details which make Jesus' stories come alive and reflect a gripping realism; they do not point to anything beyond the stories themselves, however. Likewise, in the book of Revelation, John's recounting of his visions may very well contain secondary details to the scene, but should not be pressed for a specific, separate interpretation -- for instance, the long list of import over which the merchants weep in Revelation 18:11-15 are not given isolated, interpreted meanings.

The dramatic element, one of the most effective instruments of any writer, serves as another characteristic of apocalyptic. One of the chief purposes of apocalyptic literature was to make the truth taught as vivid and forceful as possible. Frequently the figures are presented for the purpose of adding vividness to aid in creating the desired impression. The details are of significance only from this viewpoint and are not to be pressed.

This principle is true of many of the visions and figures in the book. It makes its vivid and dramatic impression upon the reader by means of the grotesque and terrific symbols. Rivers of blood; hailstones weighing one hundred pounds; a dragon so large he knocks down a third of the stars when he lashes with his tail; Death riding a horse, with the Grave following behind; a woman, with the moon as a dress and the sun as a footstool; animals with many heads and horns; a dragon that casts from its mouth a river of water to destroy a woman who is flying through the air; a dragon, a beast, a false prophet, each of which vomits up a frog which joins in gathering an army -- all these are symbolical, but they are more than just symbols. They are exaggerated symbols for the purpose of a dramatic effect. The meaning of the figure is to be discerned by viewing it in broad perspective as a whole and not by trying to determine the meaning of each minute detail.*21

The true purpose and sense of the prophecies in Revelation will be found by concentrating on the central referent of its symbols, not on the elaboration of those symbolic portraits. To make something out of every aspect of the visionary portrayal in an effort to interpret the book would be as misguided as trying to analyze the meaning of a Rembrandt painting by doing a chemical analysis of the dried paint, rather than looking upon what it portrays.

What we have set forth in the preceding pages about the need to recognize the figurative and symbolical literary genre of Revelation and the proper way to interpret it holds equally true for the frequent use of numbers and names in the book. It would be entirely arbitrary to insist that, while the picture of the "beast" must be understood symbolically, the related references to "Mount Zion" and "forty-two months" (Rev. 13:5; 14:1) must be taken literally. Names and numbers may be used literally, of course, if that is the author's intention -- as in reference to distinct historical fact (e.g., Rev. 2:130 or in the prologue where the visions have not yet begun (e.g., Rev. 1:4, 9); literally it was John who wrote to seven literal churches in literal Asia, where a literal person, Antipas, had literally been martyred. However, as clear as this literal use of words is in certain cases, it is definitely the exception to the general practice in Revelation when names and numbers are

mentioned. The usually symbolic nature of John's visions and descriptions extends for the most part to his designation of names and numbers as well.

Every student of the New Testament knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified at Jerusalem. Nevertheless, John speaks of "the great city . . . where indeed their Lord was crucified" as "spiritually called Sodom" (Rev. 11:8). One can only look on in utter amazement when some commentators struggle with this straightforward statement by John, construing it unnaturally as a reference to Rome*22 or to "every city and no city"*23 -- neither of which fit the definite description of "where their Lord was crucified"! Nevertheless, even on these strained interpretations, nobody proposes that John was referring literally to the city of ancient Sodom. It is Jerusalem (or Rome, etc.) that is "spiritually called" the despicable name "Sodom." John draws explicit attention to the fact that he is not using names "literally" he is speaking "spiritually" (pneumatikos), which means he should not be understood in a natural or carnal fashion (cf. I Cor. 2:14; 3:1), any more than Paul should be understood in an empirical manner when he spoke of the wilderness rock -- "a spiritual rock" -- as Christ (I Cor. 10:4). We are tipped off in Revelation 11:8 to the fact that John uses names figuratively in Revelation -- which is how we should also interpret "Babylon," "Harmagedon," "Gog and Magog," "Egypt," "Balaam," "Jezebel," etc. Such references should be given their "spiritual" interpretation, not an outward and natural denotation. A literal understanding is made almost intolerably difficult by the way John speaks of these places and people, for the Old Testament (from which these names are drawn) affirms that historical Babylon will never be reinhabited (Isa. 13:19-22), describes Megiddo as a plain (e.g., Judges 4, 7) rather than a mountain (the explicit meaning of "Har-magedon" in Hebrew), and refers to "Gog of Magog" (Ezek. 38:2) instead of "Gog and Magog." John does not wish to be understood literally.

The same can be said of John's mention of various numbers. The most prominent numbers in the book of Revelation are 1/4, 1/3, 1/2, 3, 3 1/2, 4, 7, 10, 12, 1000 and combinations thereof. John ranges from indications of the smallest order (e.g., "one hour," Rev. 17:12; 18:10, 17, 19) to the overwhelmingly large (e.g., 200 million or "two myriads of myriads," Rev. 9:16). The numbers 7 and 12 are pressed into service over and over again (7 is mentioned 54 times itself): there are 7 churches, 7 candlestands, 7 stars, 7 angels, 7 spirits, 7 lamps, 7 eyes, 7 horns, 7 seals, 7 trumpets, 7 bowls, 7 plagues, 7 heads, 7 mountains, 7 kings, 7 thunders, 12 tribes, with 12,000 in each, 12,000 furlongs on each side of the city, 12 gates, 12 foundations, 12 angelic guards, 12 apostles, a wall 12 times 12 cubits, 12 fruits of the tree of life, a crown of 12 stars. It would be thoroughly obtuse to overlook the stylized nature of these many references; the symbol contains sevens and twelves, but the reality symbolized need not literally contain such a count of items.

The poetic and metaphorical use of numbers is a well known literary phenomenon of the Old Testament. Seven women will take hold of one man (Isa. 4:1). Two will put ten thousand to flight (Deut. 32:30). Damascus is punished for three transgressions, yes for four (Amos 1:3). There are four corners of the earth (Isa. 11:12) and four winds (Jer. 49:36). Five Egyptian cities will speak the favored language (Isa. 19:18). There are six things hated by the Lord (Prov. 6:16). Seven abominations are in the heart of the deceitful (Prov. 26:25). One should give a portion of bread unto seven, yes unto eight (Eccl. 11:2). The disobedient will be unsatisfied even when ten women bake him bread (Lev. 26:26). The Lord owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps. 50:10). In none of these cases would the reader be true to the author's intent, if the numbers mentioned were construed

literally. Indeed, to understand them so could actually result in the assertion of false propositions. God hates more than merely six things! To say God owns livestock on one thousand literal hills would suggest that the cattle on hill number 1001 are not His -- which would completely reverse the thought intended by the Psalmist! Therefore, we must honestly recognize that Biblical literature can use numbers both literally and figuratively. The genre of literature and its local context will have to decide in individual cases. In the case of Revelation we would naturally be inclined to find a figurative use of numbers corresponding to the generally figurative use of language in the book overall.

Corresponding to the Old Testament figurative expression, Revelation 7:1 speaks of the "four corners of the earth" and the "four winds of the earth." No serious commentator claims that John here intends to teach a quaternary geography or meteorology. What we have is clearly a figure of speech. Going beyond a simple case as this, we find John evidently using numbers in a symbolic manner as well, using them for their qualitative connotation instead of for their quantitavie denotation. For example, John repeatedly refers to a period of 3 1/2 years in various ways. It is 42 months (Rev. 11:2; 13:5) or 1,260 days (Rev. 11:3; 12:6), during which there will be hardship and tribulation: two witnesses prophesy in sackcloth, the beast reigns, the hold city is trampled and the woman flees to the wilderness. Why is 3 1/2 years mentioned? A clue is found in another way John refers to this period of time. He calls it "a time, and times, and half a time" (Rev. 12:14), which is a cryptic way of designating a year , two years, and then half a year. Such terminology is taken over from the prophecy of Daniel in two places (Dan. 7:25; 12:7), where the phrase covers the period during which the little horn has dominion and the holy people are broken in pieces. Similarly, Daniel speaks of a period during which sacrifices shall be put to end., followed by the coming of an abomination of desolation; these things are initiated in the midst of a seventieth week-of-years (i.e., at the 3 1/2 year point of a period symbolically described in terms of the sabbatical year and Jubilee cycle)*24 and carry through 1,290 days (Dan. 9:27; 12:11). The e 1/2 year period is a stylized expression in John, following the idea in Daniel, for a period of affliction. Compare the 3 1/2 days in Revelation 11:9, 11 when the corpses of the two witnesses lie unburied in the street. The broken seven, 3 1/2, symbolizes a time of distress, it appears, rather than a temporal quantity to be gauged by a stop-watch.

