

# THE RIDDLE OF REVELATION

*G. Michael Cocoris*



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# THE TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
INTERPRETATIONS OF REVELATION .....	3
THE TRIBULATION.....	7
THE JUDGMENTS AND THE TRIBULATION.....	15
VARIOUS VIEWS OF THE JUDGMENTS .....	23
CONCLUSION.....	27
AN OUTLINE OF REVELATION .....	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	31



# INTRODUCTION

The book of Revelation is a riddle! Just look at what it says. Horses are not just white, red, and black, they are also pale (green) (6:4). Twenty-five percent of the people on the planet are killed (6:8). The sun turns black (6:12). The moon turns red (6:12). Stars fall from heaven to earth (6:13). Human suffering is so severe that the survivors cry out for the mountains to fall on them (6:15-16). That is only the beginning!

Hail and fire mingled with blood fall to the earth and a third of all the trees and green grass are burned up (8:7). A burning mountain falls into the ocean and a third of all sea life and a third of all ships are destroyed (8:9). A similar fate happens to the rivers and they become bitter (8:10-11). The sun, the moon, and the stars are so dark that a third of each day is darkness (8:12). Supernatural locusts ascend from a bottomless pit to torment people for five months but not kill them (9:1-6). As if enough damage has not already been done, another third of the population is killed (9:13-21). That means that 50% of the people on the earth have now been killed. If the earth's population was 100 and one-fourth died, there would be 75 people left. Then, if one-third of those died, there would be 50 left. But the end has not yet come.

A dragon has seven heads and ten horns (12:3). A woman is given two wings of an eagle (12:14). A beast with seven heads and ten horns comes out of the sea (13:1).

There is more, much more, but you get the picture. The book of Revelation is a riddle!

What in the world is going on? No doubt this is symbolic language, but symbols have significance. What is the significance of the book of Revelation?

The significance of the book of Revelation is a much-debated subject. In order to unravel the riddle, a number of different issues need to be addressed.

First, what are the different interpretations of the book? Which one is correct?

Secondly, taken at face value, the book seems to suggest that there will be a time of great trouble prior to the Second Coming of Christ. Bible teachers call such a period "the Tribulation." What does the Bible say about the Tribulation? How long is it? Apart from the book of Revelation, what is known about it?

Thirdly, what can be learned from the text of the book itself about what it is saying? Particularly important is the layout or structure of the book. An overview of the book as a whole would help explain the details in the book.

Finally, one of the most difficult problems in the book of Revelation is determining the structure of three series of seven judgments: the seal judgments, the trumpet judgments, and the bowl judgments. What solutions have been given to this part of the puzzle?

Let's explore each of these issues. When that is done, the riddle of Revelation will be solved.

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# INTERPRETATIONS OF REVELATION

Throughout history, the book of Revelation has been interpreted in a variety of ways. In a sense, the major approaches to the interpretation of Revelation have to do with time. Some say the book has been fulfilled in the past, either in the first century or throughout the centuries. Others claim it will be fulfilled just before Christ returns. Then there are those who contend that time is not the issue. The following four interpretations have been the most prominent.

## The Idealist View

*Explanation* Basically, this theory maintains that there are few, if any, references to any time period, first century or otherwise. Revelation is not about the first century, history, or the future. It is about ideas and principles (Morris, p. 20).

This approach originated with Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-ca. 215) and Origen (185-254). They regarded the book of Revelation “as one great allegory going far beyond the natural symbolism” (Walvoord, p. 16). Thiessen states, “They allegorized everything they could not understand and also much that they could” (Thiessen, p. 324).

Augustine (354-430) adopted a modified form of allegorical interpretation. He saw Revelation as a symbolic way of presenting the conflict between Christianity and evil, a conflict between the City of God and the City of Satan (Walvoord, p. 17).

A modern form of this view teaches that Revelation contains general principles concerning the conflict between the church and evil. Milligan says, “These successive waves of judgment are obviously successive in thought rather than time” (Milligan, p. 148). He claims that Revelation is “not a history of either early or mediaeval or last events written of before they happened, but a spring of elevating encouragement and holy joy to Christians in every age” (Milligan, p. 155).

*Evaluation* This method of interpretation requires extensive allegorization, which entirely disregards the plain statements of the book itself. According to Thiessen, this position “overlooks the fact that the book claims to be a prophecy (1:3; 10:11; 22:7, 10, 18, 19) and that it points to the second advent (1:7; 3:11; 16:15; 19:7; 22:7, 12, 20)” (Thiessen, p. 324).

## The Preterist View

*Explanation* According to this view, John wrote about the first-century situation and had nothing more in mind than that. Revelation begins with the first-century church and ends there (Morris, p. 18). It is concerned with “nothing further than the destruction of Pagan and persecuting Rome” (Alford, vol. IV, p. 246). Actually, this school includes those who say the major prophecies were fulfilled either in the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD) or at the fall of Rome (476 AD; Mounce, p. 41). Either way, it is symbolic history rather than prophecy. It is descriptive, not predictive (Walvoord, p. 17).

The Jesuit Alcasar (d. 1614), “a thoroughgoing preterist,” was the first to interpret chapters 4-19 as being fulfilled in the first century and in the centuries immediately following (Mounce, p. 41). A modern commentator says, “The Apocalypse is a book of its time, written out of its time and for its time, not for the distant generations of the future or even of the end-time” (Kummel, cited by Morris, fn., p. 19).

*Evaluation* Like the Idealist view, this notion exercises extensive allegorization, which entirely ignores the plain statements of the book.

A pastor friend, who said he was leaning toward this explanation, told me that the book was fulfilled in the reign of Nero (54-68 AD) and in the destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD). For example, his interpretation of hail was that the Romans hurled at Jerusalem white stones that looked like hail. He admitted, however, that if the book was written in 95 AD, this interpretation could not be sustained.

What is the date for the writing of Revelation? There are two theories. The early date claims it was written during the reign of Nero about 68 or 69 AD. The late date contends it was penned during the reign of Domitian about 95 or 96 AD.

To a large degree, the early date is based on the interpretation that the statement, “There are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, *and* the other has not yet come” (17:10), refers to the emperors of Rome. Even the proponents of this position cannot agree on which emperors fit this description. All explanations are speculation. Those who begin the count with Julius Caesar date the book in the reign of Nero (Moses Stuart). Those who begin with Augustus date the book in the reign of Galba (Ewald); or, if Galba, Otho, and Vitellius (who had only about a year between them) are counted as usurpers, the date is in the reign of Vespasian (Eichhorn; Bleek). In other words, dating the book based on that interpretation on Revelation 17:10 is arbitrary. There is no solid evidence for the early date of the writing of Revelation—only guesses.

Hort, who argues for a date in Nero’s time, admits that the Domitian view (Revelation was written in 95 AD) is the “prevalent tradition” that “goes back to an author likely to be the recipient of a true tradition on the matter.” He even concedes, “If external evidence alone could decide, there would be a clear preponderance for Domitian.”

The late date is preferred for several reasons: 1) Since John did not move to Ephesus until 67 AD, the early date would not give him enough time to have established an ongoing ministry in Asia by the time he wrote this book. 2) The church described in chapters 2 and 3 were founded in the late 50s. The early date allows too little time for the decline described to develop (2:4; 3:1, 15-18). 3) The deeds of Domitian were more relevant than those of Nero. 4) Tradition.

Irenaeus (130-202), a disciple of Polycarp (ca. 70-155), who was a disciple of John, says, “For it was seen, not long ago, but almost in our generation, near the end of Domitian’s reign” (Irenaeus, *Adv. Hoer.* v. 30.3; ii. 22.5; iii. 4.4). Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-ca. 220) and Eusebius (ca. 265-ca. 339) do not name Domitian, but they no doubt have him in mind. Victorinus (270-303) says Domitian condemned John to the mines in Patmos. Jerome (ca. 347-420) says that John saw the Apocalypse in Patmos, where he had been banished by Domitian.

Domitian was the first emperor to demand emperor worship while he was alive. That led to persecution (Barclay, vol. 2, p. 182). The Domitian type of persecution best fits the kind of situation described in Revelation chapters 2-3.

The preterists who extend the events of the book beyond 70 AD to 476 AD do not eliminate all the problems. “The major problem with the preterist position is that the decisive victory portrayed in the latter chapters of the Apocalypse was never achieved. It is difficult to believe that John envisioned anything less than the complete overthrow of Satan, the final destruction of evil, and the eternal reign of God” (Mounce, pp. 41-42).

## The Historical View

*Explanation* This approach sees the book as a continuous history from the first century to the consummation.

