



REVELATION REBOOT

Reading the book with compassion
and responsibility

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and responsibility*

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For anyone who was traumatised
by the 'Left Behind' series.

*A reference glossary awaits you
at the end of this book.*

*Return to it as you read.
It gathers the interpretations explored here,
points you back to the discussions,
and marks the questions that remain open.*

Foreword

There is something innately satisfying about revenge, even if the satisfaction is short-lived.

I have just finished watching a Netflix series about kings, queens and Vikings. It is filled with intrigue, deception, betrayal, shifting loyalties and revenge. Someone is always plotting. Someone is always in danger. And just when you think the latest betrayal will go unanswered, the balance shifts. Our hero escapes. An enemy falls. Often rather brutally.

And, honestly, there is a rush of satisfaction.

I find myself wanting the person responsible to get what is coming to them. The writers have made me care about the people they hurt. By the time revenge arrives, I am ready for it. The episode ends, and I want another.

The writers understand their audience. They have made revenge feel like a reward.

I wonder how much of that expectation we bring to the book of Revelation.

We arrive with our grievances, our fears and our sense that the world has allowed too many cruel people to prosper. We want someone to put things right. Perhaps, if we are honest, we also want to watch our enemies lose.

Some interpretations of the final book of the Bible seem almost designed to satisfy that appetite. The faithful will be vindicated. Their enemies will suffer. Everything will finally be settled, and we will discover that we were on the winning side.

It is easy to see the attraction. It is harder to ask what that expectation might be doing to us.

If I imagine God's ultimate victory as the humiliation and destruction of everyone I oppose, how will I treat those people now? Will I become more compassionate? More willing to listen? More concerned about their children, their suffering and their future? Or will I begin to regard their pain as something they have coming?

The book of Revelation gives us difficult material to wrestle with. There is blood, judgement, terror and destruction. We cannot simply turn away from those passages because they trouble our argument. We will have to read them carefully.

But at the centre of its vision stands a startling figure. John hears of a conquering lion. When he looks, he sees a Lamb bearing the marks of slaughter.

That is the image to which this book keeps returning. What happens to our understanding of victory when the one at the centre of the throne is the one who has suffered? What happens to our desire for revenge when we are called to follow him?

My argument is that reading the book of Revelation through the Lamb should challenge our appetite for retaliation. Its promise of justice should deepen our responsibility towards people who suffer and our determination to confront what harms them.

Justice matters. Victims need protection. Those responsible for harm need to be held accountable. Love cannot mean asking the wounded to keep quiet so that everyone else can remain comfortable.

Yet there is a difference between wanting suffering to end and wanting someone else to suffer.

That difference runs through this book. It also runs through me.

My struggle with the book of Revelation began long before that television series. In 1997, I was sitting in my dorm room at a Bible college in Australia, preparing to begin Masters-level papers on the book of Revelation. As an enthusiastic young man in my mid-twenties, I found the task daunting. As I began to unpack the text, much of what I had been told about this mysterious book began to unravel.

It belonged to an ancient world with its own fears, loyalties and ways of communicating. Reading it within that world made familiar explanations much harder to sustain. I finished the paper, received my mark and was left with a question an academic result could not answer: how was I going to live with what I had learned?

For years, I hardly mentioned it. When the subject arose, conversations quickly returned to the end times. People could be fierce in their defence of that reading. Sometimes even people with little connection to Christian faith were adamant that the book of Revelation existed to tell us how the world would end. Sometimes I thought I could see fear behind that certainty. Usually, I let the conversation slide.

But the question stayed with me. How had we become so absorbed in the world's supposed final catastrophe that we could miss the people living beside us? How had a wounded Lamb become an introduction to fantasies of overwhelming force?

In *The Gospel of Death*, I explored how influential systems of interpretation helped direct Christian attention towards prophetic timetables and contemporary events. This book follows the question into a different place. I want to explore what we might recover when we return to the world in which the book of Revelation was born, and what that recovery might ask of us now.

I write with some trepidation. Beliefs about this book can sit close to the centre of a person's faith. Challenging them may cost friendships. It may also open conversations I have spent years avoiding.

I do not want you to replace someone else's certainty with mine. I want us to look carefully, to admit where the evidence is difficult, and to notice what our reading makes us willing to do to other people.

The person I hope to meet again in these pages is the Lamb who was slain. The question I hope we carry away is how to follow him.

Introduction

An empire can fill a street with soldiers. It can put its ruler's face on money and teach its citizens which victories to celebrate. It can become so familiar that people struggle to imagine life outside its demands.

The book of Revelation asks its hearers to look again.

Its first audiences lived in cities of Roman Asia. John addressed their fears, their compromises and their confidence. His visions were intended to change how they understood the world they would return to after the reading ended. To hear him well, we must begin there, before assigning his beasts to our own headlines.

The book of Revelation calls us to remain faithful in a world where power, wealth and fear compete for our loyalty. My argument is that, read in the world of its first hearers and through the self-giving love of Jesus, it challenges us to resist oppression, including within our own faith, protect those who suffer and seek justice without becoming cruel ourselves. Its hope should deepen our responsibility for life now: telling the truth, practising compassion and refusing to make another person's suffering the price of our comfort.

We will enter that world through human stories. Many chapters begin with a particular encounter: papers falling through a university atrium, a woman kneeling before weapons, a man standing in the path of tanks. Other chapters begin with the quieter work of planting, giving and opening a door. The stories do not prove an interpretation of scripture. They give us questions worth bringing to it.

First, we will explore why someone might write a dangerous book in the language of visions, beasts and ancient memories. Then we will approach the throne and consider the surprise at the heart of John's account of victory. From there we will examine how power wins cooperation, and why resistance sometimes ends in suffering rather than success.

The middle of our journey faces the passages that make a compassionate reading difficult. We will read the cries for vengeance, the warrior and the fire without pretending that symbolism removes their violence. We will also take John's language of nearness seriously. The people who first heard the promise of "soon" must not disappear from our explanation of it.

Then the questions turn towards us. What happens when Christianity adopts the habits of the power it condemns? Can we recognise mercy when it comes from beyond our faith? What difference should any of this make at work, in a family argument or when someone needs help on an ordinary Tuesday?

We finish with a city whose gates remain open and whose tree offers healing to the nations. The journey will have brought us from the desire to see an enemy defeated to the harder work of seeking a world in which people can live without being sacrificed to someone else's security.

This argument must be tested against the text, including passages that resist it. Historical context can restrain our imagination without removing every disagreement. We will distinguish what John depicts, what we can know about his circumstances and what I am proposing for our own lives.

The historical stories are retold in original language from the sources listed at the end. I have not supplied invented conversations or private thoughts. Where I invite you to imagine a gathering in Roman Asia or an ordinary contemporary situation, I identify it as an illustration. The biblical scenes retell John's literary visions. Biblical passages are generally paraphrased, with references for comparison.

You do not need to solve every symbol before beginning. You do need the willingness to let the book question the loyalties you bring to it.

The way of the Lamb

The way of the Lamb is the practice of following Jesus through truthful, compassionate and self-giving love. It means using whatever power we have to protect life, seeking justice without making other people expendable, and remaining faithful when doing so costs us comfort or approval.

In chapter 5 of the book of Revelation, John hears that a conquering lion is worthy to open the scroll. When he looks, he sees a Lamb standing with the marks of slaughter. The song that follows connects the Lamb's worthiness with his death and the gathering of people from every tribe, language, people and nation (5:6–10). Later, his followers overcome through his blood and their testimony, even when their faithfulness exposes them to death (12:11).

I understand this as a challenge to the belief that victory belongs to whoever can dominate. Following the Lamb asks us to tell the truth when a lie would benefit our side, care for people beyond our own group and refuse cooperation with exploitation. Compassion becomes practical when we share the cost of protecting someone. Justice asks what must change so that harm does not continue.

This way of life does not require victims to remain within reach of abuse. Seeking safety, setting boundaries and holding people accountable can all serve love. Nor does recognising such conduct in people of other faiths make them unknowingly Christian. We can honour the resemblance between their actions and what we value in Jesus while respecting their own beliefs.

The Gospel of Death asked how theology could lead us away from these responsibilities. This book asks how careful reading might help us recover them.

The Lamb is powerful in John's vision. His wounds do not make him insignificant. They challenge us to reconsider what worthy power looks like.

1 Dangerous words

Paper falls through the university atrium.

It is 18 February 1943 in Munich. Hans and Sophie Scholl have brought leaflets into the main university building. They leave them where students will find them; some tumble from the gallery into the open space below. A custodian sees the siblings and detains them. The Gestapo is summoned.

The leaflets belong to the White Rose, a small resistance circle whose members have been challenging Nazi rule through the written word. Four days after the arrest, Hans and Sophie, together with Christoph Probst, are sentenced to death and executed.^[1]

There is a terrible disproportion between the objects in this story. Paper against a state. A few young people against institutions capable of interrogating, sentencing and killing them. Yet the authorities treat the writing as dangerous enough to require its authors' deaths.

That should make us pause before treating a book as something detached from action. Words can disturb the account of reality on which obedience depends. They can name what people have learned to avoid naming. They can make cooperation harder to justify.

The White Rose and John's churches inhabited different worlds. Their circumstances cannot be exchanged. But the leaflets give us a useful starting question: what happens when a text asks people to recognise that the order surrounding them is morally wrong?

We have often approached the book of Revelation as a puzzle left for people in a later age. Its first hearers received something addressed to them. To understand the difference, we must go into the room where it was heard.

The room

The opening scene is an imagined reconstruction of a gathering in Roman Asia. It introduces the setting; it does not describe a documented meeting.

By the time the reading begins, the room has grown dim.

An oil lamp gives enough light for the reader to follow the words. Those sitting further away can see the movement of a hand, the pale edge of the manuscript, the faces nearest the flame. Beyond the doorway, the city continues its business. Footsteps pass. Someone calls from the street.

Imagine that you have come here after work. Tomorrow you must return to the same customers and obligations, the same people whose goodwill helps put food on your table. Some know that you belong to this gathering. Others do not. You have learned that explaining your faith can change a conversation in ways you cannot control.

The reader begins. There is a blessing for the person reading, and for those listening and keeping what they hear. Then come the names of the cities. Ephesus. Smyrna. Pergamum. Thyatira. Sardis. Philadelphia. Laodicea.

Your world.

Whatever this strange document is about to say, it has arrived with your address upon it. Outside, Rome still rules. Inside, a voice begins to describe another throne.

Seven churches

Before the book of Revelation became a chart of the end of the world, it was a message to communities. Its opening identifies seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, in what is now western Türkiye. Its author calls himself John. He describes being on Patmos because of God's word and the testimony of Jesus, and introduces himself as someone sharing his readers' suffering, kingdom and endurance (1:4–11).

John writes as a participant in their struggle. He addresses communities that need encouragement, correction and sometimes a sharp interruption of their self-confidence. The precise identity of this John is disputed. The text does not introduce him as one of the Twelve, and identifying him with the author of the Fourth Gospel requires an argument beyond the shared name.^[2]

The book anticipates being read aloud. The opening blessing (1:3) distinguishes the person reading from those hearing. Its first audiences would therefore encounter its visions through a voice: images arriving in succession, repeated phrases gathering force, songs interrupting scenes of terror. We can pause over every number. They would also have experienced the momentum of the whole.

We must resist making those listeners into a single frightened crowd. The messages in chapters 2 and 3 describe different circumstances. Smyrna faces poverty and threatened imprisonment. Pergamum has witnessed the death of Antipas. Laodicea considers itself wealthy and self-sufficient. Ephesus has endured and tested teachers, yet is accused of abandoning its earlier love.

Some need courage to continue. Others need to recognise what they have become. A reading that makes the book of Revelation only a comfort for innocent sufferers misses its challenge to comfortable believers.

Outside

To understand that challenge, we need to walk outside. The cities of Roman Asia possessed their own histories, traditions and civic loyalties. Rome's power operated within that local world. Imperial honour could be expressed through buildings, ceremonies, images and the ambitions of influential citizens.

At Sardis, material evidence, including temples, coins and statuary, shows the presence of imperial worship alongside other religious commitments. Political belonging and religious life were interwoven in ways that resist our modern habit of putting them into separate compartments.^[3]

That matters because we often imagine oppression arriving only through a threatening official. Power can also arrive through an invitation: a place at the table, a useful friendship, an opportunity to become someone whose name is remembered.

Picture the dilemma rather than a documented incident. People upon whom your livelihood depends expect your participation in the religious life of the community. They consider it normal, honourable

and socially necessary. Your hesitation seems ungrateful. Your refusal may look like contempt. How much participation is harmless? At what point does belonging become allegiance?

Scholars debate the precise relationship between the imagery in the book of Revelation, imperial worship and economic pressure. We should not turn every ancient transaction into a compulsory act of emperor worship. Nevertheless, the text makes worship and commerce central concerns. Chapter 13 connects allegiance to the beast with buying and selling, while the messages to Pergamum and Thyatira dispute participation in food offered to idols.^[4]

John's question reaches into ordinary life. What will you accept so that life can continue comfortably? That question will eventually reach us too. First, we must allow it to belong to the people who heard it before us.