John tips us off to the fact that his use of numbers is not to be understood in a simple, obvious, or run-of-the-mill fashion. It will take some interpretation and intelligence to discern the meaning of his numerical designations. In telling his reader about the beast and "the number of his name," John cautions him against a straightforward and simple interpretation: "Here is wisdom. Let the one having understanding count the number of the beast" (Rev. 13:18). A normal reckoning of numbers will mislead you, for it takes wisdom and understanding -- informed insight -- to interpret the meaning of John's words.

The symbolic use of numbers in Revelation is clearly set forth in another passage as well. John is introduced to "the servants of God": as a large throng in chapter 7 of Revelation; these are the people who have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb (vv. 9, 14) and as such enjoy the benefit of God's protective seal of ownership upon them (v. 3; cf. 2 Tim. 2:19; Ezek. 9) -- which is, in harmony with the source of cleansing (v. 14), the name of the Lamb (Rev. 14:1). To imagine that John is describing two distinct groups of people here -- some sealed with the Lamb's name but not washed by His blood, then some washed by the blood of the Lamb but not sealed with His name -

- is theologically and exegetically intolerable. All of God's people are one (Eph. 2:15; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11-12) through Christ's blood (Eph. 2:13, 16) and thereby are sealed with the same Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14; 2:18; 4:4; I Cor. 12:13). In Revelation 7 we find two descriptions of the throng seen by John: early in the chapter they are called God's "servants" (coulous, v. 3), and later they are said to "serve" God in worship (latreuousin, v. 15). That these two descriptions are to be referentially united is clear, not only from the concepts involved, but also from the Greek vocabulary of Revelation 22:3, where we read that God's "servants" (douloi) will serve Him in worship (latreusousin" (cf. Rom. 1:1, 9). Therefore, we have no justification for maintaining that in Revelation 7 John describes for us two separate multitudes. We rather have one body of people under two description.

It will be seen, then, that the two visions of this chapt., with all the dissimilarities, relate to the same persons, the whole body of the Church, though seen in different stages of its experience. The first views the great conflict before the Church from its beginning, and pledges the guarding care of God which shall bring his faithful servants through the calamities awaiting the. The second anticipates the scene of triumph when all is finished, when the accomplished 'salvation' is the theme of the heavenly song (v. 10). The first is the promise; the second is the promise fulfilled.*25

Now what is notable for our present purposes is the way in which John numbers this one multitude. He heard the number of those sealed as 144,000 (Rev. 7:4), but lo, when he saw the great multitude "no one was able to number it" (Rev. 7:9). We could hardly ask for a more obvious disclosure that definite numbers in Revelation cannot automatically be presumed to be used literally. An "innumerable 144,000" is -- literally -- a contradiction in terms. The number here demands symbolic interpretation, even as such treatment would seem likely elsewhere in the book. We must conclude, therefore, that the figurative and symbolic character of the literature encountered throughout the book of Revelation extends, just as generally, to the author's mention of definite names and numbers.

Through and through, then, Revelation is a prophecy communicated in signs or symbols (cf. Rev. 1:1, samainein). Nevertheless, this symbolic literature is a blessed uncovering of the naked truth (cf. Rev. 1:1, apokalupsis). In short, Revelation is an unveiling by means of symbols! This may strike us a bit strange, especially if we have -- perhaps after grueling disputes with those who interpret the book differently than we do -- have longed for a "plain statement of the truth" in the place of these obscuring symbols. We tend to think of symbolism or figurative expression as "dressing up" the truth and stating it obliquely, whereas John informs us that the figures and symbols of his book "undress" the truth and make it stand before us in direct sight. Most of us, in all honesty, will need to readjust our mental categories and scholarly attitudes here. Revelation symbolizes the truth and thereby discloses it more openly. There are a few things which can be observed in order for us to accommodate ourselves more readily to this fact.

(2) Scripture Interprets Scripture

To begin with, we should notice the important fact that the imagery and symbolism in the book of Revelation are often interpreted for us right in the book itself. We are not left in the dark concerning the meaning of the main points in the visions given to John. Thus without succumbing to the disadvantages of figurative speech (e.g., confusion, ambiguity, misunderstanding, mystery), Revelation could utilize the literary advances of figurative expression (e.g., emotive communication, suggestiveness, multi-perspectivalism, powers of assimilation and integration, memorableness). A recent commentator, Michael Wilcock, has appreciated that this book has

. . . a quality which shines on every page of Revelation, and which belongs very much to the pulpit, because it should be a part of the living experience of the church. That is the appeal to the imagination. The truths of Revelation are indeed matters for the mind to grasp; but they are presented to us in a riotous procession of symbols, with the panoply of music and colour and texture, and even the taste and smell. . . .

We of the late twentieth century, we of all people, should understand this. We live in a post-literate age, which, tiring of words, is beginning to talk again in pictures. So television replaces radio, and the noun 'image' comes back into use with a dozen modern connotations. Well, God knew all about it long ago; and when his children had had enough of reciting systematic theology, he gives them a gorgeous picture-book to look at, which is in a different way just as educational.

Pictures, potent images of Christian truth . . . is what we are given in Revelation. . . . It is the images that stick. John's pages are studded with them, for the same purpose: that our imagination, as well as our mind, should grasp the key concepts of the faith.*26

The Bible communicates to us in a large variety of literary forms; its language performs many functions: there are assertions, but also commands, proverbs, promises, praises, poetry, prayers, parables, exclamations, exhortations, questions, treaties, letters, liturgies, and many more. The book of Revelation is, above all, the Biblical book of the imagination -- the book pressing into service a plethora of images. Yet it does this in such a way as to check the theological excesses and doctrinal dangers of imagination of which we are all too much aware after centuries of church history. Revelation engages the imagination without unbridling it, for in this book God authoritatively interprets His own figurative language.

In receiving the visions revealed to him for us, John became fully and personally involved in what he was seeing and learning. At one point in response he wept much (Rev. 5:4), and at another point his stomach was embittered (9:10). Later he personally interjected and called out for rejoicing over what he had seen (18:20), thereby completing the allusion to Jeremiah 51:45-48 which he caused to remember by the words of the heavenly voice (at 18:4).*27 John's uninhibited response to some of the things he was granted to see was not really different from our own; he was as uncertain of their meaning initially, and as overwhelmed by the their dramatic effect, as we are. In awe, he fell down as dead (1:17) or feel down to worship (19:10; 22:8) after seeing certain things -- e.g., the glorified Savior, the Lamb's marriage supper, the New Jerusalem. Elsewhere he confessed his own ignorance and confusion over the visions he experienced.