Alford points out, “In early times, the historic material since the apostolic period was not copious enough to tempt man to fit it on to the symbols of the prophetic visions” (Alford, vol. IV, p. 246). Berengaud (9<sup>th</sup> century) was the first to suggest this approach, but it was Joachim (1150) who popularized it in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Many in the Reformed tradition viewed the book as a judgment, not just against pagans, but against papal Rome. The Antichrist sits on the throne of the papacy (Alford, vol. IV, p. 246). Advocates of this approach include Wycliffe, Luther, Sir Isaac Newton, Bengel, Bullinger, Barnes, and Alford (Alford, vol. IV, p. 247; Thiessen, p. 325). Lange, a modern commentator, “...holds that the seals, trumpets, and vials are a symbolic presentation of the whole of human history” (Walvoord, p. 124).

*Evaluation* This interpretation is subjective. Proponents cannot make up their minds whether this or that king or this or that pope is meant or whether the text refers to a persecution of the past or one that is still to come (Kuyper, cited by Walvoord, p. 19). There is no objective standard to determine which historical fulfillment is accurate.

This view “breeds uncertainty and confusion” (Kuyper, cited by Walvoord, p. 20). Walvoord says, “At least fifty different systems of interpretation have arisen from the historical view alone” (Walvoord, p. 125) and, “Many of the historical interpretations have already been proved false by historical developments” (Walvoord, p. 125).

In the words of Morris, it labors “under the serious disadvantage of failing to agree. If the main points of subsequent history are in fact foreshadowed, it should be possible to identify them with tolerable certainty; otherwise, what is the point of it? But there are many historicist views and no real agreement” (Morris, p. 19). Walvoord puts it this way: “The very multiplicity of such interpretations and identifications of the personnel of Revelation with a variety of historical characters is its own reputation. If the historical method is correct, it is clear until now no one has found the key” (Walvoord, p. 19).

## The Futurist View

*Explanation* This explanation says that chapters 4-18 are concerned with the time just before the coming of Christ. Chapter 19 is about the Second Coming (19:11-16). The events described in chapters 4-18 take place just before the Second Coming. First, a series of seal judgments are revealed (6:1-7). Then trumpet judgments come out of the seal judgments (8:1-2) and the bowl judgments are the last plagues (15:1). The trumpets cover the 3½ years (11:2, 3; 12:6, 14; 13:5) just before the Second Coming (11:15). Therefore, the futurist view is correct.

The futurist view was the original view. Alfred is emphatic, stating that those who abandoned primitive interpretations of such things as the millennial reign of Christ not only wrestle with the plain sense of words but “desert the unanimous consensus of the primitive fathers, some of whom lived early enough to have retained apostolic tradition on this point” (Alford, vol. IV, p. 252). Proponents of this position include Irenaeus, Theodoret, Gregory the Great, and Tertullian. It is the basic view of pre-millennialists.

*Evaluation* The major criticism of this point of view is that it provides little comfort for first-century believers facing persecution (Mounce, pp. 42-43).

This criticism is not legitimate. The nature of biblical prophecy is that distant events have an immediate application (2 Pet. 3:10-14). As Mounce says, “This age will come to an end and Satan and his host will be destroyed and the righteous will be vindicated. These are historical events, which will take place in time. And they are future” (Mounce, p. 44). He adds, “It is the end that gives meaning to the process” (Mounce, p. 44).

**Summary:** In the main, the book of Revelation reveals what will happen just prior to the coming of Christ, not general principles for all time, nor what happened in the first century or during church history.

There are other methods of interpretation. Some combine two of the methods mentioned, but the method of interpretation that takes the book at face value has to conclude that the fulfillment of the prophecy in the book is still in the future.

Therefore, chapters 2-3 contain letters to seven historical churches in the first century, chapters 4-18 describe events just prior to the Second Coming, chapter 19 depicts the Second Coming and chapters 20-22 reveal what will happen after the Second Coming.

Originally, the book of Revelation was not intended to be a riddle. The very opposite is the case. The book opens with “The Revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1). The Greek word translated “revelation” is a compound word made up of two words: “from” and “cover, veil, conceal.” It means “an uncovering, a revealing.” The picture embedded in the word is that of taking a veil away from, to remove the veil, to unveil. This book was not meant to conceal, but reveal. It was not intended to confuse, but to clarify.

The book strikes first-time readers as strange because it contains graphic symbols. A careful reading resolves most of those problems. Symbols have significance. In the case of Revelation, the symbols are often explained. For example, in chapter 1, the lampstands (1:12) and the stars (1:16) are explained (1:20).

Commentators create confusion by forcing the book into a time period, such as the first century, all of church history, or by ignoring all references to time. Taken at face value, it is apparent that the book of Revelation is a revealing of Jesus Christ as judge of the church (chapters 2-3) and the world (chapters 4-18), and as coming King (chapters 20-22; see 1:5). Jesus Christ will punish the wicked world and reward the faithful.

# THE TRIBULATION

The prophecies in the book of Revelation are *not* about the first century, all of church history, or principles for all time. Most of Revelation (chapters 4-18) describes a period just prior to the Second Coming of Christ (chapter 19).

Understanding that much of the book resolves a large part of the riddle of Revelation, but it does not resolve the entire riddle. Being aware that chapters 4-18 portray a period just prior to the coming of Christ does not provide answers to several critical questions posed by those chapters. Revelation 4-18 contains three sets of seven judgments: the seal judgments (4:1-8:2), the trumpet judgments (8:3-11:19), and the bowl judgments (15:1-16:21). How are they related to the period just before the coming of Christ?

Normally, the questions of interpretation raised by a book of the Bible are answered from information gleaned from the book itself; if not in the immediate context, then within the context of the book. There are cases, however, when it is necessary to go outside a biblical book to gain a better understanding of an interpretive problem in a book. For example, in 2 Corinthians, Paul makes reference to a situation at Corinth that he does not explain in 2 Corinthians (2 Cor. 2:5-11). Many students of 2 Corinthians have concluded that insight into the situation mentioned in 2 Corinthians is best obtained from 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:1-13).

That is true concerning the judgments prior to the Second Coming recorded in Revelation 4-18. Numerous passages in the Bible speak of a period before the coming of Christ that is often called the “Tribulation.” Understanding several of those passages will help in answering questions raised by Revelation 4-18, especially the relationship of the judgments in Revelation 4-18 to the Tribulation.

Think of the book of Revelation as the last chapter in a long book. Does it not make sense that knowing what the book said before the last chapter would help the reader better understand the last chapter? Likewise, knowing what the Bible says about the Tribulation helps explain Revelation 4-18.

Of all the passages in the Bible that speak about the Tribulation, two are particularly important in understanding Revelation: Daniel 9 and Matthew 24. Although they both talk about the same things and Matthew 24 even refers to Daniel 9, Matthew 24 is of the utmost importance. In the nineteenth century, Dean Henry Alford, an Englishman who wrote a commentary on the entire Greek New Testament, said the first great key to understanding the book of Revelation is Old Testament prophecy and the next is the Lord’s prophetic discourse in Matthew 24 (Alford, vol. IV, p. 253).

Alford also said, “The close connection between our Lord’s prophetic discourse on the Mount of Olives, and the line of apocalyptic prophecy, cannot fail to have struck every student of Scripture” (Alford, vol. IV, p. 249). Matthew 24 has been called “the anchor of apocalyptic interpretation” (Williams, cited by Alford, vol. IV, p. 249), “the touchstone of apocalyptic systems” (Alford, vol. IV, p. 249). Alford goes so far as to say if the guidance of Matthew 24 is not followed in the interpretation of the seals, the true key to the book of Revelation is lost (Alford, vol. IV, p. 249).

What do Daniel 9 and Matthew 24 say about the Tribulation?

## Daniel 9

*The Prayer* Jeremiah predicted that the captivity of the Jews would last seventy years (Jer. 25:11-12, 29:10-14). After spending years in Babylon, Daniel realized he was living on the threshold of the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy (Dan. 9:1-2). So, Daniel prayed for the restoration of Jerusalem (Dan. 9:3-19).

*The Program* Gabriel told Daniel, "Seventy weeks are determined for your people and for your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy. Know therefore and understand, *that* from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, *there shall be* seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublesome times. And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it *shall be* with a flood, and till the end of the war desolations are determined. Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; but in the middle of the week, he shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. and on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate, even until the consummation, which is determined, is poured out on the desolate" (Dan 9:24-27).

Gabriel also told Daniel, "Seventy weeks are determined for your people and for your holy city" (Dan. 9:24). The Hebrew word translated "weeks" means "sevens" (plural). God's program for Israel and Jerusalem involves not just 70 years but "seventy sevens."

The seventy years of captivity discussed earlier in the chapter indicates that Gabriel means "seventy sevens" of years. Furthermore, only "years" makes sense. In fact, 490 days (70 x 7 days) or 490 months (70 x 7 months) is meaningless. On the other hand, the concept of a week of years is used elsewhere (Gen. 29:27; see the sabbatical year in Lev. 25; Deut. 15) and 490 years (70 x 7 years) fits what happened (see below).