Under pressure

There is a familiar version of this history in which every Christian lives under an empire-wide death sentence. Soldiers wait around every corner. The emperor has made exterminating the church his consuming purpose. That picture is too simple.

The book of Revelation contains testimony to suffering. Antipas has been killed. John associates his presence on Patmos with his witness. Smyrna is warned about imprisonment. We should neither explain those details away nor enlarge them into a uniform experience the evidence cannot establish.

Many scholars place the book towards the end of Domitian's reign, commonly around AD 95–96. Others argue for an earlier setting, particularly around Nero's time. The date remains disputed. Claims of a systematic empire-wide persecution under Domitian require particular caution.^[5]

The churches inhabited a world in which loyalty could become costly, but their circumstances differed. Some experienced danger. Some experienced prosperity. Some may have considered their accommodation with the surrounding culture entirely reasonable.

John's visions address both fear and attraction. We understand why someone threatened by violence needs hope. It is harder to accept that someone benefiting from an arrangement may need help recognising the violence that sustains it.

The unveiling

Then why the beasts? Why the horns, the stars, the bowls, the strange creatures moving around a heavenly throne? Why not write a clear letter explaining that Rome is dangerous and Christians should remain faithful?

Part of the answer is that John does write letters. He names churches, identifies their conduct and gives instructions. But he also writes an apocalypse and calls his work prophecy. Those descriptions overlap here.

Apocalypse means revelation or unveiling. Scholars use the term for ancient literature in which a heavenly disclosure opens realities beyond ordinary human perception, often through visions and otherworldly mediators. Its scope can include the heavenly world, the course of history and divine judgement. Catastrophe may appear within it, but catastrophe does not exhaust its meaning.^[6]

John works within a scriptural world already rich in such imagery. Daniel sees kingdoms represented as beasts. Ezekiel describes extraordinary living creatures and divine glory. Exodus tells of plagues, oppression and deliverance. Isaiah imagines renewal beyond devastation. The book of Revelation draws those memories into its own visions. Its creatures and disasters belong first within that inherited vocabulary.^[7]

A modern comparison helps explain why that inherited vocabulary matters. John Ortberg imagines describing the Chicago Bulls' decline through beasts, horns and numbers: imagery that basketball fans could connect with a world they knew, but which might bewilder a reader centuries later.^[34] Such a reader would need to recover the basketball context before assigning those images to events in their own lifetime. The same discipline applies here. Before asking which modern ruler resembles John's beast, we should ask what Daniel's beasts, Roman power and demands for allegiance could have meant to John's first hearers. The comparison concerns how readers recognise references; it does not reduce John's vision to a sporting allegory.

Consider what happens when a kingdom becomes a beast. A public monument might present that kingdom through a dignified ruler, victorious soldiers and grateful subjects. The image tells viewers that power is orderly, admirable and deserving of loyalty. A beast can expose appetite beneath ceremony. It can make domination visible to someone accustomed to calling it peace.

That is an interpretation of what John's imagery accomplishes. We cannot interview him about each literary decision. We can examine how the images work within his book: they disturb the appearance of things.

A secret code

There is something attractive about imagining the book of Revelation as a message smuggled past the authorities. The believers understand. Their enemies see only baffling animals and numbers.

Shared stories can certainly make some associations more available to one audience than another. Calling an imperial city Babylon enables a writer to evoke conquest, exile and judgement without continually naming the contemporary target. But the evidence does not establish that John chose this genre principally to evade Roman censorship.

Nor is his political imagery wholly impenetrable. Chapter 17 gives clues about mountains, kings and a city exercising dominion. The book explains symbols rather than merely hiding them. Its ending instructs John not to seal up its prophetic words because the time is near (22:10).

We can describe it as meaningful symbolic communication while remaining cautious about the stronger claim that it was designed to defeat hostile readers. Making secrecy its chief purpose can recreate the problem we hoped to escape: ordinary people are told that the book remains inaccessible until an expert supplies the code.

Where we stand

Readers often arrive at this book with an interpretive system already in place. A few names can help us recognise the assumptions we bring.

Preterism locates most or all of the visions' fulfilment in the ancient past from our perspective, often around Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70 or conflict with Rome. What was approaching for John's hearers is understood as history for us. Partial preterism leaves Christ's final return, bodily resurrection and final judgement ahead. Full preterism understands even these as fulfilled, usually in relation to AD 70. That is a substantial difference, not merely a disagreement over a few dates.

Preterism received a major systematic expression in the Spanish Jesuit Luis de Alcázar's commentary, published in 1614. His reading located fulfilment in early Christian history and offered an alternative to Protestant claims about the papacy; modern preterists do not simply reproduce his scheme.[37]

Futurism places much of the book's fulfilment still ahead of us, associated with Christ's return and final judgement. Futurists differ about symbolism and chronology; the label does not mean that every reader endorses the same timetable.

Future expectations were already present in second-century writers such as Irenaeus. Francisco Ribera developed an influential futurist reading around 1590. In the nineteenth century, Darby helped shape the distinctive dispensational system later spread through teaching networks and Scofield's Reference Bible of 1909. Darby did not invent futurism.[37]

Historicism, another approach, reads the visions as an unfolding course of history from John's time onwards. Idealist readings emphasise patterns of conflict, allegiance and faithfulness rather than assigning every vision to one event. These approaches can overlap.[33]

Where does this book stand? I begin with the world of John's first hearers. Their circumstances and expectations must constrain our interpretation. In that respect, our reading shares an important concern with preterism. It also recognises recurring patterns of domination and resistance, a concern associated with idealist interpretation. But recognising symbolism does not, by itself, commit us to idealism: readers in several traditions interpret beasts and other images symbolically.

I do not claim that every vision was fulfilled in AD 70. "John expected something soon" and "everything John expected happened soon" are different claims. We can take his expectation seriously while admitting that its fulfilment remains difficult to explain. We will return to that difficulty in the chapter on "Soon". Nor should recurring patterns dissolve the particular dangers and choices facing the first audience.

These labels help us locate the argument; they cannot decide it for us. The next comparison makes the differences—and the difficulties on both sides—more concrete.

Two ways of reading

Many of us learned to read this book from people we trusted. Reconsidering that reading need not mean rejecting their sincerity or everything they taught us. The comparison below concerns a common dispensational futurist approach, not every Christian who expects a future return of Christ.[36]

Question	Common dispensational futurist reading	The reading developed here
Where does fulfilment lie?	Much of chapters 4–22 describes events still to come at the end of history.	Begin with what the visions communicated in Roman Asia; later significance does not require every vision to have been fulfilled then.
Why address the first hearers?	Future victory could encourage those churches even if they would not witness the events.	Their actual fears, compromises and loyalties are central to understanding the message throughout.
What do the threatening powers signify?	Symbolic figures often point towards particular future rulers and events.	Rome supplies the primary historical setting; comparisons with later domination require evidence.
How should headlines enter our reading?	Some popular presentations seek signs of approaching fulfilment; careful futurists warn against identifying headlines with prophecy.	Contemporary events raise ethical questions, but resemblance does not establish that John predicted them.
What must each approach explain?	Why a message repeatedly described as near places so much fulfilment far beyond its first hearers.	How the promised defeat of evil relates to continuing suffering, and how the violent passages fit this book's ethical emphasis.

The strongest futurist objection deserves a hearing: the complete ending of death and suffering has plainly not occurred. A historically grounded reading must face that fact. Equally, a future fulfilment does not by itself establish a detailed timetable, identify a modern politician or turn a new technology into the mark of the beast.

Nor should the comparison become a contest between compassionate people and unfeeling people. Futurists can serve their neighbours with extraordinary commitment; readers who reject their chronology can still misuse power. The question is whether an interpretation is well supported, and how responsibly we live with it. One explicitly futurist source used here also warns against forcing newspaper events into prophecy.[36]

Imagine hearing this message in one of the seven churches. What would you recognise? What would it ask you to change? Now ask what evidence would justify moving its central conflicts thousands of years beyond you. These questions do not settle every passage, but they make our assumptions available for examination.

We need not ridicule a belief to discover that it asks too much of the evidence. Nor should we protect our own reading from the same test. Which explanation best accounts for the text, and what would lead us to revise it?

The leaflets in Munich asked their readers to recognise a regime they already lived under. John asks his hearers to reconsider the authority surrounding them through a different literary world: scripture, worship and visionary disclosure. Understanding that form does not finish our reading. It brings us to the startling figure whose authority the book will set against the splendour of earthly rulers.

What this asks of us

The book of Revelation addresses real communities whose loyalties and conduct matter. Its first hearers help us distinguish the world John describes from the assumptions we bring. Before applying his warnings to someone else, we should examine the pressures we have accepted as normal.

What have I learned to accept because questioning it would disturb my comfortable place in the world?

2 The Lamb

The woman is kneeling. The police have weapons.

On a street in Myitkyina, in northern Myanmar, Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng faces officers during the crackdown following the military coup of February 2021. Her white religious habit is unmistakable in the filmed encounter. Two officers kneel opposite her. For a moment, the confrontation takes place close to the ground.

She asks that the protesters be spared. She runs a clinic; when the shooting resumes, caring for the wounded becomes an immediate task. She and other witnesses report at least two deaths. Tear gas obstructs her efforts to bring victims to the clinic.^[8]

The image is powerful enough to tempt us into improving its ending. We want the weapons lowered permanently. We want the officers to go home. We want the woman who takes such a risk to prove that courage always changes the people before it.

The reported deaths prevent us from writing that version.

What, then, are we looking at? A failed attempt? A brave gesture? A person who understood that someone else's life had become a claim upon her own?

Her appeal assumes that the people carrying weapons can still choose. They are responsible for what they do next. She places that responsibility before them with her own body, and then tries to care for those injured when the appeal fails.

I find the way of the Lamb recognisable in that movement from protection to care. I do not mean that every person in danger must kneel before armed officers. I mean that her concern moves towards the threatened people. Her courage serves their lives.

Carry that scene with you as we approach the throne in John's vision. We are about to encounter another image that makes us question what victory looks like.

The scroll

The scroll remains closed.

In John's vision, it rests in the right hand of the one seated on the throne, writing covering both sides, seven seals holding it shut. A mighty angel calls for someone worthy to open it. The question travels through the scene without receiving an answer. No one in heaven, on earth or beneath the earth can do it.

John weeps.

An elder tells him that the Lion of Judah has conquered. The language carries royal expectation: a lion, David's line, victory sufficient to open what no one else can open. Then John looks. In the midst of the throne and the gathered figures stands a Lamb appearing to have been slaughtered (Revelation 5:1–6).

The change between hearing and seeing is the scene's decisive movement. We have been prepared for a lion. We are shown a Lamb.

Worthy

We should be careful about saying that John replaces one figure with another. The lion and the Lamb identify the same victorious figure. The interpretive question is what the second image reveals about the first.

The song that follows provides a reason for his worthiness. He was slain, and through his blood purchased people for God from every tribe, language, people and nation (5:9–10). The death belongs within the explanation of his victory. It is not an unfortunate detail removed before the celebration begins.

That is why the Lamb must govern our argument. Authority and self-giving are brought together at the centre of the vision. The image challenges an expectation that victory consists simply in possessing enough force to crush everyone who resists.

This does not make the Lamb powerless in John's account. He has seven horns and seven eyes. Horns evoke strength in the scriptural imagery John inherits; the eyes are explicitly identified with God's seven spirits sent throughout the earth. Heaven acknowledges his power. To call him merely weak or harmless would leave much of the scene unread.

The startling claim is that the wounds remain visible within that authority. John does not offer us an untouched ruler who explains suffering from a safe distance. The figure declared worthy has himself undergone killing.

Christian readers have understood that death through several overlapping scriptural associations, including sacrifice and deliverance. We need not settle every aspect of atonement here. The immediate point is supplied by the song: the slain one gathers a people whose identity crosses the boundaries by which human beings divide their loyalties.^[9]

The gathering

The widening circle of worship matters. The vision moves through elders, living creatures and angels towards the acclamation of every creature. Its language reaches beyond one city, nation or imperial household (5:8–14).

That breadth exposes a contradiction when Christians reduce the Lamb to a possession of their own country. No nation can claim this scene as a portrait of its natural superiority. The people gathered through the Lamb's death come from across the world's human divisions.

This is not yet a modern political programme. The book of Revelation does not specify immigration policy or the organisation of a welfare system. The ethical inference requires us to take another step: if our central vision gathers people across boundaries, we have reason to question habits that make another population's suffering less important simply because it occurs beyond our border.