In chapter 7 John was questioned by one of the twenty-four elders (i.e., ranking angels)*28 as to who were the people seen arrayed in white robes and where they had come from according to the previous vision. John openly confessed his lack of understanding, saying in reply to the elder: "My lord, you know' (7:14). Further on in the book John was shown a woman astride a scarlet beast, and on her forehead was written a name with a symbolic meaning ("a mystery," mustarion; cf. Eph. 5:32; 2 Thes. 2:7; Rev. 1:20): "Babylon the Great, the Mother of the Harlots and Abominations of the Earth." John plainly tells us: "And seeing her, I wondered with a great wonder" (Rev. 17:6). Just as we are, John was perplexed over the meaning and proper understanding of the things he had perceived. How were (are) they to be taken? John greatly wondered and so do we -- until God himself provides the interpretive key.

The angel in Revelation 17:7 replied to John's confusion and bewilderment: "Why did you wonder?" Perplexity over the meaning of God's revelation is categorically inappropriate; the visions have not been provided to make us stand back in amazement over the inexplicable quality of the mysterious signs. The angel insists that John (and we) must understand what he has been shown. So immediately the angel assures John: "I will tell you the mystery." For the modern

interpreter these may very well be the most comforting words in the book! God himself, through His angel, has seen to it that His visions are properly interpreted. The "mystery" has been told, that is explained.

This phrase ["I will tell thee the mystery"], understood in terms of the book of Revelation itself means, "I will tell you the meaning of the mystery," or, "I will interpret the symbols,"

In the first chapter, John saw a vision of Jesus Christ standing among seven lamp stands holding seven stars. The angel interpreted the vision: "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lamp stands . . . are the seven churches (verse 20). That interpretation is introduced with the words "As for the mystery (i.e., the meaning of the mystery) of the seven stars . . . and the seven candlesticks . . ." In Revelation 1, therefore, the "mystery" is plainly the "meaning" or "interpretation of the vision." When "the mystery" of other visions is "told" by the angel (chapter 17), one may likewise expect an interpretation of them.

The proposition that the angel has interpreted the major symbols of the book of Revelation leads to [another] . . . : wince its principal figures have been interpreted, there is good reason to believe the book can be understood. Every view which tends to deny this possibility must therefore be rejected. This proposition does not require, however, that everything must be understood with equal ease.*29

Revelation is a highly symbolical book, but it is a book of interpreted symbols.

The entire book is interspersed with hermeneutical signposts. The seven stars and seven lamp stands are explained as seven angels and seven churches (Rev. 1:20). The seven lamps of fire are the seven spirits of God (4:5). The bowls of incense are said to represent the prayers of the saints (5:8). The great multitude is interpreted by the angel as the saints triumphant through tribulation (7:13-14). The king of the mutant locusts is the angel of the abyss (9:11). The great dragon is said to be Satan (12:9). The number of the beast is explained as the number of a man (13:18). The seven heads of the beast have a double reference: first to seven hills (17:9) and then to seven rulers (17:12). The waters symbolize many peoples and nations (17:15). The woman is interpreted as the great city ruling over the kings of the earth (17:18). The rider on the white horse is identified as "The Logos" and "The King of Kings (19:13, 16). The fine linen of the saints is their justification (19:8). The reign of the saints with Christ is the first resurrection (20:5-6). The lake of fire represents the second death (20:14). The Lamb's bride is said to be heavenly Jerusalem (21:9-10). Over and over again, from beginning to end, the book of Revelation offers the interpretive insights which are necessary to give good and proper sense to what God intends to communicate by way of the figurative language and symbolic visions found in the book. Within the pages of Revelation itself we find a microcosm of a fundamental, hermeneutical principle at work: namely, God's word interprets God's word. God gives the vision transcribed by John, and then God provides the interpretive nails on which a sensible and beneficial understanding can hang. The visionary word is followed by the interpreting word in the Revelation through John -- just as surely as the eyewitness experience of Christ was followed by the apostolic interpretation of His person and work (e.g., John's gospel and epistles). God has interpreted the word which He has given. And with that confidence in mind, we can be rid of the cynical remark of Luther, to the effect that "Everyone thinks of the book whatever his spirit imparts."*30 In the book of Revelation, rather, it

is the Holy Spirit who truly instructs us, comparing spiritual things with spiritual (cf. I Cor. 2:13). Given the great efforts to which John has gone in order to supply, at the Spirit's direction, the true and proper interpretation of various images and symbols, the suggestion advanced by Boer, "Sometimes the reader must supply the meaning himself,"*31 is quite out of character with the character and thrust of the book. The fact that God so thoroughly supplies the interpretive details necessary for Revelation helps us to understand how the book can be, according to Revelation 1:1, both symbolic and an unveiling of the truth.

What, then, are we to make of those aspects of Revelation's visions which are not given a direct, explicit, and clearly labeled interpretation in the book itself (e.g., "This is the mystery of the seven stars . . . : the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches," Rev. 1:20)? In these cases, anyway, does not every reader have to think whatever his own spirit imparts to the passage (Luther) or have to supply the meaning himself (Boer)? Definitely not. The Christians to whom this book was originally addressed would not have experienced great difficulty in interpreting and appreciating the message intended by it, for they (unlike most modern believers) were steeped in the imagery and literature of the Old Testament from which John draws so consistently and often. An understanding of the Old Testament scriptures will repeatedly be the key to interpreting the message of Revelation correctly. And where the Old Testament background is not decisive for getting the point of some passage in Revelation, it turns out frequently that the literature of the New Testament provides the parallel or clue which makes an accurate insight into Revelation possible. It just may be that the most valuable aid available to the reader for understanding the book of Revelation would be a thorough, marginal cross-reference system (e.g., the one in the American Standard Version of 1901). Revelation, more than any other book in the Biblical canon, is dependent upon the remainder of the Bible for its concepts and images. It turns out, therefore, that the book whose interpretation most intensely calls for the hermeneutical rule that Scripture interprets Scripture is also the Biblical book which most readily facilitates the use of that very rule! The difficulty in initially understanding the imagery and symbolism of the book of Revelation is counterbalanced by the ease of insight provided by its numerous cross-references.

It is true that Revelation is highly symbolic, but there is hardly a symbol in the book which is not explained in some other part of Scripture. Therefore, we must seek to compare Scripture with Scripture (I Corinthians 2:13). Revelation contains some 300 allusions from other parts of Scripture.*32

As we will see shortly, Lockyer's estimate is actually quite conservative. The point, however, should be evident: Scripture as a whole is the best handbook for interpreting Revelation in particular.

The book of Revelation continually utilizes a stock of symbols and reminders of the Old Testament. The place-names are familiar: Sodom, Egypt, the Euphrates, Megiddo, Babylon, and Jerusalem. The personal names, like Balaam and Jezebel, are likewise taken from the Old Testament and used typically. We are reminded of Moses and Elijah by the two witnesses of Revelation 11. The religion of ancient Israel is the obvious background to John's references to the tabernacle, the temple, the alter, the censer, the ark of the covenant, and the high priest's breastplate. Old Testament symbols abound in the book, where we read of the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Lamb, the root of David, the restored Jerusalem, the book of life, the water of life, the

tree of life, etc. It must be obvious to the thoughtful Bible reader that this book is grounded in the literature and pictures of the Old Testament.

Its author knew well the language and teaching of the canonical Scripture of his day, drawing phraseology or images from all three of the divisions of the Hebrew Old Testament: in particular, from each of the books of the Pentateuch, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, all of the major prophets, and seven of the minor prophets. In all, one will find allusions to at least 24 of the 39 Old Testament books. The preponderance of literary contributions are from seven of the Old Testament books, though: Psalm, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Exodus, and especially -- given its size in comparison to the frequency with which it is used -- Daniel. Of all the sections of the Old Testament, the greatest percentage of allusions in Revelation come from the major prophets, with Isaiah being the source of the greatest overall number. Some examples would be these. From Isaiah: The description of the fall of Babylon (Rev. 18; Isa. 13-14, 21, 47-48), the garment dipped in blood (Rev. 19:13; Isa. 63:3), and the vision of the new heavens and earth (Rev. 21-22; Isa. 65). From Ezekiel: the marked foreheads (Rev. 7:3; Ezek. 9:4), the eating of the scroll (Rev. 10:10; Ezek. 3:3), and the battle of Gog and Magog (Rev. 20:7-10; Ezek. 38-39). From Daniel: the career of the beast (Rev. 13; Dan. 7), and the coming of the Son of Man (Rev. 14:14; 20:4, 12; Dan. 7:7-13, 22). From Zechariah: the four horses (Rev. 6:2-8; Zech. 1:8-17; 6:1-8). The list of illustrations could be expanded to remarkable lengths.