Thus, Gabriel is saying that God has a program for Israel that encompasses "seventy week (sevens)" of years, that is 490 years (Dan. 9:24). The purpose of this program is to end sin and establish righteousness (Dan. 9:24).

According to Daniel 4:25, the beginning of the 490-year program for Israel begins with the command to restore and build Jerusalem and is divided into three parts. The first phase is "seven weeks" (49 years). During this period, "the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublesome times" (Dan. 9:25). The second phase is 69 weeks (7 weeks and 62 weeks, which is 483 years). The Messiah comes after the second phase, that is, after 483 years (Dan. 9:25). The question is, "When was the command to restore and build Jerusalem?" When do the 490 years begin?

There were four commands pertaining to rebuilding. Three deal with the Temple or the wall: the Decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1) in 539 BC, the Decree of Darius (Ezra 6) in 519 BC, the Decree of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7) in 458 BC, and the Decree of Artaxerxes (Neh. 2) in 445 BC. Which one of these is the starting date for the 490 years?

Some distinguished commentators have used the Decree of Cyrus as the starting point (Calvin; Keil; Leupold; Young; et al.). There are two problems with that view. First, the Decree of Cyrus was to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:2-4). It was not a command "to restore and build Jerusalem," although apparently, the people who returned with Ezra did

work on the walls (Ezra 5:9). The second difficulty is that it put the coming of the Messiah at 56 BC ( $539 + 483 = 56$  BC).

Using the Decree of Darius does not solve either problem associated with the Decree of Cyrus. It only reaffirms the Decree of Cyrus “to build this house of God at Jerusalem” (Ezra 6:3, 7) and it falls short of the coming of Christ ( $519 + 483 = 33$  BC).

At first glance, it seems that the Decree of Artaxerxes also concerned the Temple (Ezra 7:19-20), but it clearly includes much more than that. Artaxerxes says they could do “whatever seems good to you,” “according to the will of God” (Ezra 7:18). Later, Ezra thanked God that He “did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem” (Ezra 9:9) Moreover, it fits the coming of Christ perfectly.

Calling this the traditional view, Boutflower dates the Decree in 457 AD and concludes that 483 years later is 26 AD, the year the Messiah was made manifest to Israel (Charles Boutflower, *In and Around The Book of Daniel*, pp. 186-191). Archer also dates the Decree in 457 BC, but he arrives at 25 AD as the time of Christ’s ministry (Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of the Old Testament Introduction*, p. 387). Wood says the Decree was in 458 BC and the 483-year period ends in 26 AD, because only one year elapsed between 1 BC and 1 AD (Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel*, pp. 252-54).

Because it specifically pertained to the rebuilding of the wall, many have concluded that the commencement of the 483 years is the Decree of Artaxerxes recorded in Nehemiah 2. The problem, of course, is that this starting point places the coming of Christ in 38 AD ( $445 + 483 = 38$  AD).

In his book *The Coming Prince*, Sir Robert Anderson says that the 483 years are “prophetic” years of 360 days (Anderson, pp. 67-75; Rev. 11:2-3; 12:6, 14; 13:5), that Christ died on April 6, 32 AD (Anderson, pp. 88-105, 127), and that the Decree was issued on March 3, 445 BC (Anderson, pp. 119-24). He concludes that the fulfillment of the phrase “unto Messiah the Prince” was on the day of the triumphal entry, Sunday, April 6, 32 AD (Anderson, pp. 127-28). Sixty-nine weeks of prophetic years of 360 days or  $69 \times 7 \times 360 = 173,880$  days. There are 476 years 24 days between March 14, 445 BC and April 6, 32 AD plus 116 days for leap year = 173,880 days. Thus, he dates the crucifixion in 32 AD. Showers agrees with Anderson (Renald E. Showers, *The Most High God*, pp. 120-25).

Others begin the 70 weeks with the Decree of Artaxerxes recorded in Nehemiah 2, but not all of them arrive at 32 AD for the crucifixion. Walvoord does not commit himself to a date for the crucifixion (Walvoord, pp. 223-28). Hoehner accepts this Decree as the beginning of the 70 weeks, but claims the date is 444 BC instead of 445 BC. Therefore, according to him, the crucifixion was in 33 AD (Harold. W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, pp. 115-39). Campbell concurs with Hoehner (Donald K. Campbell, *Daniel: Decoder of Dreams*, p.110).

The traditional view that the beginning of the program was with the Decree of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7) is the best explanation. So, according to Gabriel, God’s future program for Israel began in 458 BC.

*Phase One* From the Decree of Artaxerxes in 458 BC until the streets and walls were built was 49 years (409 BC). The Hebrew word translated “wall” is not the normal Hebrew word for “wall.” It means “to cut.” Modern lexicographers render it “ditch,

moat.” This refers to an aspect of Jerusalem’s fortification. The Hebrew word for “street” means “wide space” and refers to a market place or public square. In other words, it took 49 years from the Decree to restore Jerusalem as a thriving city.

*Phase Two* Daniel 9:26 begins with “after 62 weeks.” Actually, it is after 69 weeks; that is, the seven weeks in verse 25, plus the sixty-two weeks in verse 26, making a total of 69 weeks or 483 years. This period begins with the Decree in 457 AD and concludes 483 years later in 26 AD (Boutflower; Wood) or 25 AD (Archer, Jr.).

Two things take place: 1) Daniel 9:26 says after 69 weeks, Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself. “Cut off” means “to destroy, to kill” (Gen 9:11). 2) Daniel 9:26 says the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary.

The “prince that shall come” is different than Messiah the prince. Based on what Daniel 9:27 says he will do and what we know from other passages, this is the Antichrist, but Daniel 9:26 is not talking about the Antichrist. It is talking about the people of the Antichrist; that is, the Romans who in 70 AD destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple.

*Phase Three* There is a break between the second and third periods. Several events transpire after the 69<sup>th</sup> week, not during the 70<sup>th</sup> week: 1) Messiah shall be cut off and 2) Jerusalem shall be destroyed. That is a gap of at least 40 years. There is not only a 40-year gap; there is a bigger gap. We know that because the events of Daniel 9:27 have not yet been fulfilled. In fact, the whole church age is between the 69<sup>th</sup> and 70<sup>th</sup> week.

What will happen during this last week? Daniel 9:27 indicates two things will happen. First, “he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week” (Dan. 9:27a). “He” refers to “the prince that shall come.” This is a reference to the Antichrist. At the beginning of this seven-year period, the Antichrist will make a treaty with Israel.

Second, “In the middle of the week, He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate, Even until the consummation, which is determined, is poured out on the desolate” (Dan 9:27b). In the middle of this seven-year period, that is, after three and a half years, the Antichrist will break the covenant. He will cause all bloody and non-bloody sacrifices to cease. The fulfillment of this prophecy necessitates the reinstatement of the Mosaic sacrificial system in a Temple in Jerusalem.

This is called “the overspreading of abomination” that shall make desolate. Daniel 11:31 says Antiochus shall do it. Matthew 24:15 says the Antichrist shall do it. What Antiochus did is an illustration of what the Antichrist will do. What did Antiochus do?

In 1 Maccabees 1:45-54, the nature of the abomination in Antiochus’s day is described. It states what Antiochus did. Following his order forbidding “burnt-offerings, and sacrifice, and drink-offerings in the Temple,” he “set up the abomination of desolation upon the altar” and build “idol altars throughout the cities of Judah on every side.” Then, 2 Maccabees 6:2 indicates that in this way, he polluted “the Temple in Jerusalem” and called it “the temple of Jupiter Olympus.” Whether it was actually a statue of Jupiter Olympus (Zeus) or only a substitute altar on which to worship him is not clear.

The Antichrist, like Antiochus, will set up in the holy place (the restored Temple) something detestable, like a false altar or a great statue, which will cause a desolate condition there.

This explanation of the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel has been given by Jewish expositors. Showers says, “*The Babylonian Talmud* states, ‘Our Rabbis taught: In the seven-year



cycle at the end of which the son of David will come.... at the conclusion of the septennate, the son of David will come” (*Sanhedrin*, 97a, p. 654). (The word “septennate” refers to a period of seven years.)

Raphael Patai, writing about the messianic texts of Judaism, said, “The idea became entrenched that the coming of the Messiah will be preceded by greatly increased suffering.... This will last for seven years. And then, unexpectedly, the Messiah will come” (*The Messiah Texts*, pp. 95-96).

According to *The Babylonian Talmud*, “The advent of the Messiah was pictured as being preceded by years of great distress” (*Shabbath*, 118a, n. on “travails of the Messiah,” p. 590).

The Dead Sea Scrolls and ancient rabbinic literature call the severe troubles of this seven-year period “the birth pangs of the Messiah” (Burrows, “More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Burrows on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, pp. 343-44). According to The Babylonian Talmud, the reason for this designation is because travail precedes birth, and this travail “precedes the birth of a new era — the messianic age” (*Sanhedrin*, 98b, n. on “birth pangs of the Messiah,” p. 665). Just as a woman must go through a period of birth pangs before her child is born into the world, so the world must go through seven years of birth pangs before the messianic age is born into the world.