On 4 April 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. stood in Riverside Church in New York and challenged his own country's war in Vietnam. He had urged angry young Americans to reject violence. He could not

ask that of them while remaining silent about the far greater violence exercised by their government. Vietnamese families had to enter the same circle of moral concern as American families.^[10]

This is where the connection with the Lamb becomes demanding. Chapter 5 gathers people from every nation around one who was killed. National allegiance can no longer be the measure of whose pain matters. To follow this Lamb is to let the suffering of people beyond our borders question the conduct of our own side. King brought that obligation into a room of American listeners. The people beneath American bombs could not be left outside Christian compassion.

But the connection goes deeper than concern for distant suffering. In his earlier account of nonviolent resistance, King argued that injustice must be confronted without making the degradation of the opponent the goal. Boycotts and non-cooperation could exert real pressure. Love did not require leaving an unjust arrangement intact. It required seeking a changed relationship rather than the satisfaction of seeing an enemy crushed.^[10]

Read the throne scene with that distinction in mind. The Lamb is declared worthy because he gave his life (5:9); the song celebrates the people gathered through that death. This gives us a different measure of victory from the ability to force others into submission. King's account helps make that distinction practical: resist the harm, withdraw cooperation and demand change, while refusing to make hatred the organising principle of the struggle.

That refusal can cost something. King's speech drew criticism from major newspapers and civil-rights allies. He continued to oppose the war.^[10] The resemblance to the costly testimony of the Lamb's followers in 12:11 concerns fidelity when approval and security are at stake. It does not make King another saviour or establish that he derived these arguments from the book of Revelation. It shows how the pattern we are tracing can become a public choice.

The question is therefore sharper than whether we admire a courageous preacher. Will we oppose injustice when our own side benefits from it? And can we seek its defeat without making another person's destruction our reward?

Their victory

Later, the book of Revelation describes believers overcoming the accuser through the Lamb's blood and their testimony, even at the cost of their lives (12:11). At the level of visible events, some have been defeated. Their bodies can be imprisoned or killed. Within the vision's judgement, their faithful witness has not been overcome.

This reorders the meaning of success. If survival, influence and reputation become our only measures, we may excuse almost anything needed to preserve them. A community whose testimony matters more than its prestige can accept losses that institutional self-protection would make intolerable.

But the passage can be abused. Those with power can tell those without it to endure mistreatment quietly, as though the Lamb exists to make victims more manageable. That interpretation moves responsibility in the wrong direction. The call to faithful witness does not grant anyone permission to manufacture another person's suffering.

Sister Ann Rose's appeal sought protection for protesters. The danger she accepted served that purpose; it was not a virtue in itself.

Someone who escapes abuse, seeks outside help or protects a child has not betrayed the Lamb. Those causing harm must stop, and those able to intervene must answer for how they use that power.

Her movement from confrontation to tending the wounded brings the question back to us: what are we willing to give, and what power are we willing to surrender, so that another person can live?

What this asks of us

The Lamb's wounds challenge the belief that victory belongs to whoever can dominate. Following Jesus asks us to use power to protect life, even when that costs approval or advantage. Such self-giving must be freely offered; it cannot be demanded from someone being abused.

What power or advantage could I use differently so that another person is safer or freer?

3 The bargain

A man carrying shopping bags steps into the road.

Ahead of him is a column of tanks. It is 5 June 1989 on Chang'an Avenue near Tiananmen Square in Beijing, after the military's bloody suppression of the protests. The man stands before the leading vehicle. When it tries to manoeuvre around him, he moves into its path. He later climbs onto the tank before returning to the road. Other people eventually lead him away.^[11]

We do not know his name with confidence. We do not know what became of him. Claims that he was executed, imprisoned or safely escaped go beyond what has been established. The man disappears from the public record, while the image travels around the world.

The shopping bags hold our attention because they belong to an ordinary life. We can see them. We cannot supply the errand, the home or the people who might have been waiting. The gaps in the story should remain gaps.

Even the tank's hesitation matters. Machinery is being operated by people. For these moments, the person in the road interrupts its movement. He cannot match its force, but force does not make his presence meaningless.

The scene does not tell us how every confrontation should be handled. It does expose a claim on which oppressive power often depends: that the only sensible response is to cooperate because resistance can achieve nothing.

John puts a similar claim into the mouths of those who admire the beast. Who can fight against it?

Invincible

The sea produces a creature assembled from the shapes of violence.

John sees horns and heads, crowns and blasphemous names. The beast resembles a leopard, with a bear's feet and a lion's mouth. Behind its authority stands the dragon. The earth responds with wonder, and wonder becomes worship. People ask who can compare with the beast, and who can fight against it (Revelation 13:1–4).

Those questions disclose something about the appeal of power. Invincibility can become a reason for allegiance. If no one can resist successfully, cooperation begins to look like wisdom. Admiration follows what fear has already conceded.

The beast

The creature's body draws us back to Daniel 7, where beasts emerge from the sea and are interpreted as kingdoms. John's combination of their features places his vision within an existing language of political power. The first question is therefore what this imagery communicated within that scriptural world, rather than which modern machine resembles a part of the animal.

The later references in the book of Revelation to seven mountains, kings and a city ruling over the kings of the earth make Rome a strong historical reference for Babylon (17:9–18). The exact interpretation of the kings remains disputed. A recognisable imperial setting does not solve every detail.

Nor does recognising Rome make the book irrelevant after Rome. Historical reference and subsequent application are different questions. A text can first expose an ancient empire and subsequently help readers examine similar conduct elsewhere. Responsible application describes the resemblance and supplies evidence for it. It does not pretend John secretly named our preferred contemporary enemy.

The number

The invitation in 13:18 asks for wisdom to calculate the beast's number. The familiar reading is 666; some ancient witnesses read 616.

A substantial scholarly explanation connects 666 with Nero Caesar written in Hebrew letters, using the numerical values attached to those letters. A spelling corresponding to the shorter Latin form of Nero's name can yield 616. Craig Koester's study examines this proposal alongside ancient practices involving names and numbers and explains why interpretation remains disputed.^[12]

This explanation fits the invitation to an ancient audience to calculate a name and gives the variant reading a potentially meaningful place.

By comparison, finding 666 in a modern person's name by switching languages, adjusting spellings and choosing convenient numerical rules can manufacture an appearance of discovery. The procedure must be justified independently of the desired result. Otherwise, the interpreter has designed a method that produces the enemy already selected.

Identifying a likely reference to Nero does not require the whole book to have been written during Nero's reign. A ruler's memory can outlast his life. We should resist using one plausible identification to settle a separate dating debate automatically.

Falling short

Another reading sees 666 as a repeated failure to reach seven. Seven often conveys completeness in the book of Revelation. On this interpretation, the beast reaches for divine status but never attains it: six hundred falls short of seven hundred, sixty of seventy, and six of seven. G. K. Beale and D. H. Campbell defend a version of this symbolic approach.^[12]

The attraction is clear. The beast receives worship, its healed wound evokes a return from death, and the second beast resembles a lamb while speaking like a dragon (13:3–4, 11–15). Power dresses itself in the appearance of divinity. The number, on this reading, exposes the pretence: what demands ultimate allegiance is still incapable of being God.

We should distinguish that persuasive theme from certainty about the arithmetic. The text never identifies 777 as God's number. Seven is not an exclusive divine signature: the dragon and the beast also have seven heads. And John gives the number six hundred and sixty-six, written in Greek words or numeral letters in surviving manuscripts, rather than three identical modern digits. Symbolic

interpretation remains possible, but our familiar printed “666” cannot establish it. The ancient reading 616 also poses a difficulty for an explanation built around three sixes.^[12]

I would therefore give the Nero explanation greater historical weight while keeping the falling-short reading as a disputed symbolic possibility. A reference to an emperor and a wider criticism of power need not exclude each other, but neither proves this particular numerical symbolism. The practical warning is firmer than the calculation: human power can demand the trust that belongs to God. We should test its claims by its conduct, especially when it uses sacred language to secure obedience. Resembling the Lamb is not the same as following him.

The mark

The mark appears within a story about worship, coercion and commerce. It identifies allegiance to the beast and is linked to participation in buying and selling (13:15–17). The next scene places the Lamb on Mount Zion with people bearing his name and his Father's name on their foreheads (14:1).

That juxtaposition matters. The beast's mark belongs within a wider contest over whom people belong to and whose authority they acknowledge. God's servants have already been sealed on their foreheads in chapter 7. Reading the mark only as a technical device misses this relationship within the book.

Ortberg connects the forehead and hand with thoughts and actions, drawing on the sign language of Exodus 13:9. His pastoral warning is that speculation about technology can distract us from examining our own failure to practise mercy.^[34] Deuteronomy 6:6–8 also joins devotion to God with signs on the hand and between the eyes. These scriptural connections support a reading about allegiance lived out. They do not reduce the mark to private attitudes: John also depicts worship enforced through threats to livelihood. Our beliefs, conduct and cooperation with power belong together.

We do not have adequate evidence to turn the vision into a precise reconstruction of a universal first-century purchasing permit. Nor does the text identify a modern payment system, medical intervention or digital product. Claims about such things must be evaluated on their own evidence. A new technology does not acquire the identity of the beast because someone finds its reach frightening.

The vision does give us a serious question about economic pressure. How free is a person's consent when refusing allegiance threatens their livelihood? How does an institution use dependence to secure cooperation? These questions remain worth asking without assigning a prophetic number to the people involved.

For everyday life, we might describe one expression of this allegiance as devotion to money and the power it brings. The warning reaches us when protecting income, status or access becomes more important than truth or another person's wellbeing. The mark is broader than greed: in John's vision it concerns worship and allegiance to the beast, enforced through economic exclusion. Someone struggling to survive that pressure should not simply be condemned as money-loving. But the question for those of us with choices is direct: when money and conscience pull in different directions, which has our loyalty? Following the Lamb means refusing to make another person's suffering an acceptable price for our prosperity.

The bargain

Chapter 18 brings us into the economy that sustains imperial splendour. Merchants have become rich through Babylon's luxury. The image is attractive because the rewards are real. Those who prosper may experience the arrangement as generous, efficient and civilised.

John's condemnation asks what that prosperity conceals. The cargo list eventually includes human lives. The city is implicated in bloodshed, and its fall draws lament from those who benefited from its commerce (18:11–24).

The book of Revelation exposes wealth joined to exploitation, without providing a complete theory of economic organisation. Its merchants grieve for a market that traded in people.

The corresponding modern examination begins with actual relationships. What do we know about the conditions in which goods are produced? How do we treat the people whose work sustains our comfort? What happens when an employee's safety conflicts with a deadline or a congregation's finances conflict with an honest investigation?

No single reader can inspect every link in a global economy. Responsibility must be proportionate to knowledge, capacity and influence. That is a reason to work together and improve arrangements, not a reason to give up because perfect innocence is unavailable.

The disguise

John complicates the imagery again in chapter 13. The second beast has two horns resembling a lamb's, yet speaks like a dragon (13:11).

An appearance associated with innocence can accompany a voice that serves domination. The creature directs worship towards the first beast and helps enforce its power. Resemblance is insufficient. We must examine speech, allegiance and consequences.

For a religious community, that means examining whose power a leader's reassuring words actually serve.

Sometimes the beast tries to look like the Lamb. A leader may speak warmly about love, service and sacrifice while gradually demanding unquestioning loyalty. The disguise becomes visible when compassion gives way to control: questions are punished, vulnerable people are silenced, and protecting the leader becomes more important than telling the truth. We cannot always know another person's intentions, but we can examine how they use power. Does their leadership leave people free to question, disagree and leave? The way of the Lamb must be recognised in conduct, not merely claimed in words.

The accuser

The word devil carries a long history of interpretation and popular imagery. The Greek *diabolos* can mean a slanderer or accuser. Satan carries the sense of adversary. But a word's meaning does not settle what kind of reality it names. "The accuser" can describe someone who accuses, or serve as a personification of accusation. We have to ask how John uses the figure.

The book of Revelation explicitly identifies the dragon with the ancient serpent, the devil and Satan. This figure deceives, accuses, becomes angry and persecutes, acting within a cosmic drama of angels and conflict in heaven (12:7–17; 20:1–3).[13] The dragon is distinct from the beast to which it gives authority (13:2). It is not simply another name for Rome or an ordinary human opponent.

The most straightforward reading is that John envisages a personal, supernatural adversary. We should acknowledge that portrayal before deciding how it relates to our own understanding of evil. Calling Satan “the accuser” does not establish that John meant only an abstract concept.

Yet a character within a symbolic vision is not a straightforward description of what exists beyond it. John also depicts Death and Hades being thrown into the lake of fire (20:14). Abstract realities can receive judgement in this kind of writing. Satan’s actions within the vision therefore do not, by themselves, prove the existence of an individual supernatural being. Equally, the symbolism does not prove that John thought Satan was only an idea.

My conclusion is that John presents Satan as a spiritual adversary whose work is accusation, deception and persecution. Whether we understand this as a personal being or as the personification of evil, the vision identifies destructive powers we must resist. That shared application does not make the two interpretations identical, or remove the question of what John himself believed. It allows us to recognise the ethical demand without claiming that the imagery settles every question about the nature of evil.