One will notice upon studying the use of the Old Testament in the book of Revelation that there are three ways in which John draws literary allusions out of that body of inspired Scripture. In some cases we find a rather straightforward point of contact between Revelation and the Old Testament source, Ezekiel ate a scroll, and John ate a scroll -- an isolated parallel between an element in Ezekiel and an element in Revelation. At other times we come across a mosaic us of the Old Testament:

In many cases, indeed in most, the Apocalyptist blends two or more Old Testament context, whether from different books or from different parts of the same book. The result has been described as a 'mosaic'. . . . The Apocalyptist's use of his Old Testament materials is artless and natural; it is the work of a memory which is so charged with Old Testament words and thoughts that they arrange themselves in his visions like the changing patterns of a kaleidoscope, without conscious effort on his own part.*33

For example, the "four living creatures" of Revelation 4:6-89 are a composite of the cherubim of Ezekiel 1:6, 10, 18, and the seraphim of Isaiah 6:2-3. Finally, there are instances where John's use of the Old Testament shows an extended dependence on a specific pericope or series of verses from an Old Testament location; that is, John draws a number of allusions from a continuous passage.

Although most of the passages mentioned in Revelation are taken from individual verses, there are a few which are either contiguous in the original or else so near each other that they exhibit the seer's familiarity with the entire section from which they are quoted. At least thirty-seven chapters of the Old Testament appear more than once, and sometimes much more frequently. . . . The fullest use of consecutive thought falls in Isaiah and in Jeremiah. In Isaiah the chapters which are most plainly mentioned in Revelation are 6, 34, and a number of others occurring in the second half of the book, between chapters 40 and 66. There are seven allusions to Jeremiah 51 which deals with Babylon and its overthrow. Several chapters in Ezekiel 1, 2, 9, 27, 37, 38, and 40, Daniel 4 and 7, and Zechariah 12 are heartily quoted. . . . By this means of comparing the Old Testament passage with the allusion in Revelation, a fair interpretation of many of its symbolic terms may be found.*34

John's account of the fall of Babylon (Rome) in Revelation 18 gives evidence that he had Jeremiah 50-51 in mind, along with other Old Testament passages. This one chapter in Revelation repeatedly echoes Jeremiah's prophecy: The allusion to drunkenness (v. 2; Jer. 51:7), the call to exit (v. 4; Jer. 51:45), the judgment extending to heaven (v. 5; Jer. 51:9), the requiting according to deeds (v. 6; Jer. 50:29), and the burning of the city (v. 8; Jer. 51:25, 30, 32, 58).

Source-criticism of the book of Revelation, it would seem, must surely begin with John's use of the Old Testament: "The most obvious source of ideas and mental images is the Old Testament," notes Guthrie.*35 It is this inspired literature that is reflected most often and most consistently in the book of Revelation; indeed Revelation makes greater use of the Old Testament than any other book of the New Testament canon. And yet, for all of its manifest dependence on the literature of the Old Testament, Revelation will not be found to have directly quoted it. What we find, rather, are quite clearly allusions. Swete explains:

No book in the New Testament is so thoroughly steeped in the thought and imagery of the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet the writer has not once quoted the Old Testament, and rarely uses its ipsissima verba. Seldom does he borrow from it a scene or the suggestion of a vision without modifying the details, departing from his original with the utmost freedom, or combining features which have been brought together from different contexts. This method of using Old Testament materials runs through the whole of the Apocalypse, and is characteristic of the book.*36

The language and imagery of the Old Testament are so controlling in John's mind that, when he begins to write -- especially an account of the fulfillment of prophecy in figurative language -- and to give expression to the most marvelous of revelations, he cannot do so without reflecting throughout the literature of the Old Testament. John has not offered us merely a collage on the Old Testament, however, and thus his use of it is not pedantic. There are some mundane reasons why we find variation in Revelation from the original Old Testament source:

Variations in these allusions from the exact language of the originals may be explained in a number of ways. The seer may have quoted loosely from memory as the ancients so often did, giving only the sense of the passage which he had in mind. He may have consciously adapted the language of his source to meet his immediate need without attempting to reproduce its exact content or sequence. He may have quoted from a type of text different from that which has survived to make the basis of our present Septuagint or Hebrew text.*37

Going beyond these accounts, however, we should bear in mind that John did not sit down with an Old Testament before him and proceed to piece together bits from here and there in an attempt to construct a tightly worded and strictly argued polemic. He was not composing on the basis of a given text (like a preacher might do today in preparing a sermon) but rather speaking without mediation "in the Spirit" (Rev. 1:10) -- directly communicating Spirit-given revelation, as did the other New Testament prophets (cf. Eph. 3:5; I Cor. 14:29-32). Variations from the Old Testament text in his allusions arose basically from the creative conditions of the origin of Revelation. Krister Stendahl comments:

We have already established that texts of apocalyptic nature seldom contain quotations in the strict sense, while at the same time, it is just these texts which are abounding in allusions which with supreme freedom and skill have been woven into the context. Revelation is itself a striking example of this. Without a single true quotation, it is nevertheless interwoven with O.T. material to a greater extent than any other writing in the N.T.. . . . There is not attempt to quote exactly in this form, and the citing is certainly freely given from memory. The prophetic spirit creates, it does not quote in order to teach or argue.*38

Turning from the nature of John's use of the Old Testament, we should note the number of times that the text of Revelation draws on this Old Testament source of imagery and phraseology. Exact counts vary from researcher to researcher, doubtless due to the allusive character of John's use of the Old Testament literature. On any reasonable estimate, however, the sum of allusions is very impressive. Swete wrote:

The Apocalyptist's use of the Old Testament is by no means limited to its symbolical imagery and numbers; its thoughts and its very words appear in every part of his book. It is true that the Apocalypse is marked by an entire absence of the formal quotations which are to be found in other parts of the New Testament; the nature of the work precluded the author from a direct appeal to his source. Yet no writer of the Apostolic age makes larger use of his predecessors. From the list of "quotations from the Old Testament" with which the appendix to Westcott and Hort's second volume ends, it appears that of the 404 verses of the Apocalypse there are 278 which contain references to the Jewish Scriptures.*39

If 278 of Revelation's 404 verses contain references to the Old Testament, then roughly 69% of the book hearkens back to the Jewish Scriptures! How much of the Old Testament is used in these 278 verses? Because they have differences of opinion as to what constitutes an allusion, different writers come to different conclusions. One might also distinguish between the number of different Old Testament references found in Revelation and the number of times Revelation refers to the Old Testament, since some Old Testament texts are alluded to more than once. Tenney's count is conservative and nevertheless impressive:

> It is filled with references to events and characters of the Old Testament, and a great deal of its phraseology is taken directly from the Old Testament books. Oddly enough, there is not one direct citation in Revelation from the Old Testament with a statement that it is quoted from a given passage; but a count of the significant allusions which are traceable both by verbal resemblance and by contextual connection to the Hebrew canon number three hundred and forty-eight. Of these approximately ninety-five are repeated, so that the actual number of different Old Testament passages that are mentioned are nearly two hundred and fifty, or an average of more than ten for each chapter in Revelation.*40

Tenney claims that 250 Old Testament passages are referred to 348 times in Revelation. The Greek New Testament edited by Westcott and Hort listed over 400 references to the Old Testament in Revelation. Other estimates range as high as over 500 (claims Ezell)*41 or approximately 500 (claims Scroggie).*42 The computation by Vanhoye showed that there were 518 allusions in Revelation to the Old Testament, *43 in which case there would be well over one allusion to the Old Testament in each verse of Revelation if those allusions were evenly divided. No matter which count we follow, it is clear that Revelation is virtually a rereading of the Old Testament Scriptures.