According to the *Apocalypse of Abraham* (ed. G. H. Box, p. 82), the birth pangs of the Messiah will involve such things as the sword (war), famine, pestilence, and wild beasts (the kinds of things involved in the beginning of birth pangs of Matthew 24:4-8 or the first four seals of Revelation 6:1-8). In addition, according to ancient Judaism, heaven will be the source of famine, pestilence, and earthquakes (Patai, *The Messiah Texts*, pp. 95-96), from Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View*, p. 14).

To sum up, God has a program for Israel to put an end to sin and establish a righteous kingdom, but before He does that, Israel will return, the Messiah will be cut off, and the Antichrist will make and break a covenant with Israel. Israel did return. Messiah did come. Jerusalem was destroyed, but there has been no covenant or broken covenant (yet)!

The 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel 9 is often referred to as the Tribulation. Technically, the Scripture does not use the word “tribulation” for this seven-year period. In his book, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View*, an interpretation he does not accept, Renald E. Showers argues that it is appropriate to call the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel the Tribulation (see Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View*, pp. 12-17). He points out that we use words that are not in the Bible for concepts such as “trinity,” “incarnation,” and “rapture.”

The “time of Jacob’s trouble” is called “great” (Jer. 30:7). This is a reference to the last half of the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel (Showers, 2001, p. 16). The Hebrew translated “trouble” means “writhing, anguish” (BDB, p. 297), “tightness, trouble, affliction, distress, tribulation” (Strong’s *Hebrew Dictionary*). Therefore, the second half of the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel is called “the Great Tribulation.” Jesus also calls the second half of the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel the “Great Tribulation” (Mt. 24:15-21). Therefore, if the second half of the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel is the “Great Tribulation,” it is appropriate to designate the first half the “Tribulation.”

The “time of Jacob’s trouble” is compared to labor-pains (Jer. 30:6). Jesus refers to the first of the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel (see Mt. 24:15) as the “beginning of labor-pains” (Mt. 24:8, where the Greek word translated “sorrows” means “birth-pangs, travail-pains.” It is used figuratively of “extreme suffering;” (see A-S). Therefore, the first-half of the 70<sup>th</sup>

week of Daniel is the “beginning of birth pains” and the second half is the birth pains themselves.

The Bible associates a woman’s birth pangs with “tribulation.” Jeremiah says, “Anguish has taken hold of us, pain as of a woman in labor” (Jer. 6:24; 50:43). The Hebrew word translated “anguish” in Jeremiah 6:24 and 50:43 means “tribulation” (it is the same Hebrew word translated “trouble” in Jer. 30:7). Just hearing about war is described as ‘tribulation’ and “pain” as a woman in labor (Jer. 6:24; 50:43).

The point of all of this is that Daniel 9 says that there is coming a period of seven years. At the beginning of that seven years, “the prince who is to come” (the Antichrist) will make a covenant with Israel. Daniel 9 also says that in the middle of that seven-year period, “the prince who is to come” (the Antichrist) will break that covenant. The Bible never calls that seven-year period “the Tribulation,” but given what it does say, “Tribulation” is an appropriate name.

## Matthew 24

*The Tribulation* When the disciples asked Jesus, “When will these things be? And what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (Mt. 24:3), He spoke of a false Christ (Mt. 24:4-5), war (Mt. 24:6-7a), famines (Mt. 24:7b), pestilences, and earthquakes (Mt. 24:7c), calling these the “beginning of sorrows” (Mt. 24:8). He went on to talk about persecution (Mt. 24:9-13), and the worldwide preaching of the gospel (Mt. 24:14). Then, He said, “The end will come” (Mt. 24:14). Clearly, He is describing a period with a beginning (Mt. 24:8) and an end (Mt. 24:14).

After describing a period that has a beginning and an end, Jesus says, “Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place” (whoever reads, let him understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains” (Mt. 24:15-16). In other words, *the* sign (singular; see Mt. 24:3) is the abomination of desolation.

According to Daniel 9:27, the abomination of desolation occurs in the middle of a seven-year period, which, as we have seen, is called “the Tribulation.” Therefore, the period Jesus describes in Mathew 24:4-14, a period with a beginning and an end, is the seven-year Tribulation. Like Daniel, Jesus divides it into two parts (Mt. 24:8, 14, 15).

*The Great Tribulation* Also, since the abomination of desolation is the middle of the Tribulation (Dan. 9:27), what Jesus says in Matthew 24:15-28 is the second half of the Tribulation. Jesus calls this “the Great Tribulation” (Mt. 24:21).

Jesus goes on to say that when the abomination of desolation occurs, Israel should flee into the wilderness (Mt. 24:16-20), because “there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Mt. 24:21). Notice carefully, it is during the “Great Tribulation” that there is tribulation such as the world has never seen.

After issuing warnings (Mt. 24:22-28), He says, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Mt.

24:29-30). According to Jesus, after the Tribulation and before He returns there will be physical disturbances.

To sum up, Jesus gives the characteristics of the Tribulation from beginning to end (Mt. 24:4-14), refers to the middle of the Tribulation (Mt. 24:15) and describes some of the characteristics of the second half of the Tribulation, which He calls the “Great Tribulation” (Mt. 24:21, 29). Based on what He says in Matthew 24, the characteristics of the Tribulation from beginning to end are as follows:

1. False Christ (Mt. 24:4-5)
2. War (Mt. 24:6-7a)
3. Famines (Mt. 24:7b)
4. Pestilences and earthquakes (Mt. 24:7c)
5. Martyrdom (Mt. 24:9-13)
6. Worldwide preaching of the Gospel (Mt. 24:14)
7. Great Tribulation on people (Mt. 24:21)
8. Physical disturbances just before His Second Coming (Mt. 24:19)

## Revelation

In the book of Revelation, John records seven seal judgments (Rev. 6:1-8:2). The first four are marked off from the last three, in that the first four are depicted by horsemen. The content of the six seal judgments and the interlude that follows is:

1. The appearance of Antichrist (Rev. 6:1-2)
2. War (Rev. 6:3-4)
3. Famine (Rev. 6:5-6)
4. Death (Rev. 6:7-8)
5. Martyrdom (Rev. 6:9-11)
6. Physical disturbances (Rev. 6:12-14).
7. Great wrath (Rev. 6:15-17)
8. Worldwide preaching of the Gospel (Rev. 7:9-10)

A comparison between the characteristics of the Tribulation in Matthew 24 and the seal judgments in Revelation 6 indicates that the two passages are virtually identical. Both passages list a false Christ (Mt. 24:4-5; Rev. 6:1-2), war (Mt. 24:7a; Rev. 6:3-4), famine (Mt. 24:7b; Rev. 6:5-6), death (Mt. 24:7c; Rev. 6:7-8), martyrdom (Mt. 24:9-23; Rev. 6:9-11), physical disturbances (Mt. 24:19; Rev. 6:12-14), great tribulation (Mt. 24:21; Rev. 6:15-17), and worldwide preaching of the Gospel (Mt. 24:14; Rev. 7:9-10).

In Matthew 24, Jesus refers to the middle of the Tribulation (Mt. 24:15; Dan. 9:27), but He does not specifically say when in the series of events in Matthew 24:4-14 will occur. He does, however, call the first *four* characteristics of the Tribulation “the beginning of sorrows” (Mt. 24:8). That seems to indicate that the events before verse 8 are in the first half of the Tribulation. If that analysis is correct, the first four characteristics of the Tribulation in Matthew 24 are in the first half of the Tribulation.

If that is the case, the first *four* seal judgments of Revelation are in the first half of the Tribulation, because they are virtually identical to the first characteristics of the

Tribulation in Matthew 24. Perhaps that is why the four horsemen mark off the first four seal judgments.

This conclusion is confirmed by another characteristic of the Tribulation. In Matthew 24, martyrdom follows the first four characteristics of the Tribulation and in Revelation 6, martyrdom follows the first four seals. Martyrdom is in the fifth seal judgment. It is logical to assume that because of the covenant, Israel is protected in the first half of the Tribulation, but when the covenant is broken in the middle of the Tribulation, persecution and martyrdom begin. Walvoord concurs, “In this period (the great tribulation), Israel becomes the object of persecution instead of being protected from her enemies” (Walvoord, p. 131).

Therefore, the middle of the Tribulation in the book of Revelation is between the fourth and fifth seal.

Walvoord arrives at a slightly different conclusion. He says, “Inasmuch as the judgment described in the *fourth* seal is unparalleled (He is referring to the death of a fourth of the population), it seems to correspond with greater accuracy to the latter half of Daniel’s seventieth week rather than to the earlier half and for that reason must be the time of great tribulation which Christ declared would exceed by far anything the world had previously known” (Walvoord, p. 132, italics added). Actually, he places the seal, trumpet and bowl judgments in the second half of the tribulation period (Walvoord, p. 123).