We cannot blame “the devil” in a way that excuses our own participation in lies, accusation or oppression. Nor does naming evil entitle us to diagnose our political opponents as possessed. Such certainty can reproduce the dehumanisation we are trying to resist. Following the Lamb requires us to examine evidence, take responsibility for our conduct and confront these practices—including when they appear within our own communities.

Refusal

The call to come out of Babylon is explained as a refusal to share in her sins and plagues (18:4). God’s people must examine their own participation; belonging to a religious community does not exempt them. The command demands a break with wrongdoing, without itself prescribing geographical withdrawal from every city or abandonment of everyone still entangled in harm.

During Myanmar’s protests in 2007, participating Buddhist monks refused alms from military officials and their supporters. An overturned alms bowl gave their refusal a visible form.^[14] The practice belongs within Buddhism. Its relevance here is the question it raises for any religious community: when does receiving support become a way of reassuring people whose conduct we should challenge?

For a Christian community, the first step might be a specific refusal: a donation whose condition is silence, an instruction to conceal an injury, a contract that depends on people being misled. Refusal often becomes sustainable only when others help carry its cost. A church that praises integrity should consider how to support the person who loses work for exercising it.

This can happen at the ballot box. A Christian community may support a politician because of one policy it considers morally important, then excuse intimidation, cruelty or abuses of power to protect that policy. The commitment may be sincere. It does not make the other harms disappear.

We may also choose a party because it promises to make our own lives easier, while giving less attention to people whose lives its policies could make harder. The question is not simply whether we benefit, but who bears the cost—and whether those people have enough power to be heard.

The book of Revelation does not supply a modern party endorsement. Its warning about allegiance does, however, challenge the bargains through which we become willing to tolerate harm. No party will perfectly embody the way of the Lamb, and voting requires judgement among imperfect alternatives. That makes scrutiny more necessary. We must remain willing to question our own side, acknowledge the consequences of policies we support, and withdraw support when loyalty becomes an excuse for cruelty.

In Nazi Berlin, Otto Weidt used his workshop, which employed blind and deaf Jewish workers, as part of an effort to protect people through concealment and practical assistance. He could not save everyone.^[15] Refusing harmful cooperation and providing active help can belong to the same response.

The beast's appeal begins with the claim that resistance is futile. The book of Revelation locates worth beyond the power to compel. Our response begins with the cooperation we can change, even before we know what that decision will cost.

We cannot finish Tank Man's story. We can refuse to let the absence of an ending turn him into whatever our argument requires. What we have is an interruption: an ordinary person standing where overwhelming power expects the road to be clear. The book of Revelation asks what happens when the claim of invincibility no longer settles the question of allegiance.

What this asks of us

Power does not deserve our loyalty simply because it appears unbeatable. Religious language does not make a leader trustworthy. When protecting our income, status or security requires accepting someone else's suffering, our allegiance needs examining.

Where am I accepting harm because challenging it might cost me something?

4 The cost

The children are singing when the troops enter Parihaka.

On 5 November 1881, about 1,600 colonial troops arrive at the settlement in Taranaki, Aotearoa New Zealand. Several thousand Māori remain seated on the marae. Under Te Whiti-o-Rongomai and Tohu Kākahi, the community has resisted land confiscation through ploughing and rebuilding fences. Hundreds of protesters have already been imprisoned without trial.

The invasion brings arrests, destruction and dispersal. Te Whiti and Tohu are detained without trial for sixteen months.^[16]

For those of us in New Zealand, this history belongs to the landscape we call home. It cannot be kept safely overseas with the worst examples of other people's conduct. The invading force acted for New Zealand's settler-colonial government within the British Empire.

The seated community was asserting its rights. Its restraint did not signal agreement that the land could justly be taken. Nor did restraint prevent the taking.

That last fact can make us restless. We like stories of nonviolent resistance to finish with the powerful ashamed, the prisoners released and the wrong repaired. Such endings reassure us that the moral choice will also prove to be the effective one. Parihaka does not allow us to make the promise so easily.

If we call this resistance faithful, what do we mean? And what do we owe to people whose courage did not protect them from injustice?

Those questions lead into one of the most difficult sounds in the book of Revelation: the voices of the murdered asking how long they must wait.

How long

In chapter 6 of the book of Revelation, John sees the souls of those killed because of their witness. They ask how long it will be before God judges and avenges their blood. They receive white robes and are told to rest a little longer (6:9–11).

It is easy for a comfortable reader to condemn the desire for vindication. It is harder to imagine living where the deaths of people you love can be dismissed as necessary, deserved or unimportant. The vision gives the murdered a hearing. Their claim has not been buried with their bodies.

That recognition can encourage people suffering under violent power. It tells them that the authorities who control the public account do not control the final judgement. But historical encouragement and future expectation are not mutually exclusive. John can comfort his hearers by promising an intervention he expects to come. We should not remove the expectation simply because we recognise the pastoral function.

Nor does compassion require us to call every form of retribution good. We can recognise the injured person's demand that wrong be answered while still asking what justice should accomplish. Protection, truthful testimony and repair deserve attention before we allow the conversation to become a contest over how much suffering an offender deserves.

The people of Parihaka also require more than remembrance. Honouring courage leaves the question of repair before those who inherit the consequences of injustice.

How long, then, should we be prepared to wait? John gives us no date to circle. The answer is painfully incomplete: a little longer, while suffering continues. But the question is heard. The murdered are acknowledged; their lives have not become irrelevant because those who killed them still hold power.

The book's promise is that injustice will not have the final word. That hope does not give us permission to turn our longing for justice into delight in another person's suffering. The martyrs ask God to judge; they do not receive instructions to carry out retaliation themselves. Following the Lamb means seeking protection, accountability and repair while refusing to make revenge our purpose.

We may have to wait for justice's fulfilment. We do not have to wait before doing what justice requires of us.

The witnesses

Chapter 11 complicates a simple account of nonviolent witness. The two witnesses have power associated with Moses and Elijah: plagues, water becoming blood and a sky withheld from rain. Fire from their mouths consumes those who would harm them (11:3–6).

We cannot say without qualification that every faithful figure in the book of Revelation is depicted as harmless. These witnesses exercise destructive power within the vision. They are then killed, publicly exposed, raised to life and taken into heaven.

Their identification remains debated. The text calls them olive trees and lampstands, recalling Zechariah 4 and the lampstand imagery already used for churches in chapter 1 of the book of Revelation. Some read them as a representation of the witnessing church; others expect particular prophetic figures. Their scriptural associations provide a firmer starting point than attempts to identify two modern individuals.

The clearest conclusion is that silencing the witnesses does not prove their testimony false. The beast kills them, and the watching world celebrates. Then God raises them and calls them into heaven. Within John's vision, the power that can end a life does not have the final authority to judge its worth.

This is not a promise that faithful people will escape harm, or that every cause which suffers opposition is righteous. Nor can we overlook the witnesses' destructive powers earlier in the passage. Those details complicate a wholly nonviolent reading. But the movement from testimony through apparent defeat to vindication gives threatened believers a reason to remain faithful when intimidation makes silence attractive.

For us, the responsibility is to tell the truth, stand beside people punished for doing so, and keep examining whether our own witness serves justice. We should seek safety and protection wherever

possible. The passage offers hope when faithfulness becomes costly; it gives us no right to demand that someone else suffer.

Those who silence a witness may control the moment. John's vision insists that they do not control the final verdict.

Afterwards

We have now met a woman before armed police, a man before tanks and a community before troops. Each image can be admired without changing anything about the admirer. We can hang courage on a wall and continue benefiting from the arrangements that made it necessary.

The book of Revelation makes that distance uncomfortable. John speaks as someone sharing in suffering and endurance. He addresses communities, not an audience invited merely to applaud impressive individuals. The repeated summons to hear asks what the listeners themselves will do.

For a church, that may begin with the person who has told an unwelcome truth. Perhaps a worker reports a dangerous practice and loses income. Perhaps someone names harm within a respected institution and finds that friendships disappear. These are imagined situations, but their demands are ordinary enough to recognise. Praise will not pay the rent. Admiration will not provide company at a difficult meeting.

If we believe testimony matters, we must consider the conditions under which people can give it. Support may require money, time, independent advice or a willingness to be publicly associated with someone whom influential people would prefer to isolate. The community becomes part of the witness through the burdens it shares.

That is also why suffering should never become our test of someone else's faith. A person may have children to protect, limited resources or a history we do not understand. We cannot order them into danger and congratulate ourselves on the courage we demand. The moral pressure belongs first upon those causing harm and those able to stop it.

Faithfulness

In chapter 12 of the book of Revelation, the faithful overcome the accuser through the Lamb's blood and their testimony. Their victory can coexist with their deaths (12:11). John asks his hearers to accept a judgement of their lives that the authorities who can kill them do not control.

The Lamb's blood refers to his death. Elsewhere, John describes that death as purchasing people for God from every nation (5:9). We should preserve its saving significance. But this passage does not explain a complete theory of atonement, or require the particular claim that God needed to punish Jesus before he could forgive. Its immediate concern is the victory of the Lamb and the faithful witness of his people.

To overcome by the blood of the Lamb is to belong to a victory shaped by his self-giving death. John immediately connects that victory with the believers' own testimony and their willingness to remain faithful even when it costs their lives. The Lamb's death establishes the victory in which they participate. His blood cannot be separated from his way of living and dying.

In the reading developed here, this means refusing to preserve ourselves by adopting the cruelty we oppose. We speak truth, protect our neighbours and practise compassion even when domination would offer an easier route to safety. We do not seek suffering or require others to endure abuse. We refuse to make another person expendable for our own survival.

Allegiance to the crucified Lamb must therefore become visible in the conduct of his followers. The saving significance of his death and the ethical demand of their witness belong together.

This is hope for someone who fears that speaking truth will achieve nothing. It is dangerous when a comfortable observer turns it into a reason to leave that person unprotected. The difference lies partly in who is speaking and what they are prepared to share.

We need both the courage to act without guaranteed success and the humility to learn whether our actions actually help. A failed strategy can require revision. A faithful person can need rescue. Calling an action costly does not make it wise, and calling an outcome disappointing does not make the person worthless.

At Parihaka, the injustice is not answered by praising restraint. The land, the arrests and the consequences for the community remain part of the history we must face. What was taken cannot be restored by a moving description of the taking.

The murdered in John's vision ask to be heard. The living who read their story must decide what hearing will require. That brings us back to the question with which this book began: when we ask for justice, what are we hoping will happen next?

What this asks of us

Faithful witness can matter even when it is punished or ignored. The cry for justice deserves a hearing, and those who speak need practical support. We share their costs rather than demanding courage from a safe distance.

Whose truthful testimony needs my practical support, and what part of its cost can I help carry?

5 Justice

Two people who might have preferred almost anyone else's company are asked to chair the same meetings.

The place is Durham, North Carolina. The year is 1971. Ann Atwater is a Black community organiser. C. P. Ellis leads a local Ku Klux Klan chapter. A series of community meetings about school desegregation brings them into sustained contact. By the end of the process, Ellis has renounced his Klan leadership. An unlikely friendship develops.^[17]

The story can be made too comfortable. We could hurry towards the friendship and let it obscure the children whose education was at stake, the organising that brought people together and the unequal positions from which Atwater and Ellis entered the room. We could imply that injustice lasts because its victims have not been kind enough to those responsible.

That would place the burden in the wrong hands.

What interests me is that change became possible without treating the original injustice as a misunderstanding. Desegregation mattered. The children mattered. An opponent's capacity to change did not make his previous position harmless.

Think back to the television series with which I began this book. A satisfying episode might end with the enemy humiliated or killed. Durham offers another possibility: the conduct must end, but the person need not remain forever identical with it.

Can our desire for justice make room for that possibility? Would we welcome an enemy's repentance, or would it deprive us of the ending we wanted?

Now take that question into the bloodiest scenes in the book of Revelation. It will not solve them. It will help us notice what we bring to them.

The rider

The rider's garment is already marked with blood when he enters the scene.

Heaven opens. A white horse appears. The rider has eyes like fire and many crowns. He bears the name Word of God. Behind him come heavenly armies in clean white linen. From his mouth comes a sword (Revelation 19:11–16).

If we stopped there, we might say that truth has replaced violence: a weapon proceeding from speech, followers clothed for purity rather than described in bloodied armour. But the scene continues. An angel summons birds to a feast of flesh. The beast and false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire. The remaining opponents are killed by the rider's sword.

The birds descend upon the defeated army. Within the vision, the image is unmistakably one of death. But what is this terrible picture asking its hearers to understand?

John draws on Ezekiel's image of birds feasting upon a defeated enemy (Ezekiel 39:17–20). The powers that appeared untouchable have become powerless. Kings, commanders and armies cannot preserve the order they served. The scene gives dramatic form to the hope that oppression will not endure for ever.