In a study of the Old Testament books most frequently utilized in Revelation, Jenkins observed that John drew heavily upon the periods of most intense and active miraculous activity, upon the apocalyptic visions, and upon the expressions of praise to God. "These periods emphasize the omnipotence, omniscience and reality of God; they describe the overthrow of God's enemies and the victory of His people."*44 (Already, then, even from this formal analysis of the composition of Revelation, we have a clue to the optimism of its message to a persecuted church.) The message, imagery, and phraseology of Revelation find their counterpart and original basis in the teaching of the Old Testament. "Without the Old Testament the Apocalypse would be a hopeless enigma, and . . . without the Apocalypse the Old Testament would be an unfinished story. That is their relation."*45 We see, then, that one of the best keys for interpretive success in the case of the book of Revelation is a thorough familiarity with the literature, and a faithful adherence to the theological teaching, of the Old Testament. If we have difficulty with the book of Revelation, we can hardly do better than to explore anew the Old Testament for help.

It is believed that one of the major reasons why Christians fail to understand the book of Revelation is that they lack an awareness of the use of the Old Testament which permeates the book. Even an awareness of this phenomenon has not always brought an understanding of the Old Testament symbols used. If Christians could only see that John was using language and imagery which was thoroughly familiar to his first readers! But this insight does not come without careful study and comparison with the Old Testament background parallels.*46

In understanding John's allusions to the Old Testament one needs hermeneutical flexibility and common sense. It should not be thought that there is only one way in which John goes to the literature of the Old Testament, or only one purpose for doing so, or only one proper way to interpret and expound his Old Testament allusions. In the Old Testament John could find many things which served his purposes as an author, from definite prophecy to parallels or analogies to simple figures of speech or convenient expressions. One extreme to which a commentator can go is to operate on the assumption that, when John alludes to some Old Testament passage, he intends to assert everything contained in that pericope with absolutely no change from the use, understanding, or expectation it had for the Old Testament author involved -- that is, to forget that John could be using only an aspect of the Old Testament context, or to think that expressions with the same sense (in the Old Testament as in the New) cannot have differing referents or literary functions. On the other hand, one should avoid the opposite extreme of asserting that John changes the meaning of the Old Testament passages which he uses.*47 If this were strictly true, the Old Testament would actually be of no benefit in interpreting the literature of Revelation, or to use it as such would create equivocation! Using only selected aspects of some Old Testament passage does not constitute a transformation of the sense given that portion of the literature to which allusion is made, and altering the referent or function of an expression does not thereby change its basic sense. If the reader is not careful, artificial rules for understanding the use of the Old Testament in Revelation can produce misunderstanding of its message, fostered by a too rigid concept of the continuity, or by a too loose concept of the discontinuity, between the "meanings" of the Old Testament and Revelation passages. John shows the same fidelity and creativity toward the Old Testament that we find in other New Testament authors (or in the use made by any responsible author in drawing on a body of preceding literature).

After the reader has enjoyed the advantage of interpreting the book of Revelation in accord with the explanations of its symbolism contained right within the book itself, and then in the light of its numerous Old Testament allusions, he or she may gain further insight by studying the parallels between elements in Revelation and other portions of the New Testament Scriptures. Although not as numerous as the Old Testament allusions in Revelation, the traces and reflections of New Testament literature (or at least of expressions and concepts common to the New Testament church which at some time -- before or after Revelation -- found their way into the canonical literature) are definite and impressive. The salutation, "Grace to you and peace," may be too general to offer specific or noteworthy hermeneutical insights as we study it in both Revelation (1:4) and Colossians (1:2), but the common use of the expression "firstborn from the dead" in Revelation 1:5 and Colossians 1:18 is of obvious benefit to correct interpretation and theological understanding. If you can gain a proper assessment of what Paul meant by that phrase, there is a presumption that it will enable you to comprehend John's construction as well.

Expressions [in Revelation] that are found elsewhere in the New Testament may there be defined by their context and so interpreted for their usage in the Apocalypse. The parallels of both the Old Testament and the New Testament are quite helpful in comparative study.*48

In a listing and tabulation of the New Testament allusions or points of contact with the literature of Revelation, Ford has found such connections in every chapter of Revelation with the exceptions of chapters 4, 10, and 16. In all she finds 104 allusions and parallels in Revelation to the rest of the New Testament, thus averaging just under five per chapter (if evenly distributed).*49 If one

were to look up in the New Testament all of the literary points of contact with the book of Revelation, one would end up turning in his or her Bible to every New Testament book except six or seven of them. The distribution of New Testament allusions in Revelation falls into three obvious groups: there are 38 allusions in chapters 20-22. The book is thus bracketed at beginning and end with a wealth of such literary contacts with the other New Testament books, leaving proportionately much fewer allusions in the body of the book (the inner 17 chapters).

The phrases and concepts used by John often strike us as distinct reminiscences of the sayings of Christ. John writes that the one who has an ear, let him hear (e.g., Rev. 2:7) -- even as Christ often said (e.g., Matt. 11:15). Echoes of Christ's words while on earth are heard in the statements of Revelation that one must be watchful because of the surprise of a thief (Rev. 3:3; cf. Matt. 24:43), that Christ will confess one's name before the Father (Rev. 21:6; 22:17; cf. John 4:10; 7:37). Perhaps we have a recollection of the Apostolic Council at Jerusalem in John's language about placing no other burden on the reader (Rev. 2:24; cf. Acts 15:28). Personal discussions with the other apostles or private correspondence with them, not to mention common experience with them as followers of Christ, had given John similar theological concepts as those found in the other New Testament writings: for instance, that Christ is the beginning of God's creation (Rev. 3:14; cf. Col. 1:150 and the firstborn from the dead (Rev. 1:5; cf. Col. 1:18), that God's people are a temple built on the foundation of the apostles (Rev. 3:12; 21:14; cf. Eph. 2:19-22), that believers are seated with Christ (Rev. 3:21; cf. Eph. 2:6), and that there is a heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21; cf. Heb. 12:22).

Throughout Revelation, then, we find that its wording and ideas can often be explicated with the help of parallels elsewhere in the New Testament Scriptures. In this way -- even as with interpretations offered right within the book of Revelation itself, and with the interpretive insights offered by consideration of the Old Testament allusions in Revelation -- the New Testament points of contact reinforce the hermeneutical principle which we have already advanced: Scripture interprets Scripture. Where clear passages of Scripture are available and relevant to the teaching of the book of Revelation, they should be allowed to guide our interpretation of the difficult or symbolic passages within Revelation. In his classic textbook on hermeneutics, Milton Terry described the Bible as a "self-interpreting book," stating in accordance with that fact that the interpreter must have strict regard "to the analogy and import of similar symbols and figures elsewhere used."*50 Ramm says:

Scripture interprets Scripture (or, "obscure passages in Scripture must give way to clear passages"). . . . Restated the principle would read: "The entire Holy Scripture is the context and guide for understanding the particular passages of Scripture." . . . In the concrete task of writing Christian theology this principle means that the theologian must basically rest his theology on those passages that are clear and not upon those that are obscure. . . . There is no question that much mischief has been done with Scripture in the history of interpretation by interpreters who claimed to have much truth in obscure passages of Scripture.*51

Alan Stibbs further explains:

Interpret the obscure by the clear and the partial by the more complete reference. Some passages and statements of Scripture, taken by themselves and particularly on first acquaintance, are very obscure and hard to understand. Their language, too, may be figurative and enigmatic; they seem to need clarification. . . . In such cases it is important to look for some clear and more detailed Scriptural statement as an aid to true understanding, and not to make incomplete or abstruse statements the main foundation of what, as far as the rest of Scripture is concerned, is a novel doctrine.*52

Not every author who has put his hand to the interpretation of Revelation has respected the foregoing principles. For instance, despite the very clear teaching of Paul in Ephesians 5 that the church is the bride (wife) of Christ, Scroggie refuses to take the bride (wife) of the Lamb in Revelation 21:2, 9 (cf. 19:7) as the church!*53 Some dispensationalists, out of uncontrolled prejudice concerning their eschatological scheme, have managed hermeneutically to turn matters completely up-side-down, resisting the advice that didactic passages ought to be used to interpret figurative and prophetic passages. In a caustic commentary on Revelation we read:

Any man who is Post-Millennial or A-Millennial will have to reject the Book of Revelation or reject the plain, clear passages in it, and go to more obscure passages in Hebrews, Matthew, or Acts to prove his "Kingdom" ideas. . . . Revelation opens the Old Testament and enables a man to interpret Matthew, Acts, and Hebrews correctly. You cannot get Matthew, Acts, and Hebrews correct doctrinally . . . without the Book of Revelation.*54

When a man cannot properly distinguish between the clear and the less clear modes of literature, or when a man closes his eyes to the obvious, it will be no surprise to find that his confident treatment of the less obvious passages of Scripture is even more incredible.

(3) Historical Context

Having taken account of the need for genre analysis in our understanding of Revelation, and having insisted that a cardinal rule must be that Scripture interprets Scripture regarding the literature of Revelation, it should finally be noted that some aspects of Revelation cannot be fully or properly understood without historical research into the setting and culture out of which the book came. The book itself would seem to clue us to this fact.

At least twice John appeals to the intelligence of those studying the book, challenging them to think hard, look beyond the surface meaning of his expressions, and to unravel the purpose of his words. "Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding count the number of the beast" (Rev. 13:18); and "Here is the mind that has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains. . ." (Rev. 17:9). One gets the impression that those readers who would be diligent and clear-headed could, on the basis of what was known to them, figure out what John was intending to communicate. Why did John not simply state his points straightforwardly for everyone to understand with ease? The answer to this question undoubtedly lies in the conditions under which the book was written.

As John wrote, he found himself on the island of Patmos as a steadfast "companion in tribulation" (Rev. 1:9) with fellow believers who have experienced and face future slander, affliction, imprisonment, and even martyrdom (cf. Rev. 2:9, 10, 13; 6:19). Patmos was a rocky island, ten miles long and five miles wide, in the Icarian Sea, lying southwest of Miletus. Both Tacitus (Annals 3.68; 4.30; 15.71) and Pliny (Natural History 12:4-13, 23) inform us that the Romans used Patmos as a place of banishment for political prisoners, and the unanimous testimony of the early church (Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Eusebius, Jerome) is that John was banished to this island to work the mines found there. John declares that he was on Patmos "on account of" (dia) the word of God and the witness of Jesus (Rev. 1:9). Taken by itself, the use of this preposition in the Greek might simply denote that John had gone to Patmos (in his ordinary apostolic labors) for the purpose of receiving the revelation God granted him there.*55 However, it more likely indicates that it was on the basis of John's commitment to the word of God that he was exiled by the civil authorities. Elsewhere in Revelation, when he speaks of suffering for one's Christian testimony, he uses the preposition in this fashion: e.g., John saw under the alter the souls of them who had been "slain on account of the word of God" (6:9), and he saw reigning with Christ those who had been "beheaded on account of the witness of Jesus" (20:4). Therefore, contrary to the opinion of some older commentators (e.g., Lucke**, De Wette, Reuss, Dusterdieck**), the evidence is compelling that John wrote the book of Revelation while suffering for his faith, having been politically banished to the island of Patmos.

That being the case, John would have had sufficient motivation to write in such a way that his captors and any other official who happened to come into contact with the book would not be able to understand what he was saying -- the book would not be able to understand what he was saying -- especially given the fact that his message was anything but flattering to the Roman command! In short, John expressed himself in a kind of "code" which would have been familiar to his readers but confusing to his persecutors. Harrison says of Revelation:

> It is a mysterious book, filled with enigmas for the modern reader. But this does not mean that it was necessarily so for believers who read it at the end of the first century. Its message had to be conveyed by symbols and obscure allusions at least in part because of the danger of reprisal by an arrogant and ruthless Roman regime that was threatening the church with persecution.*56

To a certain degree, then, the modern reader may not understand the meaning of Revelation at points because he does not have "the inside line" shared by John and his early readers. Just recognizing this fact, however, may put us on the path to greater comprehension. As Stauffer said,

> We may read the Book of Revelation with new understanding when we see it as the apostolic reply to the declaration of war [on Christianity] by the divine emperor of Rome. And when we realize the perilous political situation in which the book was both written and "published" (22:10), we understand the reason for its mysterious and veiled pictorial language and its preference for words and pseudonyms from the Old Testament.*57

Realizing that Revelation was a kind of code understandable to its early readers motivates us to find out those things about the early days and culture, not to mention the early apostolic instruction to the church, which will open up the book's meaning for us as well.

The manner in which John clues in his readers to the identity of the beast (Rev. 13:18) assumes their familiarity with his style of communication. If they have the requisite "understanding," they will be able to calculate the name of the beast. In this case John counted on his readers to understand the deciphering use of gematria, where each letter in a word carried a corresponding numerical value. Examples of such a thing were frequent enough in the first century (especially among Jewish teachers) that John could point the finger of guilt at the reigning emperor by use of gematria and thereby still observe "precaution against the charge of sedition."*58

Why should "John" have spoken so cryptically. It would seem that in time of persecution or war the faithful should be warned. However, the warning had to be given in such a way as to obscure its meaning for the pagans into whose hands the book of Revelation might fall. If it violated the sacrosanct majesty of Rome, the faithful might be charged with treason. Hence the gematria was a measure of prudence.*59

As the modern interpreter attempts to understand this portion of Revelation, then, he will need to know something of the history and circumstances of John's day -- minimally, the list of relevant emperors or other forces which John could have been picking out by his cryptic designation. Additionally, one should know the workings of gematria and the pertinent languages within which

John might have been using it. A knowledge of history, in short, is prerequisite to a full understanding of the historical message of Revelation.

It also seems that, in writing the book of Revelation, John proceeded on the assumption that his readers would be familiar with and remember earlier instruction they had received in the church (or even from him personally). We see this, for instance, in the way that John can introduce a character who has not been previously mentioned in the book, and yet who is introduced definite -- as well known to the readers. The best example of this is found in Revelation 11:7, where we find the very first mention of the "beast" whose career dominates the second half of the book. Without an prefatory or subsequent explanation, John felt free simply to write, "And when they finish their testimony, the beast who ascends from the abyss will make war with them." It is taken for granted that the reader will know how to take this reference to a "beast," and that indeed the reader will understand that John spoke not simply of a beast, but of "the" beast, the well known one from instruction within Christian circles (cf. "the second death," 2:11, 20:14; "my two witnesses," 11:3; etc.). Beckwith suggests something similar saying:

Like 'every scripture inspired of God' the Apocalypse was certainly meant to be to those whom it first came 'profitable for teaching' (2 Tim. 3:16), and so the writer must have counted on its being understood in its chief lessons. Doubtless the readers had already been instructed orally in such eschatological teachings as appears in the Gospel record of our Lord's words, and in the epistles; and if so, they possessed the norm guiding them to the general understanding of a book which likewise told of the approach of the 'times of the Gentiles,' 'the Messianic woes,' and of the near appearing of Christ in his kingdom, a book which also warned and encouraged the Church in view of what was coming on the earth. . . . The monitions to preparedness and steadfastness, the revelations of hope and comfort, were clear; and as long as the eschatological expectations of the apostolic age continued active, the Church was not altogether far from the author's thought in the understanding of the book; but as that expectation died away, or was transformed, the Church entered into a wilderness of wandering in its conception of this portion of Scripture, from which it is only in recent years escaping through the rise and rigorous application of the historical method of study.*60

Beckwith had earlier explained: "By the historical method of studying any ancient writing we mean the endeavor to realize as fully as possible the historic past out of which the work sprang."*61 Gaining something of an insight into the historical context for the book of Revelation, and seeing it concretely in the setting of the early church's struggles and oral teaching (reflected to some degree in the New Testament literature), will provide necessary aid in interpreting the book for today. The early church had the advantage of hearing apostolic instruction which would have made the message of Revelation plain to its recipients. We who miss that advantage need as much as possible to compensate through thorough historical research, realizing that the book was not addressed and styled to our circumstances, conceptions, and idioms, but rather to those of John's own day.