Perhaps the Antichrist uses the death of one-fourth of the population to take more power and after that he breaks the covenant with Israel. If this analysis of Matthew 24 and Revelation 6 is correct, the middle of the Tribulation is indicated in Matthew 24 by the phrase “the beginning of sorrows” and in Revelation by the four horsemen.

**Summary:** Since the seal judgments of Revelation 6 are identical to the characteristics of the Tribulation given by Jesus in Matthew 24, the seal judgments occur during the Tribulation.

Let’s review. Daniel 9 predicates a seven-year period (the Tribulation) beginning with a covenant. The covenant is broken in the middle of the seven years with an abomination of desolation. In Matthew 24, Jesus lists the characteristics of a period that has a beginning and an end (the Tribulation; Mt. 24:8, 14), refers to the abomination of desolation (Mt. 24:15) and says that there will be “great tribulation” (Mt. 24:21) just prior to His return (Mt. 24:29-30). The seals in Revelation 6 are identical to the characteristics given by Jesus in Matthew. Therefore, the seal judgments occur during the Tribulation.

Characteristic	Matthew 24	Revelation 6-7
	Beginning of Sorrows	Four Horsemen
False Christ	Matthew 24:4-5	Revelation 6:1-2
War	Matthew 24:6-7a	Revelation 6:3-4
Famine	Matthew 24:7b	Revelation 6:5-6
Death	Matthew 24:7c	Revelation 6:7-8
	Great Tribulation	
Martyrdom	Matthew 24:9-13	Revelation 6:9-11
Great Tribulation	Matthew 24:15-28	Revelation 6:13-17
Physical disturbances	Matthew 24:29	Revelation 6:12-14
Worldwide Preaching	Matthew 24:14	Revelation 7:9-10

# THE JUDGMENTS AND THE TRIBULATION

The pieces of the puzzle are coming together. The prophecies of Revelation 4-18 describe the Tribulation just prior to the Second Coming. The seal judgments definitely take place during the Tribulation.

Nevertheless, the entire riddle has not been resolved. There are three sets of judgments: the seal judgments, the trumpet judgments, and the bowl judgments. The last piece of the puzzle of Revelation is the relationship between those judgments and their relationship to the Tribulation. How are they related to each other? How are they related to the Tribulation?

In order to answer that question, it is necessary to understand the structure of Revelation, especially the overall structure of the three series of judgments. Once the structure of Revelation is understood, the riddle of Revelation will be solved.

Andreas, who lived in the sixth century, did the earliest known analysis of Revelation. He divides the book into 24 sections, corresponding to the 24 elders in chapter 4. He then subdivided each of these sections into three chapters, an arrangement suggested by the threefold nature of man. The result was 72 chapters, which “fairly well” represents the natural subdivisions of the book (Swete, p. xxxiii). Those 72 chapters may have come close to reflecting the natural subdivisions of the book, but dividing the structure according to the 24 elders and the threefold nature of man is arbitrary and has no basis in the book itself. Since then, commentators have divided the book into 20 chapters or 25 chapters, and Greek manuscripts divide the book into 22, 23, 24, 41 and 43 sections (Swete, p. xxxvi).

What is the structure of Revelation? What are the major divisions of the book and what is the structure of the sections within those divisions, especially the arrangement of the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments?

## The Structure of the Book

*A Twofold Division* Swete claims that the book consists of a succession of scenes, which are “so easily distinguished that at this stage, no serious difference of opinion can arise.” He lists 42 such sections (Swete, pp. xxxvii-xxxviii). Then he adds, “Our difficulties began when we attempt to group the sections into larger masses of apocalyptic matter, and by a process of synthesis to arrive at a plan upon which the author has constructed his work” (Swete, p. xxxviii). He divides the book into two major parts: chapters 1-11 and 12-22 (Swete, p. xxxix).

*A Fourfold Division* Tenney contends that the book contains four visions, each of which is introduced by the phrase “in the spirit” (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). In each vision, John is in a different place and Christ is pictured in a different way.

In the first vision (1:9-3:22), Christ is the critic of the churches, who commends their virtues and condemns their vices. In the second vision (4:1-16:21), Christ judges the world with the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments. In the third vision (17:1-21:8), Christ overthrows the evil world. In the fourth vision (21:9-22:5), He establishes the city of

God, the eternal destiny of His people. Tenney's outline is as follows (Merrill C. Tenney, "Revelation," *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, p. 722):

Introduction: The Return of Christ	1:1-8
I. Christ, the Critic of the Churches	1:9-3:22
II. Christ, the Controller of Destiny	4: 1-16:21
III. Christ, the Conqueror of Evil	17:1-21:8
IV. Christ, the Consummator of Hope	21:9-22:5
Epilogue: Appeal and Invitation	22:6-21

*A Threefold Division* The overall structure of the book of Revelation is given in the book itself. Jesus told John, "Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this" (1:19). This is the "inspired outline" of the book (Wiersbe).

The overall structure of Revelation is threefold. The "things which you have seen" refers to the vision of the Son of Man in the middle of the seven golden lampstands (1:12-18). The "things which are" is a reference to the messages to the seven churches (2:1-3:22) and the "things which will take place after this" means the future events recorded in 4:1 to the end of the book (Robert L. Thomas, "John's Apocalyptic Outline," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, volume 122, #492, October 1966). Revelation 4:1 confirms this approach.

## **The Structure of the Third Division**

The *overall* structure of the third division (4:1-22:21) is clear. It consists of judgments interspersed with explanations (4:1-18:24), the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (19:1-21), the Millennium (20:1-10), the Great White Throne Judgment (20:11-15) and the eternal state (21:1-22:21). As Swete says, "The book consists of a succession of scenes, which are so easily distinguished that at this stage no serious difference of opinion can arise" (see above).

## **The Structure of the Judgments**

The greatest challenge in discovering the structure of the book is the judgments in the third division. In the large section of "judgments" (4:1-18:24), there are three series of seven judgments: 1) seven seal judgments (4:1-8:2), seven trumpet judgments (8:3-11:19), and seven bowl judgments (15:1-16:21). That much is plain enough.

The problem is the relationship between these judgments. This is a "long recognized hermeneutical problem" (Dale Ralph Davis, "The Relationship Between the Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls in the Book of Revelation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, summer 1973, p. 149).

Are the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments in successive order, or are they simultaneous? Is there strict chronological order, or is there recapitulation?

*Succession* The first impression is the three series of judgments are successive. The seventh seal *contains* the seven trumpet judgments (8:1-2), which seems to say that the trumpet judgments come after the seal judgments. In fact, the trumpet judgments are in response to events in the seal judgments (*cf.* 8:3-5 with 6:9-11). Furthermore, specific statements within the judgments indicate sequence. For example, “Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads” (7:3). The reference to five months (9:5) indicates progression.

There seems to be an increase in intensity in the judgments. In the seal judgments, one-fourth of the earth is affected (6:8). Then, in the trumpet judgments, one-third of the earth is involved (8:7, 9, 10-12; 9:15). No percentage is given for any of the bowl judgments, but they follow the other judgments for they are “the seven *last* plagues and in them the wrath of God is *complete*” (15:1, italics added). Davis concludes, “Clearly, each series raises the crescendo of divine judgment to a higher pitch, and some form of sequence would best fit this framework” (Davis, p. 150).

Perhaps the strongest argument for some kind of sequence is not only the increase in intensity but also the notation that the people did not repent (9:20-21; 16:9, 11, 21). Davis asks, “Does not the *gradual* rise in the intensity of the judgments bespeak a kind of divine reluctance to bring that last climactic stroke? Do we not sense something of the agonizing patience of God with profane men as He continues to offer grace in the midst of judgment and in wrath remembers mercy?” (Davis, p. 151, italics his).

The evidence bears out the first impression. There is a sequence in the overall structure of the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments. Walvoord says, “The six seals seem to unfold successively in a chronological pattern. Out of the seventh seal will come another series of seven trumpets and out of the seventh trumpet will come another series of seven vials or bowls of the wrath of God” (Walvoord, p. 124).

*Recapitulation* Is the overall chronological order of the seals, trumpets, and bowls a *strict* chronological order or is there also recapitulation within that overall scheme? An examination of the interludes in the seal and trumpet judgments indicates that within the basic chronological order, there is recapitulation.

There is a four-part pattern in the seal and trumpet judgments: 1) A prelude (a heavenly scene), 2) six of the seven judgments, 3) an interlude, and 4) the seventh judgment.