In the reading developed here, the beast represents imperial domination, while the false prophet represents the deception that makes domination appear worthy of allegiance. Their defeat announces the end of both the oppressive power and the claims that sustain it. The empire cannot save itself. Its promises cannot make it true.

This is the hope I hear beneath the horror: a world finally released from the rule of the beast. That does not make every detail gentle. John portrays defeated people as well as defeated powers. Interpreters disagree about whether their destruction can signify the ending of their allegiance rather than their lives. We should acknowledge that tension rather than declare it resolved.

What the scene does not give us is permission to bring about its violence. The followers' calling elsewhere in the book of Revelation is faithful witness and endurance. Our responsibility is to resist domination, expose deception and protect those who suffer—not to appoint ourselves executioners.

Blood

A sword from a mouth is plainly symbolic. The interpretation of that symbol remains a further question. It may portray the authority of divine speech. That does not automatically make its effects nonviolent within the vision. The account in 19:21 says that people are killed by it.

The blood on the rider's clothing is also disputed. Since it appears before the battle is narrated, some interpreters understand it as his own blood and read the scene through the slain Lamb. Yet the winepress imagery recalls Isaiah 63, where the divine warrior's clothing is stained through judgement upon enemies. We should present both reasons rather than treating the timing alone as decisive.^[18]

The strongest peaceable reading sees John's conquest imagery transformed by the Lamb's death and the power of testimony. A more punitive reading sees the same Christ redeeming his people through sacrifice and finally destroying his opponents. Both must attend to the whole text. Neither should conceal the passages that make its case difficult.

I give priority to the Lamb's self-giving when asking how Christians should live. This priority is supported by the believers' victory through testimony and the commands to endure. It is also informed by Jesus' teaching about love of enemies in Matthew 5:43–48. That use of the Gospel is a deliberate theological comparison, not a claim that the violent images in the book of Revelation have ceased to exist.

Chapter 14 gives us another extravagant picture: blood from the winepress reaches the horses' bridles for an immense distance (14:19–20). I read such excess, alongside the rider's sword, as apocalyptic exaggeration portraying the completeness of judgement. The sword's position in his mouth and his name, Word of God, direct our attention towards divine speech: authority to expose deception, pronounce judgement and bring domination to an end.

The illustration is violent, and we should acknowledge that. But we need not treat it as a literal preview of bodies on a future battlefield. I understand its excess as announcing that nothing sustaining the beast's rule can finally withstand God's judgement. Its lies will be exposed. Its power to intimidate and exploit will end.

Read through the slain Lamb, the hope is that God can finally put to rest all that makes the world hateful without requiring his followers to become hateful themselves. The passage does not explain precisely how that ending happens. It gives suffering communities an assurance that the powers confronting them do not have the final word.

Babylon

Babylon is an imperial city portrayed as a woman, splendidly dressed and implicated in exploitation and bloodshed. John explicitly identifies her with the city ruling over the earth's kings (17:18). The judgement concerns an oppressive order; it is not an accusation against women as a group.

Yet her punishment draws upon the exposure and destruction of a female body. The beast and its allied kings turn against her, strip her, consume her flesh and burn her (17:16). The powers associated with her splendour become the agents of her destruction.

That reversal can expose something recognisable about domination: it consumes even those who once benefited from its power. But John also places their actions within God's purpose (17:17). We cannot resolve every difficulty by claiming that he is simply condemning the assault as an abuse of a woman's dignity. Nor can we reduce Babylon to an innocent victim; within the vision, she is herself implicated in oppression.

There is nevertheless a contemporary parallel worth considering. A commercial or political order can profit from women's beauty while denying women authority over their own lives. Consider a business that uses a woman's appearance to attract customers, yet dismisses her report of harassment because investigating it might threaten a profitable relationship. This is an illustrative example, not an incident John is predicting. It shows how public admiration and underlying misogyny can coexist.

Being displayed is not the same as being respected. A woman may be celebrated while she serves someone else's interests, then shamed or discarded when she objects, grows older or insists on deciding for herself. The problem is not beauty, sexuality or a woman's choice to appear in public. It is the claim that her worth depends on her usefulness to those controlling the money and power.

I offer this as an ethical application of the image, not a claim that exposing misogyny was John's explicit intention. The comparison concerns the way power uses and turns against people. It does not transfer Babylon's guilt to women who experience exploitation. Their mistreatment is not deserved judgement.

Images shape feeling. Even when a female figure represents an empire, readers can come to associate righteous anger with the humiliation of women. Careful interpretation must resist that movement. We can recognise the destruction of an exploitative order without making the abuse of a woman's body something to celebrate.

The accusation against the teacher called Jezebel in chapter 2 raises a related concern. We possess John's denunciation, not her full account of the dispute. The threatened killing of her children is disturbing, whether children is understood literally or as referring to followers. We should not turn the name into a label for women who question religious authority.^[19]

Our reading must preserve the dignity of actual women. The fall of an oppressive order gives us no permission to shame, expose or harm a person. If we oppose domination in the name of the Lamb, we must listen when women describe harm, respect their agency and examine who profits when their voices are ignored. Our treatment of women must demonstrate the freedom from domination we proclaim.

The multitude

The visions of judgement leave another question: what becomes of the people caught beneath these powers? To answer it, we return to chapter 7. John hears a number, then sees a crowd. I understand these as two portraits of the whole community belonging to the Lamb: complete in God's keeping and drawn from peoples across the world.

He hears that 144,000 have been sealed, twelve thousand from each of twelve tribes of Israel (7:4–8). Then he sees a multitude beyond counting, drawn from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and the Lamb (7:9). Why understand them as two pictures of the same people rather than two separate groups? The argument begins with the way John shapes the number.

The twelve

The tribes recall the descendants of Jacob, also called Israel, and the people's covenant history. The number twelve carries the memory of Israel as a whole people, even amid division and dispersal. It is not an arbitrary code for a modern religious organisation. John draws upon Israel's story to describe belonging to God.

His list is carefully shaped. Judah comes first, although Reuben was Jacob's firstborn. Dan is absent; Levi is included; Joseph and Joseph's son Manasseh both appear, while Ephraim is not separately named. Biblical tribal lists vary, so these features do not by themselves prove symbolism. They do warn us against treating this as an ordinary census. Judah's prominence also recalls the Lion of Judah announced in chapter 5.^[31]

The arithmetic is twelve groups of twelve thousand: twelve times twelve times a thousand. Later, the New Jerusalem has twelve gates bearing the tribes' names and twelve foundations bearing the apostles' names; its measurements include twelve thousand stadia and 144 cubits (21:12–17). This repeated numerical architecture strengthens the case for reading 144,000 as a theological symbol of completeness.

The precision gives shape to a claim about belonging. Twelve recalls the covenant people; repeating it and multiplying by a thousand enlarges the picture of their fullness. John does not explain each factor, so we should not pretend he supplies a fixed numerical dictionary. The case rests on the pattern across the visions, rather than on arithmetic alone.

Heard and seen

Why might the numbered people and the multitude be the same community? Chapter 5 provides a useful comparison. John hears that the Lion of Judah has conquered, then sees a slain Lamb (5:5–6). He has not encountered two separate deliverers. What he sees reveals the character of the one announced to him.

Something similar may happen in chapter 7. The numbered tribes announce God’s people through Israel’s covenant identity; the multinational crowd reveals their breadth. The hearing-and-seeing parallel supports this interpretation without making it certain.[31]

This also explains why “numbered” and “beyond counting” need not contradict one another. A symbolic number can express the completeness of a community while a crowd scene expresses its immense size and variety. We are not saying that 144,000 equals infinity, or that John secretly counted the crowd. We are saying that the two images may answer different questions about the same people: whose are they, and how wide is their gathering?

There are alternatives. The phrase introducing the next vision can signal a distinct group. Some interpreters therefore distinguish an Israelite company from the wider multitude. Others understand even the multitude as dispersed Israel gathered from among the nations. Chapter 14’s description of the 144,000 as first fruits can also suggest a representative group within a larger harvest. These are substantive questions, not objections we should hide.[32]

The same-community reading also fits the Lamb’s gathering of people from every tribe, language, people and nation in 5:9. Taken together, these connections persuade me. This reading need not mean that Jewish people have been replaced or erased: the vision’s language remains rooted in Israel’s story.

No private claim

Jehovah’s Witnesses provide a well-known example of a literal reading of the number. Their official explanation identifies 144,000 Christians who will live in heaven and rule with Christ, while the great crowd receives salvation with an earthly hope. It would be inaccurate to say they believe only 144,000 people are saved. They argue that the definite number contrasts with the uncountable crowd, and that chapter 14’s first-fruits language indicates a smaller representative group.[38]

That is a recognisable argument from the text, and it deserves an answer rather than ridicule. It depends, however, on treating the numbered group and the crowd as separate populations. The hearing-and-seeing pattern gives us a reason to question that starting point. First fruits remains a genuine difficulty for our reading: it can suggest a smaller group, although the phrase itself does not identify a modern organisation or specify two permanent classes of believers. The disagreement must be settled by considering the whole vision, not by assuming that a precise-looking number must be literal.

Even if someone takes 144,000 literally, a further argument is needed to identify those people with a particular contemporary organisation. The number alone cannot do that. A church cannot establish its exclusive status simply by announcing that its members fulfil the vision.

Consistency also matters. A reader treating the number as an exact headcount must explain how they understand the tribal identities and the description in chapter 14 of male virgins. Why should one feature be literal and the others symbolic? There may be an argument, but it must be shown rather than assumed. Interpretations differ over literal celibacy, ritual purity associated with holy war and figurative faithfulness. We should not use this difficult imagery to describe women as contaminants or marriage as spiritual inferiority.

The passage does not settle every question about salvation. It does direct our attention towards the character of those who belong to the Lamb.

Notice where John takes us when the number reappears. The people bear the Lamb's and the Father's names, follow the Lamb and refuse falsehood (14:1–5). Their identity is expressed through belonging and faithfulness. For our purposes, the searching question is whether our community displays that character. A claim to be chosen becomes dangerous when it excuses dishonesty, contempt for outsiders or obedience to abusive leaders. No numerical interpretation gives us that permission.

The multitude answers the fearful question at the end of the preceding vision: who can stand before judgement (6:17)? John now sees people standing before the throne and the Lamb (7:9). Their apparent powerlessness on earth has not excluded them from God's presence. That is the reassurance the imagery offers.

The Lamb shepherds them; hunger and thirst end, and God wipes away tears. Being sealed is not a promise of immunity from suffering: the multitude has come through great tribulation. Suffering does not have the final claim upon them. Our response should be to practise the care the vision promises—to feed, shelter and comfort, rather than turn its hope into a claim of superiority.

Fire

The multitude's relief must be read alongside a much harsher prospect. Chapter 14 portrays the torment of the beast's worshippers, with smoke rising for ever and no rest day or night. Chapter 20 depicts the devil, beast and false prophet in enduring torment, then presents the lake of fire as the second death. Death and Hades themselves are thrown into it (14:9–11; 20:10–15).

These images have contributed to differing Christian accounts of final judgement. Some readers understand everlasting conscious punishment. Others emphasise destruction and the language of death. Still others argue that the book's expansive visions of worship and healing support a final restoration. Those positions require more than selecting the verse most congenial to us.

I read this fire as an extravagant, hyperbolic image of evil's final defeat. Hate, deceit and death—the powers that make life unbearable—will cease to exist, forever. Even death itself is thrown into the fire (20:14), and the next vision announces that death, mourning and pain will be no more (21:4). The promise reaches beyond the fall of one empire towards the ending of what makes empire destructive.

Read alongside the slain Lamb, this becomes a vision of victory whose purpose is life released from those powers. The Lamb who suffered at their hands stands victorious; their apparent permanence is broken. John's language of torment and judgement remains difficult, and this reading does not answer every question about the fate of those who participate in evil. People face judgement in the vision too;

we cannot reduce its fire to the destruction of abstract forces alone. But the hope I hear is clear: cruelty will not govern creation forever.

That hope asks something of us now. If hatred and deceit belong to what God will finally overcome, we cannot make them our methods of serving God. No account of judgement permits us to delight in a neighbour's suffering or withhold care. We follow the victorious Lamb by practising the truth, compassion and justice that we believe will outlast the powers that destroy life.

Justice

The question begins beneath the altar. Those who have been killed ask how long their suffering will remain unanswered (6:9–11). Their cry establishes something essential: justice must answer the people who have been harmed. Their lives cannot be treated as the disposable cost of someone else's power.

Babylon's judgement gives that cry a political and economic setting. Her wealth is bound up with luxury, exploitation and commerce that includes human lives (18:11–13). The accusation against her includes the blood of those slaughtered on the earth (18:24). Kings, merchants and shipping interests benefit from the same arrangement. "Systems" is our modern word, but it helps describe this organised relationship between power, prosperity and harm.