If nothing else, a knowledge of John's historical period and culture should help us to understand certain symbols in the book of Revelation which are not explained within the book itself nor by parallel with Old and New Testament literature.

Although these symbols are not identified clearly either by the immediate context or by exact correspondence with the Old Testament, they are completely obscure. In a few cases they are to be interpreted in terms of local custom or usage which may be unknown to us, but which was obvious to the initial readers.

For instance, the "white stone" (2:17) has no precedent in the Old Testament, nor does the context define the meaning. It has been variously explained as the ballot used in a voting urn, or as the pebble which was sometimes given as a ticket for free entertainment, or as the white pebble cast by a jury man for acquittal of a prisoner, or as an amulet engraved with a secret formula. . . . It is both a guarantee of divine favor and a key to divine fellowship . . . .

The seals of chapter 6 draw their meaning from documentary usage. The "book" which John saw in the right hand of the occupant of the throne (5:1) was not a volume with pages like a modern book, but was properly a scroll made of papyrus, a kind of paper. It may not have been very large, but it was peculiar because it was "written within and on the back, close sealed with seven seals" (5:1). Ordinarily papyrus scrolls were inscribed on one side only. The reverse side was used either because the writer had more material than he could put on one side of the sheet, or because he placed the title on the book where it could be seen readily. A scroll written on both sides and sealed with seven seals would be an unusually full and important document, possibly legal in character.

Roman wills were often written on bronze or wooden plates, with one copy on the outside and an original sealed within. While the document of Revelation 5 is a scroll, it is possible that the seven seals would connote a will to all who read the passage. If so, a new meaning is given to the text; for a will could be opened only by the heir and executor of the estate. In breaking the seals he avowed his rightful claim as heir and asserted his authority over the property. The opening of the sealed scroll would thus show that Christ was the heir of God, worthy to assume rulership over the universe by right of redemption and ready to exercise the authority necessary to reclaim for God the inheritance that had been usurped by Satan and his minions.*62

Whether we agree completely with Tenney's conclusions or not, these illustrations demonstrate the value of research into the historical setting of the book of Revelation. Such study can be quite

valuable in explaining figures and symbols which are not paralleled in Scripture, but which would have been known to the believers of a previous age.

Terry's textbook on Biblical hermeneutics lays before us the necessity of historical research in interpreting the Scriptures:

> It is of the first importance, in interpreting a written document, to ascertain who the author was, and to determine the time, the place, and the circumstances of his writing. The interpreter should, therefore, endeavour to take himself from the present, and to transport himself into the historical position of his author, look through his eyes, note his surroundings, feel with his heart, and catch his emotion. Herein we note the import of the term grammatico-historical interpretation. We are not only to grasp the grammatical import of words and sentences, but also to feel the force and bearing of the historical circumstances which may in any way have affected the writer.*63

It is noteworthy that when Terry moves on to a special, concrete illustration of the importance of knowing the historical standpoint of a writer, he points to and studies the "Historical Standpoint of the Apocalypse." The book of Revelation can be interpreted more accurately and beneficially if one takes the time to become familiar with its historical context. This is true, of course, for all Biblical books, but given the nature of the literature in Revelation and the difficulty experienced by many in understanding it, this principle is all the more necessary in the case of Revelation. For the many reasons we have set forth above, then, it is crucial to learn of the local conditions, now unfamiliar to us, out of which Revelation arose and to which its message was styled.

Confidence in Interpretation: Its Real Obstacle and True Nature

It has been pointed out above that the book of Revelation, although symbolic in character, is an unveiling or disclosure of the naked truth. Because of the difficulty many readers feel in properly understanding the literature of Revelation, we have taken space to lay down some keys to interpretive success with respect to this inspired book of the New Testament canon.

We should be firmly convinced about the genuine source of our difficulty with the book of Revelation: namely, we have not paid sufficient attention to the literary genre of the book and the hermeneutical guideposts within the book itself, have not been familiar enough with the Old Testament Scriptures and the New Testament books which offer literary parallels to Revelation, and have not done the historical study necessary to put things in context.

It is true, of course, that Revelation presents to the student of the New Testament the strangest vocabulary, grammar, and style of any of the books of the canon. One out of eight of the words in Revelation are peculiar to that Biblical book, solecisms abound (especially forms of anacoluthon), idiosyncrasies of grammar and eccentricities of syntax combine with unique, characteristic phrases to form an extraordinary body of literature for the exegete and commentator.*64 Yet these do not represent insurmountable problems, as is evident not only from the overabundance of books on Revelation, but also from the occasional attempts that have been made to devise a special grammar for the book of Revelation. There is sufficient order and intelligence to John's peculiar style, so that it is not the cause of our interpretive distress regarding the book.

That John uses an unusual style of writing is a true, but minor, claim about the book. Another proposed explanation for the book's difficulty -- its illogical style -- is, on the other hand, simply a false claim. In previous decades it has been fashionable in scholarly circles of Biblical study to premise a great contrast between Green (Western) and Hebrew (Eastern) modes of thought.*65 Falling into line with this, Beckwith has written: "The book is the work of a prophet and religious poet often transported with the transcendent thoughts filling his vision, writing with the unrestrained freedom of a Hebrew in departing from ordered sequence and self-consistency." Indeed, postulating "departure from logical order" in the book of Revelation, Beckwith says: "The Hebrew mind in general does not bind itself by the strict law of continuity. . . ."*66 Likewise, a more recent commentator states that "by no means' is the message of Revelation laid out "with logic and precision.'*67 Such remarks reflect, in actuality, the narrow and artificial ideas of order, consistency, and logic held by those making them. It is true that the book of Revelation does not utilize the discursive ordering found in Paul's epistle to the Romans, but for that matter neither does Luke's book of Acts or Peter's first epistle. There does not exist one and only one kind of orderly presentation of truth. the kind of ordering an author gives to his material will usually be dictated by his ultimate goals in writing and the kind of material with which he deals. Poetry has order (if its good art), and so does a "Do It Yourself" manual; a text in history has order, and so does a treatise of philosophy. Yet the kind of organization and transitions that you will find in these various kinds of literature (and others) will greatly differ from one another.

There should be no question for anyone who will study the structure and development of the book of Revelation that it too is an orderly presentation. Indeed, the more one considers the dramatic sections, progressions, parallels between sections, anticipations and fulfillments (for instance) in

the book, the more one will wonder how anybody could think that the writer was in such an "ecstatic" state of mind that he could not communicate with clarity, order, or consistency. And as for alleged departures from logical consistence, one can only challenge those who do not believe that it characterizes Revelation to give us a few examples of the contradictions found within its teaching. If those who depreciate the logical order and coherence of Revelation do not mean to assert the presence of didactic contradictions in the book, but merely discontinuity between scenes, symbols, and styles of expression in it, then we need to point out that such matters (e.g., "stars" representing different things throughout the book) are not violations of logical order, but merely manifestations of literary diversity. The difficulty with understanding the book of Revelation is not to be found in any alleged, illogical character of the book.