In the section on the seal judgments, after a prelude (4:1-5:14), John lists six seal judgments (6:1-17), pauses for an interlude (7:1-17) and then records the seventh seal judgment (8:1-2). He follows the same pattern in the trumpet judgments. After a prelude (8:3-6), he describes six trumpet judgments (8:7-9:21). Then, he pauses for another interlude (10:1-14). After that, he reveals the seventh trumpet judgment (11:15-19).

These intrudes do not chronologically *follow* the judgments they interrupt. Rather, the events of the interludes happen *during* the period of the series of judgments they interrupt. They recapitulate back to sometime during the time of those judgments. The interlude that interrupts the seal judgments takes place *during* the time of the six seal judgments. Likewise, the interlude in the trumpet judgments takes place *during* the time of the trumpet judgments.

For example, the interlude in the seal judgments describes something that happens *before* the sixth judgment. The interlude describes 144,000 “servants” (7:3). Their “service” begins before any harm comes to the earth, the sea, or the trees (7:3), which

definitely indicates that it begins *before* the sixth seal judgment (6:12) and implies it takes place even prior to that (see the famine in 6:5-6), even possibly from the first seal judgment (“earth” in 7:3 and in 6:4). If that is the case for the seal judgments, it is safe to assume it is also true for the trumpet judgments. The seal judgments set up the pattern. If so, the interlude in the trumpet judgments indicates that they cover 3½ years, during which time the two witnesses prophesy (11:3).

In other words, in the case of the seal and the trumpet judgments, John describes six judgments. Then before recording the seventh judgment, he pauses to describe something that is not part of the judgments. These interludes describe something going on during the series of judgments that has nothing to do with judgments on the earth, but what is happening with the saints. The interlude between the sixth and seventh seal judgments describes 144,000 servants of God (7:1-8) and a great multitude of saints in heaven (7:9-17). The interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet judgments describes a little book (10:1-11) and the ministry of two witnesses (11:1-14). In short, after describing six judgments, John records an interlude, which is a flashback.

The recapitulation of the interludes proves that Revelation 6-11 is not in strict chronological order. That should not come as a surprise to anyone just reading the third division of Revelation. The seventh trumpet in Chapter 11 concludes with the ushering in of the kingdom, but the Millennium is not until chapter 20! Therefore, chapters 12-19 are a recapitulation. The third division of Revelation is not in *strict* chronological order.

*Simultaneous* To complicate matters, one element of the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments seem to be simultaneous.

In the Olivet Discourse recorded in Matthew 24, Jesus said, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Mt. 24:29-30). Notice what happens immediately after the Tribulation and just prior to the Second Coming of Christ.

The sixth seal contains these words: “I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place” (Rev. 6:12-14).

A comparison between what Jesus said in Matthew 24 and the sixth seal judgment seems to indicate that the sixth seal takes place immediately after the Tribulation and just prior to the Second Coming of Christ. In other words, the seal judgments extend to the Second Coming of Christ.

Walvoord says, “Actually, however, the seven seals comprehend the whole, as all the trumpets and all the vials [bowls] are comprehended in the seventh seal. The seven-sealed book, therefore, is the comprehensive program of God culminating in the second coming of Christ” (Walvoord, p. 124).

The seventh trumpet definitely extends to the Second Coming. Just listen. “Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdoms of this world have become *the kingdoms* of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!’” (11:15).



Likewise, the seventh bowl is unquestionably at the end of the Tribulation: “Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, ‘It is done!’” (16:17).

By the way, in the seventh bowl we find, “Then every island fled away, and the mountains were not found” (16:20). Sounds like the seventh seal to me (6:14).

Smith agrees. He points out that Revelation 6:14 says, “Every mountain and island was moved out of its place” and Revelation 16:20 inverts the order, but the fact that it is the same event indicates that the time here is parallel with Revelation 6:14, namely the close of the Tribulation (Smith).

Davis argues that the “*parallel phenomena* associated with the concluding member of each series may well imply that John intended them to be taken as parallel.” Moreover, he points out that following the seventh seal there are “noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake” (8:5), that the description of the seventh trumpet closes with “lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail” (11:19) and that the seventh bowl reveals similar manifestations, namely “noises and thunderings and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such a mighty and great earthquake as had not occurred since men were on the earth” (16:18) “And great hail from heaven fell upon men, *each hailstone* about the weight of a talent” (16:21; Davis, p. 152).

Smith concurs, pointing out that at the end of the seals (8:5) and at the end of the trumpets (11:9) there is a similar refrain, indicating that each series of judgments ends at the close of the Tribulation (Smith).

The sixth seal, the seventh trumpet, and the seventh bowl are not just describing something similar; they are describing the same event. Therefore, they must be simultaneous. Also, note that all three conclude with the Second Coming of Christ.

It might be objected that the sixth seal cannot be at the conclusion of the Tribulation, because it is followed by the seventh seal. If the analysis of the *content* of the end of each series of judgments is correct, that is that they are parallel, it must be concluded that the *order of the visions* that reveal the judgments does not necessarily indicate the *order of the events* (Davis, p. 153).

That is not to say that the *overall* structure of the three series is not chronological or that the events *within* the three series are not chronological. It is to simply acknowledge the obvious fact that the conclusion of each of the series is parallel. This is an inescapable conclusion for the trumpet and bowl judgments (they both state that they go all the way to the Second Coming) and when the sixth seal is compared to Matthew 24, it is apparent that it too is parallel with the other judgments at the Second Coming of Christ.

Granted, the similarity of events does not prove they are identical, but statements such as “every mountain and island was moved out of its place” in the sixth seal (6:14) and “every island fled away, and the mountains were not found” in the seventh bowl (16:20) are not just similar; they are the same event. How many times can every mountain be removed? The very nature of this event indicates it is the same event in both judgments.

Therefore, the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls run to the close of the end. “At the termination of each series, the note is unmistakably given, that such is the case” (Alford, vol. IV, p. 249). “Any system which does not recognize this common ending of the three, seems to me to stand there by convicted of error” (Alford, vol. IV, p. 250).

If the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments are basically sequential and yet each ends at the Second Coming, there must be gaps in the sequence. There must be a gap somewhere before the sixth seal judgment to allow for the first six trumpet judgments to occur because the sixth seal and the seventh trumpet are parallel to each other. Likewise, there must be a gap somewhere before the seventh trumpet to make room for the six bowl judgments in order for the seventh trumpet and the seventh bowl judgments to occur at the same time.

The conclusion is that although the three series of judgments are basically sequential, each extends to the Second Coming and the ending of each is simultaneous or parallel with the others (Davis, p. 151). There is a sense in which there are sequence, recapitulation, and parallel aspects to the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments.

**Summary:** There is a threefold overall structure of the book of Revelation, which is in chronological order (1:19), but the third division is definitely not in chronological order (11:19, and 16:17). The three series of judgments—the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls—are basically in sequence; they are in chronological order, but the interludes recapitulate, probably to the beginning of the series they interrupt, and all three series end at the Second Coming of Christ.

The first six seal judgments are in chronological order ending at the Second Coming of Christ. That means they include the Great Tribulation. That is not just a logical deduction; there are indications of that in Revelation 6 and Matthew 24. In Revelation 6, the fifth seal is martyrdom (6:9-10). These martyrs are said to be clothed in “white robes” (6:11). Revelation 7 says that those arrayed in white robes are those who come out of the “Great Tribulation” (7:9-14). So, the fifth seal takes place during the Great Tribulation.

Many have pointed out the parallel between the first four signs in Matthew 24 (false Christ, war, famine, and death caused by pestilence and earthquakes) and the first four seals in Revelation 6 (Antichrist, war, famine, and death). Jesus calls the first four signs “the beginning of sorrows” (Mt. 24:8), a reference to the first half of the Tribulation (Mt. 24:14, 15, 21). If the first four signs in Matthew 24 are in the first half of the Tribulation and they are parallel to the first seal, the first four seals are in the first half of the Tribulation. Now note: the fifth sign in Matthew 24 is martyrdom (Mt. 24:9) and the fifth seal in Revelation 6 is martyrdom (6:9-11). These martyrs are in the “Great Tribulation” (7:14). Does this not indicate that the first four seals in Revelation 6 are in the first half of the Tribulation (“the beginning of sorrows”) and the fifth seal is in the second half of the Tribulation? Is that why the first four seals are marked off by four horsemen (6:1-8)?

The middle of the Tribulation is between the fourth and fifth seal judgments. It is in the middle of the Tribulation, when the Antichrist breaks the covenant and persecution and martyrdom begin.

The trumpet judgments seem to cover the last 3½ years of the Tribulation. In Revelation 11, 12, and 13 three-time designations appear 1) forty-two months (11:2, 13:5), 2) 1260 days (11:3; 12:6), and 3) times, time, and half a time (12:14). These three-time descriptions are each referring to three- and one-half years. Forty-two months is three and one-half years. One thousand two hundred and sixty days is three and a half prophetic years (Smith, p. 190). Times, times, and half a times is used twice in Daniel (7:25; 12:7), where “time” is used of a year and “times” is used of “years” (Dan. 11:13).