Much of the judgement in the book of Revelation confronts a world organised around domination: power sustained by deception, prosperity purchased through exploitation, and security maintained through violence. These are larger than any individual. Yet individuals sustain them, benefit from them and sometimes find the courage to refuse them. The judgement concerns oppressive systems and our participation in them. John also depicts each person being judged according to their deeds (20:12–13); responsibility cannot disappear into an institution.

The call to come out of Babylon therefore reaches into our own lives (18:4). God's people are addressed as people who must refuse participation in her sins. Religious identity has not automatically placed them outside her influence. Where have we accepted an advantage that depends upon someone else being harmed? Where has loyalty silenced our conscience? Following the Lamb means withdrawing our cooperation from what destroys life and helping make another way possible.

This does not make everyone caught within an unjust arrangement equally responsible. People directing it, those benefiting with room to choose, and those struggling to survive its demands have different power and freedom. Our response should reflect those differences: hold decision-makers accountable, examine our own choices and help people find alternatives to coerced cooperation.

Babylon's fall therefore means more than the humiliation of an enemy. It means that an arrangement sustained by suffering cannot continue indefinitely. The merchants mourn the loss of their market. Heaven's rejoicing concerns God's judgement on behalf of those she harmed (18:15–20). The same collapse looks different depending on whether one has profited from the system or suffered beneath it.

Yet judgement is not the book's final picture. Death ends. Tears are wiped away. Mourning and pain cease (21:4). The river gives life, and the tree's leaves serve the healing of the nations (22:1–2). These images give substance to the hope of justice: the conditions that destroy life are overcome, and creation becomes a place where life can flourish.

This does not make every judgement scene restorative. John also depicts punishment and exclusion. The healing imagery does not, by itself, settle what happens to every person. But it does prevent us from treating destruction as the whole purpose of the vision. The book moves towards life in God's presence.

That movement grounds the argument of this book. Justice hears the harmed, confronts what harms them and seeks a world in which the harm no longer governs their lives. We follow the Lamb towards that hope through truthful witness, endurance and refusal to share Babylon's sins (12:11; 14:12; 18:4). John does not commission the churches to carry out the rider's judgement.

Ann Atwater's work offers a limited, human illustration of that direction. Segregation had to end; the children needed a different future. Ellis's change mattered because it helped dismantle the injustice he had supported. Their friendship did not substitute for justice. It grew alongside a change in how people would live.

Protection and accountability must not wait for an offender's willingness to change. But where repentance occurs, we should be able to welcome it without feeling that justice has been cheated. The desire for revenge keeps our attention on the enemy's pain. The work of justice returns our attention to the people harmed and the arrangements that must change.

The question for us is therefore concrete: whose suffering have we learned to overlook, what are we helping to sustain, and what would it take to change our part in it?

What this asks of us

The book's judgements confront the suffering sustained by oppressive power. They do not commission us to inflict that judgement ourselves. Our task is to protect those harmed, seek accountability and welcome genuine change without confusing an enemy's pain with justice.

What would help the people harmed here, beyond the satisfaction of seeing an offender suffer?

6 Soon

The women describe streams drying up. Food is becoming less secure. Collecting firewood requires longer journeys.

In Kenya, Wangari Maathai listens to concerns that might be dismissed as separate household difficulties. They are connected to the condition of the land. In 1977 she establishes the Green Belt Movement under the National Council of Women of Kenya, encouraging women to grow and plant trees in response.^[20]

A tree is an unusual answer to an urgent problem. It takes time. It needs care before it gives much back. Planting assumes that something worth protecting may happen beyond the present season.

Maathai's work connects environmental care with livelihoods and the capacity of women to act. Its wider vision comes to include democratic participation and human rights.^[21] The planting is practical, but it also expresses an understanding of responsibility: the future of a place is not irrelevant to the people living there now.

That makes the story a searching companion to one small word in the book of Revelation.

Soon.

What do we do with our lives when we believe there may be very little time left? Plant the tree? Teach the child? Repair the institution? Or turn away because we assume none of it will matter?

Maathai's work was not an answer to John's chronology. It puts a consequence of our own theology before us. The meaning we assign to the future can change what we are willing to care for in the present.

Near

John begins with soon and near and returns to that urgency at the end (1:1–3; 22:6–12). The first audience is addressed as the audience to whom the message matters. That makes an exclusively distant-future reading difficult to sustain.

One proposed explanation is that “soon” describes the speed of events once they begin. But the repeated language of nearness and the address to these churches still need explaining. The first hearers were given reasons to expect, not merely a definition of how quickly a remote event might unfold.

I hear “soon” as a word of hope spoken to people who need to know that the powers hurting them will not endure for ever. Hold on. Their apparent permanence is not the final truth.

But I cannot pretend that this exhausts the word's meaning. John also says that the time is near. His first hearers had reason to expect something approaching, and two thousand years of continuing suffering leave us with a real question. “Hold on; this will happen” captures the encouragement. It does not fully explain the timing.

An appeal to a thousand years being brief in God's sight does not resolve that difficulty for me. That comparison comes from Psalm 90:4 and 2 Peter 3:8, rather than from John's explanation of "soon". Whatever theological insight it offers, these words were addressed to human beings experiencing suffering in human time. Their understanding cannot simply be made irrelevant.

We also need to ask what John expected to happen soon. If he meant particular judgements within the ancient world, those claims require historical examination. If he expected the complete ending of death and suffering within a short time, that expectation was not fulfilled in the ordinary, observable sense. If his visions combine approaching events with an ultimate hope, we must demonstrate that distinction from the text rather than introduce it merely to rescue a prediction.

Perhaps the vision brings the hoped-for future so vividly into the present that its promise feels immediate. That is a possible account of how apocalyptic writing works, not proof that John had no chronological expectation. Hope and an expectation of nearness can coexist. Perhaps he expected the final resolution sooner than it came. I cannot confidently settle that question. I will not change "soon" into "whenever" merely to protect the text from difficulty.

This remains one of the most frustrating parts of the book of Revelation for me. I want an explanation that honours the first hearers and makes sense of the world we still inhabit. I do not have a complete one. Their children, work and dangers were not an elaborate waiting room for our century. We cannot move an ancient promise into our own generation simply because we are the people reading it now.

Ortberg warns against the assumption that earlier generations could not understand the message but ours finally possesses its key. In his discussion of rapture predictions, he connects the attraction of secret knowledge with anxiety and the desire to know what comes next.[35] That warning belongs here. Feeling that our moment is uniquely significant cannot establish that John was describing it. Nor does recognising the temptation resolve his expectation of nearness; it simply keeps us from turning our uncertainty into another confident prediction.

What I continue to find compelling is the hope that domination is not permanent and the demand to remain faithful to the Lamb. That is the conviction I draw from the vision; it is not a solution to its unresolved timing. The book's later significance can grow through attention to its first audience without our pretending that the difficulty has disappeared.

A thousand years

Imagine being part of a community whose faithful members have been killed. They refused to worship the beast. They would not surrender their allegiance to Jesus. And they died.

What did their faithfulness achieve? From the street outside the prison, it might look as though the empire won.

John opens another window. The people who were killed are alive. Those denied a place in the world now share in Christ's reign (20:4). The power that silenced them has not had the final say.

That is the heart of this scene: the victims' apparent defeat is overturned.

John pictures their reign lasting a thousand years. Think about how that might have sounded when the vision was read aloud. Your own life would end. Your children and grandchildren would live and die.

Generations whose names you could not imagine would follow—and still the reign John describes would continue.

This is the scale on which John pictures the vindication of people the empire had discarded. Their persecutors made their lives seem brief and insignificant. The vision gives them life, honour and a future extending far beyond their persecutors' reach. To people facing the loss of everything familiar, a thousand years could sound almost beyond imagining.

I read the number symbolically: it communicates the greatness of their vindication more than it invites us to count the years. It is not simply another word for eternity, because John explicitly describes the period ending. But a span can feel immeasurably long without being endless. Here, the immense duration gives weight to the reversal: those whom empire crushed are shown sharing Christ's rule.

Then notice the contrast. The devil receives only a short time (20:3, 7–10). Deception returns, gathers support and threatens another conflict—but it cannot prevail. Against the long reign, evil's last opportunity is brief and unsuccessful.

The release returns us to the adversary discussed in chapter 3. Whether understood as a personal being or a personification, Satan appears here as deception gathering the nations into one last destructive confrontation (20:7–10).

Why must that happen? John says the release is necessary but does not explain why (20:3). It brings the narrative to a final confrontation; that does not answer the moral question of why renewed deception is allowed. We can recognise the assurance that the attack fails while leaving the reason for its permission unresolved.

There is also something painfully familiar here. We celebrate the fall of a cruel leader, the exposure of a lie or the end of an abusive practice. For a while, it seems that evil has been defeated. Then it raises its head again, perhaps under a different name, with a more reassuring face. A change of leadership does not automatically uproot the habits that made domination possible. We have to recognise the harm and resist it again.

I offer this as a connection with our experience, not as proof that John intended the release to describe a recurring cycle of history. His vision moves towards a final defeat of evil. But the resemblance matters: an earlier victory does not remove our responsibility to remain attentive. When cruelty returns, faithfulness means renewed resistance through truth, compassion and protection of those at risk. The Lamb's way must shape how we resist, as well as what we oppose.

The scene thus answers the question with which we began: was the faithfulness of those killed by empire wasted?

John's answer is no. The empire's verdict is overturned. Those it treated as expendable are honoured, and the powers responsible must answer for their actions. This does not tell a grieving family that their loss was necessary or good. It does not ask us to leave suffering people unaided. It offers hope that the violence done to them cannot determine the final meaning of their lives.

This symbolic reading of the thousand years does not solve "soon". It does give us a reason to care for people whose worth the world has refused to recognise, even while the timing remains uncertain.

Waiting well

Imagine two people hearing the same claim that the world may end tomorrow. One stops planning for the children who will inherit a damaged place. The other becomes more attentive to the people she might otherwise take for granted. An expectation alone does not determine its consequences. The teaching around it, the community practising it and the habits it encourages all matter.

My concern is with the point at which urgency becomes permission to abandon responsibility. We can begin to treat preventable suffering as scenery in a story whose ending has already been fixed. A war becomes interesting because it seems to fulfil a prediction. The people beneath the bombs become less visible than the pattern we believe we have recognised.

At that point, our interpretation has changed the direction of our attention. Instead of asking what is happening to people and what help is possible, we ask whether their suffering confirms our chart. The emotional reward comes from being proved right.

John's opening blessing falls upon people who hear and keep the message (1:3). His letters demand repentance and faithful conduct. Whatever else we think his future language means, it is not a release from responsibility. The urgency intensifies the summons.

This distinction also prevents us from caricaturing believers who expect Christ's imminent return. Some have sustained extraordinary service through that hope. Their conduct should be acknowledged. The question is not whether expectation is always harmful, but whether a particular use of it makes us more available to our neighbours or less.

Planting anyway

Return to the tree. It cannot promise the person planting it that the future will be safe. The work is undertaken within uncertainty, for lives that extend beyond the present moment.

The book of Revelation ends with a tree whose leaves serve the healing of the nations. That vision does not give us a forestry policy, and Maathai's movement is not its fulfilment. The relationship is ethical: if healing belongs within our deepest hope, tending the conditions in which others can live becomes a fitting expression of that hope.

We can ask the same question about a school, a hospital or a congregation. What are we leaving for the next person? Have we made it easier to tell the truth? Have we used resources in ways that preserve the possibility of care? Have we passed on fear that paralyses, or responsibility that can be shared?

The date of the world's ending is not ours to control. The consequences of neglect are often much closer to hand. Whatever tomorrow brings, someone needs water today.

What this asks of us

John's promise of nearness remains a real interpretive difficulty. We can admit that without abandoning the hope that domination will end. Whatever we believe about the timing, the people who need us today retain their claim upon our care.

What worthwhile work have I postponed because I assumed the future would make it pointless?

7 Our empire

On a visit to Yangon, a taxi driver told me that locals jokingly called Kyimindine, a suburb of Yangon, “Come and Die”. In his telling, the suburb was remembered as a place where British colonial authorities had detained, tortured and even murdered some of those who resisted the Crown.

He gave me no names, dates or particular building to investigate. I have not been able to verify that explanation. I remember it as something a man told me about his city, not as an established historical account.^[28]

But the conversation left me with a question. While missionaries were telling people in Burma about the love of Christ, how did they understand the power of the empire around them? When did its protection become something they could no longer question?

The flag

The historical record takes us into Kemmendine itself, as the neighbourhood was often written in English. Bishop Jonathan Holt Titcomb’s 1880 account describes the missionary J. A. Colbeck living upstairs in a Burmese house, with a chapel below. People crossed the river by boat for Sunday worship. Titcomb remembers climbing a rough ladder to visit him.^[29]

These details establish a Christian presence in the neighbourhood. They do not establish knowledge of a torture centre. We must not turn geographical proximity into proof of guilt. Yet Titcomb’s language elsewhere in the same chapter reveals something we can examine: he calls the imperial order “our Christian empire”.^[29]

What happens when those words seem to belong naturally together?