Difficulties arise in understanding the book of Revelation quite simply because inappropriate or mistaken hermeneutical principles are applied to it by the reader. Treat any instance of literature in such a fashion -- using interpretive procedures never meant to apply to the kind of literature in hand -- and just as with Revelation you will complain about the difficulty of the publication and misconstrue its true meaning and purpose. The student of Revelation must appreciate the kind of literature it is and activate the correspondingly appropriate hermeneutical principles. Wilcock has wisely said: "It is no use reading Revelation as though it were a Paul-type theological treatise in a slightly different idiom, or a Luke-style history projected into the future."*68 Many treatments of the book of Revelation have failed at just this point, ignoring the specific rules of interpretation which fit the unique literary style of the book and pressing into service a didactic or historical hermeneutic out of preconceived notions of what this portion of God's word should mean. In his classic work, The Interpretation of Prophecy, Patrick Fairbairn objected to those who handle the Biblical prophecies as though their literature could be treated merely as a variant of another genre of communication altogether:

Bishop Butler gave expression to the sentiment, which has since been many a time repeated, "Prophecy is nothing but the history of events before they come to pass." Of course, if it be nothing but that, it should be written like that: as the character of both is the same, there can be no reason shy the style of both should not also be substantially the same. . . . /Some Christians/ reason thus: since prophecy is but history anticipated, all it reveals of the future must be taken as literally as history itself; every word must have a simple meaning attached to it -- that and no more; so that the degree of fulfillment which has been given to any prophecy of Scripture, is to be ascertained and measured by the adaptation of what is written to events subsequently occurring, viewed simply in the light of a prehistorical intimation of them; whatever has not been so fulfilled must be regarded as still waiting for its accomplishment in the future. . . . This principle of regarding prophecy as merely anticipative history, will not stand, by any fair construction, with some of the recorded examples of fulfilled prophecy mentioned in the New Testament Scripture. . . . The consequence has been, that the number of fulfilled prophecies has been constantly lessening in the hands of this school of interpreters.*69

We can readily see here how one mistaken assumption begets a host of subsequent mistakes in interpretation. One begins with an artificial idea of the nature of prophetic writing, proceeds to read it by misconstruing the style of its communication, goes on to look for a kind of fulfillment which was never intended, moves then to the judgment that the prophecy has not yet been fulfilled, and infers from New Testament declarations of the fulfillment of the prophecy that it can only be "partially" fulfilled since the (falsely) anticipated elements of it have not been realized! In interpreting a prophecy such as we find in the book of Revelation, then, we had best be sure that we start out our journey on the right foot and in the right direction.

In order that this might be done, the preceding pages have sought to lay down general principles or rules of interpretation which appear to be dictated by the book of Revelation itself. These hermeneutical principles formally correspond to those which have always been acknowledged in the best of Protestant and especially Reformed circles. It has been indicated that we should interpret the book, not mystically or allegorically, but according to the normal understanding of its language -- that is, philologically and grammatically (i.e., in the archaic, technical sense of "literally," as the Reformers said). The previous discussion has further insisted that an understanding of this literature. Hence we are called upon to use grammatico-historical exegesis in studying the book of Revelation. Moreover, a proper interpretation will rest upon a correct analysis of the literary genre (with its peculiarities of style and unique mode of communication) to be found in the book before us. Finally, our discussion has also noted that, given the interpretation of its symbols offered by the book itself, as well as the numerous literary parallels between Revelation and the Old and New Testament Scriptures, we must remember to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. In short, based on genre analysis, we are to employ the grammatico-historical method with the understanding that Scripture interprets Scripture. This general summary of the outlook of all evangelical hermeneutics receives a special application when we bring it to bear on prophetic and symbolical literature in the Bible as Terry said:

It is principally those portions of the prophetic Scriptures which forecast the future that call for special hermeneutics. Being exceptional in their character, they demand exceptional study and care in interpretation. Other prophecies, consisting mainly of rebuke, expostulation, or warning, are so readily apprehended by the common mind as to need no extended explanation. Avoiding, on the one side, the extreme literalistic error that the biblical predictions are "history written beforehand," and on the other, the rationalistic notions that they are either happy guesses of the probable outcome of impending events, or else a peculiar portraiture of them after they had taken place . . . , we accept these predictions as divine oracles of events that were subsequently to come to pass, but so expressed in figure and symbol as to demand great care on the part of him who would understand and interpret them. . . . In the exposition, therefore, of this class of prophecies it is of the first importance to apply with judgment and skill the hermeneutical principles of biblical symbolism. This process requires, especially, three things: (1) That we be able clearly to discriminate and determine what are symbols and what are not; (2) that the symbols be contemplated in their broad and striking aspects rather than their incidental points of resemblance; and (3) that they be amply compared as to their general import and usage, so that a uniform and self-consistent method be followed in their interpretation.*70

When our hermeneutical treatment of Revelation lives up to such appropriate principles as these (which essentially are the rules explicated throughout the previous discussion), then we will pleasantly find that our confidence was not unfounded, that the book of Revelation indeed uncovers the naked truth, rather than obscuring it, and that great blessing comes to those who obey the book's teaching and live in terms of its perspective. Having expounded the hermeneutical principles which should engender confidence in the reader who approaches Revelation with them, though, it must still be acknowledged that all of us are fallible in their application. Swete makes the generalization:

No attempt to solve the problems of this most enigmatic of canonical books can be more than provisional; even if the principles on which it rests are sound, their application must be attended with uncertainty through the interpreter's lack of knowledge, or through his liability to err in his judgments upon the facts which are known to him.*71

The fact that Revelation is an "unveiling" and that we have sound principles for interpreting it does not inherently shield us from the normal mistakes common to human interpreters of any literature. When one pays attention to the many different interpretations offered of the details of the prophecy in Revelation, and when one considers the scholarship and godliness and many of its differing interpreters, a due reticence and humility is required in advancing one's own views.

His courage is greater than his wisdom who finds no room for doubt on the interpretation of much in the Apocalypse. Equal scholarship and equal saintliness are found in opposite camps, and that should lead us all to be modest. . .. Let us respect the views of others while holding our own, and ever keep a mind open toward the light. *72

Basically, what we must recognize here, is the necessity of a teachable spirit along with our Scripture-based confidence that Revelation can be understood and obeyed. The preceding discussion has not attempted to preclude any measure of uncertainty in the proposal of an interpretation of Revelation; it has merely tried to assure the reader that the grounds for this tentativeness and teachability are no greater in the case of Revelation than they are in the case of any other book of the Bible. Inflexible dogmatism in one's interpretation of any particular passage of Scripture will usually prove to be only temporarily satisfying! That said, it is nevertheless the case that we are entitled (by the book itself) to have assurance that the meaning or message of Revelation has not been locked against us. Modesty is required in studying Revelation, but Scroggie is inappropriately humble in saying: "In the study of this book, perhaps more than in the study of any other, we need common sense, a devout spirit, patience, and persistence."*73 The error here is in the words, "more than in the study of any other.' We need to break once and for all with the timidity which so many so often display toward this book of God's inspired word, treating it something as an outcast in relation to other Biblical books which are cherished, studied with fervor, and preached with boldness. We may not have absolute assurance that every point of our interpretation is unassailably correct, and we may not be able to compel assent on the part of all those who consider the interpretation advanced, but as Swete recognized: "the uncertainty which thus besets apocalyptic interpretation does not seriously detract from the general value of the book. Nor can it be laid to the charge of the author that he is unnecessarily obscure."*74