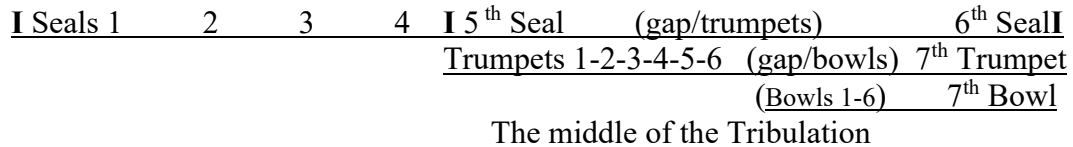
So, time (one year), plus times (two years), plus half a time (half a year) equals three- and one-half years.

During these three and a half years, the Temple will be given to the Gentiles (11:2), the Antichrist will reign (13:5), the two witnesses will minister (11:3), and Israel will flee into the wilderness (12:6; 12:14). In the context of the Book of Revelation, it is obvious that this three-and-a-half-year period is the three and a half years before the coming of Christ. This is also proven by Christ’s teaching that Israel will flee in the last half of the Tribulation, the Great Tribulation (Mt. 24:15-30).

The bowl judgments occur after the seal and trumpet judgments (15:1), apparently at the end of the Tribulation period. The trumpet judgments and the bowl judgments “fall in rapid succession like trip-hammer blows” (Walvoord, p. 232). The indication that the bowl judgments are poured in rapid secession is that the sores of the first bowl are still felt during the fifth plague (Mounce, p. 292). The Tribulation is like a roll of toilet paper. The closer it gets to the end, the faster it goes.

Bailey says, “The seals that begin in Revelation 6 parallel the events of Matthew 24:4-8 and 24:9-14 take you all the way through the Tribulation. When you open that last seal, it’s the next ‘seven,’ which comes back and picks up near the mid-point of the Tribulation. The trumpets take you from there to the end, which is the return of the Lord at the end. The Germans call this structure ‘the drag to the end’ in which you have an overview that culminates at the end; then you have a return of a portion of that which culminates at the end. And then like the bowls, you have it emphasizing what’s poured out at the end” (Mark Bailey, “The Tribulation” in *The Road to Armageddon*, p. 71).

Assuming that the first seal is at the beginning of the Tribulation and the first trumpet is that the beginning of the Great Tribulation, the arrangement of the three series of judgments is as follows.



## Matthew 24, The Seals, The Trumpets, and The Bowls

Matthew 24	Seals/Rev. 6	Trumpets/Rev. 8-9	Bowls/Rev. 16
False Christ (24:4-5)	Antichrist revealed (6:2)		
War(24:6)	War released (6:3-4)		
Famines (24:7:a)	Famine results (6:5-6)		
Pestilence and Earthquakes (24:7b)	Death reigns (6:7-8) ¼ killed with sword, hunger, and beast		
Martyrdom (24:9-13)	Martyrdom reoccurs (6:9-11)		
Worldwide preaching (24:14)	Great multitudes saved (7:1-11)		
Great Tribulation (24:21)		Hail and fire (8:7) 1/3 trees/ all grass	
		Sea turn to blood (8:8-9) 1/3 sea life/ships	
		Rivers turn bitter(8:10-11) 1/3 bitter/death	
		Sun gets dark (8:12-13) 1/3 darkness	
		demonic locusts (9:1-12) torment for 5 months	
		demonic hordes Euphrates (9:13-21) 1/3 killed (now 50%) <b>No repentance</b>	
			Sores distributed (16:1-2) all w/ mark
			Blood dispensed (16:3) All sea life died
			Blood delivered (16:4-7) Rivers
			Heat descends (16:8-9) <b>Sun. No repentance</b>
			Darkness dispersed (16:10-11) throne of beast <b>No repentance</b>
			Euphrates demonic activity dispatched. (16:12-16) <b>Armageddon</b>
Physical disturbances (24:29) darkness Sun, moon, stars	Physical disturbances (6:12-14) darkness sun, moon, stars island, mts		Pollution disseminated Wrath is Done (16: 17-21) island, mts, hail
		Kingdom (11:18-19)	

# VARIOUS VIEWS OF THE JUDGMENTS

Not everyone agrees with the solution to the riddle of Revelation presented so far. Not even those who believe that the fulfillment of Revelation is still future and that Revelation 4-18 is describing the Tribulation agree with this solution. The disagreement concerns the relationship of the three series of judgments to each other and to the Tribulation. Here is a summary of the various views, including the one already presented.

## The Seals are in the First Half

*Explanation* Some say only the seal judgments are in the first half of the Tribulation.

Dwight Pentecost claims that Matthew 24:4-8 outlines the first half of the Tribulation and Matthew 24:9-26 describes the second half. During the first half, Israel will dwell “in relative safety under the false covenant (Dan. 9:27).” In the middle, persecution breaks out (Mt. 24:9; Rev. 12:12-17) (Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 278-280).

Pentecost says, “These seals, then, are but the beginning of God’s judgments upon the earth. They are successive unfoldings of the judgment program, although they may continue throughout the period when once unfolded. They are mainly divine judgments though human agencies. They fall upon the earth in the first portion of the tribulation and they will continue through the period” (Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 360-361). The first trumpet judgment begins the middle of the Tribulation (Pentecost, pp. 362-363).

The bowl judgments are not the same as the trumpet judgments. “The trumpets began in the middle of the tribulation and depict events during the entire second half of the tribulation. The bowl judgments cover a brief period at end of the tribulation just prior to the second coming of Christ. They seem to have particular reference to unbelievers (Rev. 16:9, 11) and special reference to the beast and his followers (Rev. 16:2)” (Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 363). (Johnson, Constable, McGee, and Criswell also hold this view).

|            Seals            |    Trumpets    Bowls    |

*Evaluation* This arrangement ignores the fact that all three series of judgments end at the coming of Christ (*cf.* Mt. 24:29 with 6:13-14, 11:15, 16:17).

## The Seals and the Trumpets are in the First Half

*Explanation* Some put the seal and the trumpet judgments in the first half of the Tribulation. One version of this approach provides for a strict continuous chronology throughout the book. It is said that the seal and the trumpet judgments occur in the first half of the Tribulation (4:1-11:19) and that the middle of the Tribulation occurs when Satan is cast out of heaven (12:1-17). The bowl judgments are in the second half of the Tribulation (13:1-18:24). Not all forms of this interpretation divide the book that way, but all variations place the seal and trumpets judgments in the first half of the Tribulation.

Clarence Larkin puts the middle of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week between Revelation 11:19 and 12:1. In other words, the seals and the trumpets are in the first half of the Tribulation (Larkin, *The Book of Revelation*, 1919, pp. 14-15).

David Cooper has the seals and the trumpets in the first half of the Tribulation. He begins the second half of the Tribulation at Revelation 16:1 (Cooper, *An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, p. 16).

Tim La Haye and Tom Ice place the middle of the Tribulation between Revelation 14:20 and 15:1. The seal and the trumpet judgments as well as the prophecy in 12:1-14:20 take place in the first half of the Tribulation. Warren Wiersbe says the first three and a half years are covered in Revelation 6-9, the middle of the Tribulation in Revelation 10-14 and the last three and half years in Revelation 15-19 (Wiersbe, *Be Victorious*, p. 61). Later he says, "The trumpet judgments are released during the last half of the Tribulation and the bowl judgments during the last half" (Wiersbe, p. 73).

    |    Seals    Trumpets    |            Bowls    |    

*Evaluation* This arrangement ignores the fact that all three series of judgments end at the coming of Christ (*cf.* Mt. 24:29 with Rev. 6:13-14; 11:15; 16:17). Alford notes that any system of interpretation that requires the sixth seal to belong to any other time than the great day of the Lord "stands thereby self-condemned" (Alford, vol. IV, p. 249).

## **The Seals and the Trumpets are in the Last Half**

*Explanation* Some claim the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments are all in the last half of the Tribulation. This is a recapitulation approach to the book.

Walvoord says, "Many have assumed that the events of earth in chapters 6 through 19 coincide with the seven years of Israel's program culminating in the second coming of Christ. Expositors of this point of view have usually taken for granted that the book gives a panoramic view of the entire seven years, even though there is no explicit proof of this in the book itself. There is some evidence, however, that the events pictured in the seals, trumpets, and vials are instead a concentrated prophecy of the latter half of this week, i.e., a period of three and one-half years, designated as a time of wrath and the great tribulation, and constituting the introduction to the second coming of Christ. Evidence for this is presented as the exposition unfolds.