Calista Vinton Luther’s 1880 memoir of her missionary parents offers a troubling answer. It recounts Karen Christians asking Calista Vinton whether they might pray for British intervention because they were being persecuted. “Mamma, is it wrong to pray for war?” the account has them ask. She approves. This is a daughter’s retrospective, sympathetic account, not a neutral transcript. Its presentation of conquest as deliverance is nevertheless explicit.^[30]

We need to distinguish the histories gathered beneath the word persecution. The Vinton memoir describes restrictions on Christian worship before the British conquest of Lower Burma in 1852. It also portrays Karen support for British intervention and threats of revenge for that allegiance. A separate missionary history, describing the violence of 1853, explicitly connects attacks on Karen villages with their attachment to the British. These sympathetic missionary sources require critical reading, but even their accounts do not permit us to explain every attack simply as hatred of Christian faith.^[39]

Earlier oppression under Burman rule, resistance to that rule, and reprisals connected with British conquest must therefore be examined separately. Religious hostility, ethnic antagonism and political allegiance could overlap. Some people supported the British; others could be treated as collaborators because of an identity or association, without having chosen that role. Being Christian does not prove

someone suffered solely for their faith, just as being Karen does not prove collaboration. The circumstances of Christians from other ethnic groups also require their own evidence.

This distinction explains motives; it does not justify torture, killing or collective punishment. Nor does it make earlier repression deserved, or imply that everyone subjected to it had resisted the authorities. People seeking protection faced a real moral emergency. Yet relief from one oppressive power could draw them into dependence on another. That is the difficult question here: how can a community seek safety without allowing gratitude to silence its judgement of its protector?

The connection also took material form. The memoir records British army officers providing plans and offering unpaid supervision for Frank's Chapel at Kemmendine, and Governor-General Dalhousie granting land. Its foundation stone was laid in May 1855.^[30]

Such assistance does not by itself prove complicity in abuse. It does create a question about dependence. When powerful people help us do something good, do we become less willing to confront the harm they do to others?

The neighbour

The same memoir describes Justus Vinton distributing rice during famine. Initially he helped Christians; then he extended help to everyone because he could not turn away hungry non-Christians.^[30]

That action matters. A history containing allegiance to empire can also contain costly compassion. We need to recognise both without using either to erase the other. Feeding a hungry neighbour embodies the love this book commends. It cannot make conquest righteous or release a church from responsibility for the people its protectors harm.

How can we proclaim a crucified Christ while treating the suffering inflicted by empire as an acceptable cost of spreading his name?

The book of Revelation makes that question unavoidable for our reading. Babylon's commerce includes human lives, and the call to leave her concerns participation in her sins (Revelation 18:11–13; 18:4). Applying this warning to colonial Christianity means comparing conduct, not claiming that John secretly predicted Britain. We must ask whether religious institutions have repeated the pattern he exposes: benefiting from domination until they cease to question it.

The taxi driver's account remains unverified. The missionary records do not settle what happened at the place he had in mind. They do show why the larger question deserves our attention. A church cannot measure faithfulness only by the opportunities it gains. It must also listen to the people who bear the cost of the power that makes those opportunities possible.

That question reaches beyond colonial Burma. It follows us into every society where Christian belonging makes cooperation easier than refusal.

The refusal

In February 1943, an Austrian farmer receives another call to military service.

Franz Jägerstätter has already served in the German army. This time he refuses the oath and military service on grounds of Christian conscience. He is arrested, tried by the Reich Court Martial and sentenced to death. On 9 August 1943, he is executed at Brandenburg-Görden.^[22]

There is no battlefield victory in this account. A government requires service; one man judges that he cannot give it. His refusal does not stop the war.

It does, however, disturb a defence that can seem persuasive when everyone around us is cooperating: surely the responsibility belongs to someone higher up. Surely ordinary people cannot be expected to decide whether the whole arrangement is wrong.

Jägerstätter's Christian convictions make that defence unavailable to him. His conscience reaches a different conclusion from the conformity around him. The record includes attempts by people close to him, including clergy, to dissuade him.^[22]

We should be careful with a story whose cost was borne by a family as well as the person executed. It is easy to admire someone else's sacrifice from a distance. It is harder to ask how communities might have supported such conscience while it was still inconvenient and dangerous.

For our purposes, the unsettling question is this: how does a person come to believe that fidelity to Christ requires refusing what a society containing many Christians expects him to do?

The missionary accounts raised the problem of dependence on imperial protection. Jägerstätter's refusal sharpens it: what happens inside a Christian community when conscience threatens its accommodation with power?

Our own power

Empire is a historical term, and we should not use it as a synonym for everything we dislike. A congregation with poor administration is not thereby equivalent to an occupying army. Scale, intention, coercion and consequences matter.

Here, the question is when faith adopts habits associated with domination: demanding allegiance that cannot be questioned, treating people as expendable, protecting privilege through fear, or describing injury to outsiders as the necessary cost of our own security.

Those habits can operate within a state, an institution or a smaller community. The comparison identifies a pattern; it does not erase differences between them. Nor is the possession of influence inherently wrong. A hospital, school or church needs resources and authority to serve effectively. What matters is whether those entrusted with power remain answerable for its use.

The danger grows when criticism of a leader becomes disloyalty to the community, and disloyalty to the community becomes rebellion against God. At that point, ordinary human judgement has acquired a protection it cannot justify. The leader's decisions are fallible, but questioning them is treated as a spiritual offence.

The book of Revelation gives us reasons to resist this arrangement. Its churches are examined, rebuked and called to repent. Their religious identity does not secure their innocence. Ephesus must recover its

love. Sardis must confront the distance between its reputation and its condition. Laodicea must recognise needs concealed by its confidence (Revelation 2:1–7; 3:1–6, 14–22).

We cannot reserve those warnings for congregations unlike our own. Their first effect should be to make our communities capable of receiving correction.

The church

German Christianity under Nazism offers a grave historical warning. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum describes varied responses, including support, accommodation and resistance. The German Christians movement embraced racial and nationalist elements of Nazi ideology. The Confessing Church opposed the attempted reshaping of the church, but much of its struggle concerned interference in church affairs. Individual Christians did help Jews and resist the regime; institutional opposition to the persecution of Jews was profoundly inadequate.^[23]

These distinctions matter. Calling every Christian a collaborator would erase courageous resistance. Making the resisters representative of the whole church would erase complicity.

The question this history poses is larger than whether a church will defend its freedom. Will it defend someone else's life when doing so threatens that freedom?

It is possible to oppose interference in worship while accepting the humiliation of people outside one's congregation. It is possible to insist on the independence of a pulpit while failing to examine what is preached from it. Institutional self-defence and love of neighbour can coincide, but they are not identical.

Consider an imagined church meeting about an allegation against a respected leader. Discussion shifts from investigating the harm to protecting the organisation's reputation. Protecting a church's capacity to serve is a legitimate concern. It becomes morally distorted when the person already harmed is required to absorb further injury so the institution can continue appearing benevolent.

The neighbour is not a threat to the church's mission. Our response to the neighbour reveals what that mission has become.

The queen

In her 1897 protest against the proposed annexation of Hawai'i, Queen Lili'uokalani appealed to Americans whose country had helped bring Christianity to her people. She asked them to act justly towards the nation whose independence was being taken away. She also recalled yielding authority under protest in 1893 to avoid bloodshed in the face of overwhelming force. Her continued protest did not prevent annexation in 1898.^[24]

Her appeal exposes a possibility Christians should take seriously: people subjected to a supposedly benevolent power may understand the contradictions in its religious claims more clearly than those who benefit from it.

We need not conclude that every missionary supported annexation or that every American approved it. The historical record includes opposition. The point is that the vocabulary of Christian civilisation

cannot decide the justice of an action. We must examine what was done, whose consent was ignored and whose interests prevailed.

The same discipline applies when interpreting our own national histories. Love of a country can include truthful attention to the people it has harmed. Refusing that attention does not become Christian fidelity because it is expressed with patriotic feeling.

An exemption

The book of Revelation is especially vulnerable to being used to exempt power from scrutiny. Once a government, war or territorial ambition has been placed within a supposedly inevitable prophetic plan, ordinary moral questions can be treated as interference with God's purposes.

But identifying an event as predicted would not, by itself, establish that every action involved is right. Prediction and moral permission are different claims. A theology that moves between them without explanation can make suffering appear necessary and opposition appear faithless.

The question must remain available: what is happening to actual people? Who is being displaced, injured, deceived or denied a voice? What evidence supports the claims being made? Would we judge the same conduct differently if the people responsible belonged to another nation or religion?

This standard must apply consistently, including when Christians discuss Israel and Palestine. Concern for Palestinian life and rights does not require hostility towards Jewish people, and Jewish safety cannot be treated as expendable. Neither population should be reduced to a supporting role in someone else's end-times narrative. Specific claims about policies, organisations and lobbying require their own evidence; a prophetic label is no substitute for it.

John's urgent language asks his hearers to keep the message and answer for their conduct. Whatever further meaning readers find in his visions, an interpretation that suspends accountability needs to explain why it moves against those repeated demands.

Our labels

There is an uncomfortable complication. The book of Revelation itself includes threats, exclusion and severe punishment. We have encountered them in the messages to the churches, the torment of the beast's worshippers and the destruction of Babylon. We cannot make this chapter credible by pretending that coercive religious rhetoric appears only in later misreadings.

Our task is therefore more demanding than replacing literal interpretation with symbolism. A symbol can still frighten, stigmatise or legitimise harm. We must ask how we are using it and what authority we claim for our application.

When John calls a rival teacher Jezebel, we should investigate the ancient dispute and acknowledge that we possess his accusation rather than her full account. We should not hand contemporary leaders a convenient name for women who challenge them. When we encounter the phrase synagogue of Satan, we must resist extending a situated polemic into a judgement against Jewish people. Context does not remove every difficulty, but it can expose the unwarranted steps by which a text becomes a weapon.

The same restraint applies to Babylon. A present-day comparison may reveal something worth examining. It does not make us infallible interpreters of our opponents' character. Before asking whether another institution resembles Babylon, we should ask what practices we share with the power we condemn.

Repair

If faith has become a means of domination, better language is insufficient. Repentance must change who can speak, who can investigate and who bears the cost of wrongdoing.

A community can begin by making allegations examinable without retaliation. That requires fair processes, attention to evidence and independence from those whose conduct is in question. Listening seriously does not mean treating every allegation as already proven. It means refusing to make status, friendship or financial importance a substitute for investigation.

Where harm is established, repair should respond to the people harmed. An apology designed mainly to restore confidence in the institution leaves the original priorities intact. Appropriate restitution, changed leadership arrangements and continuing support may matter more than a carefully worded announcement. Forgiveness cannot be demanded as a condition of receiving care.

Money also needs examination. The overturned bowl does not supply a universal rule for donations. It asks whether gratitude has purchased silence. A community should be able to explain the conditions under which it accepts support, and it should not depend on secrecy about those conditions.

In teaching, accountability means making the steps of interpretation visible. What does the passage say? What historical evidence informs the reading? Where do scholars disagree? Which conclusion is the teacher's inference? A person who admits those distinctions may sound less certain, but gives listeners greater freedom to judge responsibly.

These practices do not guarantee a community free of failure. They make failure more discoverable and correction more possible. That is already a significant refusal of domination.

Jägerstätter's refusal puts the issue before us with painful clarity. Christian vocabulary and Christian obedience can travel in different directions. We should not wait until a dissenter has become a safe historical example before asking whether their criticism is true. A community shaped by the Lamb needs ways to hear the inconvenient person while change is still possible.

What this asks of us

The churches John addresses are themselves called to repent. Our faith must therefore remain open to correction, especially when it benefits from power. Repair begins when harmed people can speak safely and their testimony can change what we do.

Who finds it difficult to challenge our community, and what would make it safer for them to be heard?

8 Beyond us

People fleeing anti-Muslim violence in Lashio find refuge in a Buddhist monastery.

It is May 2013 in Shan State, Myanmar. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom later records that at least 1,400 people sought sanctuary there.^[25]

We do not need to invent a conversation at the entrance to understand what is at stake. The people seeking shelter remain Muslim. Their hosts remain Buddhist. Safety cannot wait until religious differences have been resolved.

The monastery's use changes because people need somewhere to go. A place shaped by one community's religious life becomes a refuge for another community under threat.

Christians reading this may recognise something we honour in Jesus. The recognition should be allowed to unsettle us. If people outside our faith offer the protection we say our faith requires, what should we do with that fact?

We could try to claim them. We could say that, without knowing it, they are really following our religion. Or we could begin by being grateful that threatened people found shelter, and then ask whether our own doors would have opened.

I think the second response takes both faith and neighbour more seriously.

Learning

There is a small humiliation in discovering that someone we have been taught to correct has something to teach us. We may be prepared to acknowledge their kindness while still arranging the conversation so that we remain the teacher.