"There is a remarkable similarity between the progress of chapter 6 as a whole and the description given by our Lord of the end of the age in Matthew 24:4-31. In both passages the order is (1) war (Matt. 24:6-7; Rev. 6:3-4), (2) famine (Matt. 24:7; Rev. 6:5-6), (3) death (Matt. 24:7-9; Rev. 6:7-8), (4) martyrdom (Matt. 24:9-10, 16-22; Rev. 6:9-11), (5) the sun darkened, the moon darkened, and the stars falling (Matt. 24:29; Rev. 6:12-14), (6) a time of divine judgment (Matt. 24:32-25:26; Rev. 6:15-17). The general features of Matthew 24 are obviously quite parallel to the events of the book of Revelation beginning in chapter 6" (Walvoord, p. 123).

  |Seals Trumpets Bowls|

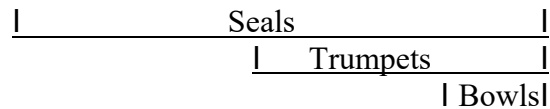
*Evaluation* The advantage of this arrangement is that it acknowledges the fact that all three series of judgments extend to the end of the Tribulation. It does not account for the expression “the beginning of sorrows” in Matthew 24:8 and the fact that there are only four horsemen in Revelation 6.

## The Seals cover both halves

*Explanation* Some insist the seal judgments are an overview of both halves of the Tribulation. The trumpet judgments cover the second half and the bowl judgments occur at the very end of the Tribulation.

The support for this view is: 1) Each series of judgment ends at the Second Coming of Christ (*cf.* Mt. 24:29 with 6:13-14; 11:15; 16:17). 2) Revelation 6:14 says, “Every mountain and island was moved out of its place” and, while Revelation 16:20 inverts the order, the fact that it is the same event indicates that the time here is parallel with Revelation 6:14, namely the close of the Tribulation.

Mark Bailey says, “The seals that begin in Revelation 6 parallel the events of Matthew 24:4-8 and 24:9-14 taking you all the way through the Tribulation. When you open that last seal, it’s the next ‘seven,’ which comes back and picks up near the mid-point of the Tribulation. The trumpets take you from there to the end, which is the return of the Lord at the end. The Germans call this structure ‘the drag to the end’ in which you have an overview that culminates at the end; then you have a return of a portion of that which culminates at the end. And then, like the bowls, you have it emphasizing what’s poured out at the end” (Mark Bailey, “The Tribulation” in *The Road to Armageddon*, p. 71; James M. Gray, *Synthetic Bible Studies*, p. 334; Wilbur M. Smith, *Moody Monthly*, 58:49; W. K. Harrison, *Bib Sac*, 115:203).



*Evaluation* This arrangement solves the last piece of the riddle of Revelation.

**Summary:** Even among those who believe that the Revelation is describing the Tribulation, there is disagreement about where the middle of the Tribulation takes place.

The list of views presented here is not exhaustive. Here are a few others.

According to C. I. Scofield, Matthew 24:4-14 has a double interpretation: 1) It describes the present age. 2) It also describes the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel. Matthew 24:15 introduces the Great Tribulation, which is the last 3½ years of the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel (see his note on Matthew 24:3). In the book of Revelation, the Great Tribulation is described in Revelation 11-18 (see his note on Revelation 7:14).

Lewis Sperry Chafer holds that Matthew 24:4-8 describes the present church age, which takes place prior to the beginning of the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel. Matthew 24:9-26 describes the Great Tribulation (Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. v, pp. 120-121). He says, “The seals, the trumpets, the vials, and the woes are progressive aspects of divine judgments falling upon Gentile peoples punitively—not upon either Jews or Christians” (Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. iv, p. 343).





## CONCLUSION

The book of Revelation is not an unsolvable puzzle. It was intended to be a revelation, not a riddle.

The Bible describes a period prior to the Second Coming of Christ that is called “the Tribulation.” According to Daniel, this Tribulation lasts for seven years (Dan. 9:27). At the beginning of a seven-year period, “he” (the Antichrist) will establish a covenant with Israel (Dan. 9:27). In the middle of that seven-year period, the Antichrist will do something called the “abomination of desolation” (Dan. 9:27).

In Matthew 24, when the disciples ask Jesus, “When will these things be? And what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (Mt. 24:3), He describes a period that has a beginning (Mt. 24:8) and an end (Mt. 24:14). Then He says, “Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (whoever reads, let him understand) then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains” (Mt. 24:15-16).

Daniel indicates that the abomination of desolation takes place in the middle of the seven-year Tribulation (Dan. 9:27). Therefore, in Matthew 24:4-14, Jesus was speaking of the Tribulation. He goes on to talk about the second half of the Tribulation, calling it the “great tribulation” (Mt. 24:21).

To sum up, 1) There is a Tribulation that lasts for seven years (Dan. 9:27). 2) It is divided into two parts of 3½ years each (Dan 9:27; Mt. 24:15). 3) The last half is called the “the great tribulation” (Mt. 24:21).

The parallel between Matthew 24 and Revelation 6 proves that the seal judgments are in the Tribulation up to just before Christ returns. Alford says, “It is somewhat astonishing” that some should fail to observe in the book of Revelation the same arrangement that is in Matthew 24 (Alford, vol. IV, p. 253).

It is clear that the trumpets come out of the seals (8:1-2) and that the bowls are the last judgments (15:1). Therefore, since the seal judgments are in the Tribulation and the trumpets and bowls are related to the seals, all three series of judgments are in the Tribulation. Furthermore, all three extend to the end of the Tribulation (*cf.* Mt. 24:29 with 6:13-14, 11:15, 16:17).

The seal judgments begin at the start of the Tribulation (*cf.* “the beginning of sorrows” in Matthew 24:8 and the four horsemen in Revelation 6). The trumpet judgments take place in the second half of the Tribulation (11:2, 3; 12:6, 14; 13:5).



# AN OUTLINE OF REVELATION

I. Prologue	1:1-8
II. Christ Revealed as Judge (things seen)	1:9-20
III. Christ Revealed as Judge of the Church (things that are)	2:1-3:22
A. To Ephesus (The Loveless Church)	2:1-7
B. To Smyrna (The Suffering Church)	2:8-11
C. To Pergamos (The Tolerant Church)	2:12-17
D. To Thyatira (The Compromising Church)	2:18-29
E. To Sardis (The Dead Church)	3:1-6
F. To Philadelphia (Persevering Church)	3:7-13
G. To Laodicea (The Lukewarm Church)	3:14-22
IV. Christ Revealed as Judge of the World (things that will be)	4:1-22:5
A. The Tribulation	4:1-18:24
1. The Seal Judgments	4:1-8:2
a. The Prelude	4:1-5:14
b. The First Seal: The Antichrist	6:1-2
c. The Second Seal: War	6:3-4
d. The Third Seal: Famine	6:5-6
e. The Fourth Seal: Death	6:7-8
f. The Fifth Seal: Martyrdom	6:9-11
g. The Sixth Seal: Physical disturbances	6:12-17
h. An Interlude	7:1-17
1). The 144,000	7:1-8
2). The Great Multitude	7:9-17
i. Seventh Seal Judgment	8:1-2
2. The Trumpet Judgments	8:3-11:19
a. The Prelude (6:10)	8:3-6
b. The First Trumpet: Hail and Fire (trees and grass)	8:7
c. The Second Trumpet: Blood in Sea (sea life and ships)	8:8-9
d. The Third Trumpet: Wormwood in Rivers (bitter/death)	8:10-11
e. The Fourth Trumpet: Darkness	8:12-13
f. The Fifth Trumpet: Demonic Locusts (1 <sup>st</sup> woe, 5 mos.)	9:1-12
g. The Sixth Trumpet: Demonic Hordes (2 <sup>nd</sup> woe, Euphrates)	9:13-21
h. An Interlude	10:1-11:14
1). The Little Book	10:1-11
2). The Two Witnesses (3½ years)	11:1-14
i. The Seventh Trumpet Judgment (3 <sup>rd</sup> woe)	11:15-19
j. Postlude (explanatory prophecies)	12:1-14:20
1). The Women (Israel), dragon (Satan) and Child (Christ)	12:1-17
2) The Beast out of the Sea (Antichrist)	13:1-10
3) The Beast out of the Earth (False Prophet)	13:11-18
4) Announcements	14:1-20
3. The Bowl Judgments	15:1-16:21

a. Prelude	15:1-8
b. First Bowl: Sores	16:1-2
c. Second Bowl: Blood in Sea	16:3
d. Third Bowl: Blood in Rivers	16:4-7
e. Fourth Bowl: Scorching Heat	16:8-9
f. Fifth Bowl: Darkness	16:10-11
g. Sixth Bowl: Demonic Activity (Euphrates)	16:12-16
h. Seventh Bowl: Pollution	16:17-21
i. Postlude (the judgment of Babylon)	17:1-18:24
B. The Second Coming	19:1-21
C. The Millennium	20:1-10
D. The Great White Throne Judgment	20:11-15
E. The New Heavens and the New Earth	21:1-22:5
V. Epilogue	22:6-20
VI. Benediction	22:21

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