The shelter in Lashio makes that manoeuvre difficult. The immediate moral fact is that endangered people found somewhere to go. A Christian arriving afterwards does not improve the act by finding a way to rename it. The better question is whether we can learn from the readiness to provide safety.

This is not a competition in which one religion must be declared compassionate and another cruel. Religious communities contain people whose conduct deserves admiration and people whose conduct requires challenge. Sister Ann Rose's Christian commitment belongs in the story as clearly as the Buddhist hospitality at Lashio. We honour each more accurately when we do not ask either to prove everything about a tradition.

Our language about the way of the Lamb explains the qualities we recognise through our own faith. It does not give us access to someone else's private motives. Resemblance is a reason for gratitude, conversation and self-examination.

Another tradition

In Pakistan, Abdul Sattar Edhi and Bilquis Edhi developed practical care for people in need. The Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation recognised them jointly in 1986. Its account situates their service within Muslim faith and acknowledges Bilquis's leadership in the work. Their story gives another setting in which Christians can encounter care without claiming ownership of its religious source.

Lashio shows a door opening in an emergency. The Edhis' work extends our attention to care organised and sustained over time. Both challenge us to recognise service on its own terms, without absorbing its practitioners into our religious identity.[25][26]

The question now turns from recognising that care to understanding why Christian readers should be willing to learn from it.

Our neighbour

The gathering in chapter 5 of the book of Revelation reaches across tribe, language, people and nation. It challenges a faith confined to the welfare of one ethnic or national group. But it does not by itself settle the religious identity or final destiny of everyone outside the church.

For the argument here, we also need Jesus' story of the Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). A wounded man is helped by someone the hearer might have dismissed. Mercy makes the answer to the question of neighbourliness visible. Recognition comes through what the person does.

Read alongside John's multinational gathering, that story gives Christians a strong reason to distrust the assumption that goodness must always arrive bearing our familiar labels. We can take our convictions seriously and still be surprised by the person who puts them into practice more faithfully than we do.

Suppose a religious community spends months debating whether to assist a family whose beliefs it considers mistaken. Meanwhile, neighbours with no interest in that debate arrange food and safe accommodation. This is a hypothetical example, but it exposes a real possibility in our reasoning: we can make agreement a precondition for care until someone else has done the caring.

Theological questions remain available afterwards. The person's immediate need should not become a hostage to them.

Together

Cooperation begins more easily when the task is specific. A family needs transport. Someone leaving a dangerous home needs somewhere safe to stay. A community needs a reliable way to distribute food. People can agree to share that work without pretending their traditions have become identical.

They will still need practical judgement. Who decides? Who receives help? How are concerns raised? What happens if a volunteer abuses trust? Shared compassion does not remove the need for accountability. It gives us a reason to build it into the work.

We should also allow those receiving care to speak. A story about generosity can leave its recipients strangely silent, present only to demonstrate the goodness of the giver. Love asks what people actually need and what choices they wish to retain. Receiving help should not require surrendering dignity or religious identity.

That is one reason the story of a shelter matters more than a general claim that everyone is welcome. A door can open while control remains with the host in ways the guest cannot question. Hospitality becomes more trustworthy when it listens and permits people to remain themselves.

The monastery at Lashio gives us an action to remember. It also leaves a task with Christian readers. We have recognised protection in another tradition. Now we must ask whether someone in danger could find it among us.

What this asks of us

The breadth of John's vision challenges our habit of making our own group the measure of belonging. Compassion in another tradition can teach us without becoming ours to claim. We can work together while respecting the beliefs and identities of those beside us.

Whose care have I undervalued because it came from outside my own faith or community?

9 Tuesday

There is a chair, an appointment and another donation.

James Harrison returns to blood donation over a lifetime. As a teenager in Australia, he received donated blood during major surgery. Later, he became a donor himself. His plasma contained an antibody used to make anti-D, a medicine given during and after certain pregnancies to help prevent an immune reaction that could endanger a baby. By his retirement in 2018, he had made 1,173 donations across more than six decades.^[27]

The number is striking. The repetition is more revealing.

An appointment has to be fitted into a day. Then another day. Enthusiasm at the beginning must become something dependable if the contribution is to continue. Around the donor is a wider system of staff, laboratories, other donors and people receiving care. Harrison's contribution matters within that shared work.

There is no need to give this story a literal resemblance to the Lamb's blood. The ethical resemblance is enough: something of one person's life is made available for the wellbeing of people he may never meet.

Most of us will never stand before a tank. Almost all of us will discover occasions when another person's wellbeing depends on whether we can be relied upon.

This is where a book about dramatic visions must eventually arrive. We close it. The next day begins. What happens then?

Morning

Consider an imagined Tuesday morning. The kettle has boiled. A phone lights up beside an unpaid bill. Someone you promised to call has sent another message. An email asks you to approve a decision before lunch. A headline offers another reason to be angry.

There is no dragon at the window. Yet the day will ask whose needs you notice, what you are prepared to know and how much inconvenience someone else's wellbeing is allowed to cause.

The book of Revelation addresses communities whose ordinary conduct matters. Its opening letters praise and rebuke what people are doing. That makes everyday life an essential test of the reading we have developed, rather than an optional application after the interesting material ends.

Being right

The message to Ephesus praises endurance and the testing of false claims. Then it identifies a serious failure: the church has abandoned its earlier love and must return to its former works (Revelation 2:1–5).

The precise scope of that earlier love is debated. What the rebuke makes plain is that vigilance against error is insufficient evidence of faithfulness.

That distinction reaches into an ordinary disagreement. We may have the better argument and still humiliate the person who cannot answer it. A church can accurately criticise an interpretation while becoming a place where people are frightened to ask questions.

The practical response is not to pretend all views are equally convincing. It is to examine the way truth is being pursued. Have I represented the other person's claim fairly? Do I allow them to correct my account? Am I trying to help someone understand, or enjoying their embarrassment?

Returning to love may require a particular repair: withdrawing a misleading accusation, apologising for contempt, or resuming care for someone whose views have become inconvenient to us. The connection with Ephesus is direct. Discernment and endurance do not cancel the obligation to love.

Money

Laodicea's confidence rests upon its assessment of its own wealth. The message exposes a gulf between that self-description and its actual need (3:14–22). Financial security has become a poor instrument for measuring spiritual health.

For us, the application begins when money starts deciding what we are willing to know. A comfortable arrangement may make us reluctant to ask how a worker is treated. An important donor may become unusually difficult to question. A successful programme may be protected from evaluation because its reputation brings in funds.

A practical response is to separate gratitude from immunity. People can be thanked for contributions while remaining answerable for conduct. Employment decisions can include the welfare of workers rather than treating it as an optional cost. Budgets can reveal whether a community's stated concern for vulnerable people is reflected in its priorities.

The book of Revelation supplies the challenge to self-satisfaction; it does not determine every budget line. Applying it responsibly means examining the evidence, listening to those affected and accepting that our first proposal may need correction.

The truth

The Lamb's followers in chapter 14 of the book of Revelation are described as free from falsehood in their mouths (14:5). That feature offers a straightforward point of application even while other details in the passage remain contested.

Before sharing a frightening claim, we can check whether the source supports it. If a story about an opponent turns out to be false, we can correct it with the same visibility with which we spread it. If uncertainty remains, we can say so.

The test becomes more serious when a false claim would benefit a cause we regard as righteous. Religious conviction does not improve the evidence for an allegation. A compelling prediction is not made true by the number of people who repeat it.

This applies to the book in your hands as well. You should be able to compare my claims with the passages and sources cited. Where I make an inference, it should remain available for examination. Theological writing ought to help readers exercise judgement rather than make them dependent upon the writer's confidence.

Shared costs

The summons to leave Babylon concerns participation in wrongdoing (18:4). In contemporary life, refusal might involve declining an instruction to mislead a customer or to conceal a serious problem. The particular judgement depends upon facts, obligations and available alternatives.

What often determines whether someone can act is the support around them. The person with savings has choices unavailable to someone already struggling to pay rent. A public appeal for courage can become cruel if it ignores those differences.

A community can help by sharing consequences. It might provide meals, temporary financial assistance, accompaniment to a meeting or help finding independent advice. These are proposals for practice, not instructions directly listed by John. They arise from taking faithful witness seriously as a shared commitment.

The workshop in Berlin and the monastery in Lashio brought refusal and provision together. Our own forms of resistance should ask what we will make possible for the people affected.

Returning

James Harrison's repeated donations belong here. His story directs attention towards dependable contribution over many years. Most acts of care do not have the shape of a public confrontation. They consist of returning when the first emotion has faded.

There are limits. No one can meet every need, and exhaustion can diminish the care we hoped to offer. Shared responsibility makes endurance possible. A congregation that depends on one person's endless availability has confused generosity with an inexhaustible resource.

For the imagined Tuesday, choose something specific enough to do. Make the call. Check the allegation before repeating it. Reopen the decision that excluded the people affected. Offer practical support alongside your praise of someone's courage.

What this asks of us

The letters to the churches examine conduct as well as conviction. Our reading therefore has to reach our conversations, spending, work and use of influence. A small practice of truthfulness or care becomes significant when someone can rely upon us to repeat it.

What one change will I practise this week, and how will I know whether it helps?

10 Open gates

We have travelled through a book full of contested loyalties and frightening visions. Its final city gives us a question with which to return home: what sort of place does our hope teach us to make?

The city

At the end of the book of Revelation, water runs through a city.

The river is clear, proceeding from the throne of God and the Lamb. The tree of life bears fruit, and its leaves are for the healing of the nations. Night has gone. The city's inhabitants need neither lamplight nor sunlight, for God gives them light (Revelation 22:1–5).

After so much burning and blood, John gives us something we can recognise as life: water, fruit, healing, people dwelling in the presence of God.

The city descends. The movement in chapter 21 is towards God's dwelling with humanity. Whatever else Christians believe about life beyond death, this vision does not end with the earth rendered morally irrelevant while the fortunate escape. Its announced horizon is new heaven and new earth, the end of mourning and the wiping away of tears (21:1–4).

The gates

The nations walk by the city's light. Kings bring their glory into it. Its gates remain open, yet the text also excludes what is unclean and those who practise abomination and falsehood (21:24–27).

Both features belong in our reading. The open gates and healing of the nations sustain an expansive hope. The exclusions prevent us from claiming that John has supplied an uncomplicated statement of universal restoration. We should not quote whichever side suits us and quietly remove the other.

The vision does, however, give a striking place to the nations. They are not merely a mass to be despised. Their healing belongs within the conclusion. The world's wounds matter to the world John imagines beyond its present violence.

That gives Christian hope a direction. If we welcome healing, we should examine our willingness to participate in harm. If we welcome the end of tears, we should not become indifferent to the person crying beside us.

These are ethical inferences from the vision. Our acts of care cannot guarantee its fulfilment. They can express the allegiance we profess.

Reading well

This book began with a concern about what our theology does to us. We have followed that concern into the circumstances of John's audience, the image of the Lamb, the attractions of imperial power and the passages that resist a straightforward peaceable reading.

The conclusion is a discipline of attention: read the text in its historical and scriptural setting, explain the steps of interpretation, and admit where the evidence leaves disagreement. A preferred ethical outcome cannot do that interpretive work for us.

We also need to notice what happens when an interpretation enters a human relationship. Does it make a leader unanswerable? Does it turn another population into scenery for our expectations? Does it make tomorrow's predicted catastrophe more compelling than today's preventable injury?

An interpretation's harmful use does not, by itself, prove every part of it false. Nor does a comforting consequence prove a reading true. Textual reasoning and moral examination must both remain available. We should neither abandon the text for a preferred outcome nor treat a claimed interpretation as an exemption from responsibility.

The last episode

At the beginning of this book, I admitted enjoying the moment when a fictional enemy gets what is coming to them. I have not written these pages from a place beyond that appetite. The pleasure of being vindicated remains familiar. So does the temptation to make my own group the innocent centre of every story.

The question is whether I let that appetite direct my reading of scripture and my treatment of people.

The way of the Lamb asks more of me than choosing a more attractive interpretation. It asks me to recognise suffering when recognising it is inconvenient. It asks me to stop treating someone else's humiliation as evidence that justice has been achieved. It asks what I am doing with the authority, money, attention and time available to me.

We have seen people resist, shelter, speak and give. Their actions have not made history tidy. Sister Ann Rose could not prevent all the deaths. The identity and fate of Tank Man remain unknown. Parihaka's restraint did not stop the invasion. Remembering these limits prevents us from selling compassion as a technique for controlling the world.

We have also seen that limits do not make action empty. A person can be sheltered. A harmful allegiance can be refused. A life can be helped by someone who returns to give again. The work matters to the people who receive it, even when the wider wrong has not yet ended.

These questions belong wherever we hold influence. Who gets heard when we hold the money? Who can correct us when we lead? Can someone refuse our beliefs without losing our care? The Lamb's place at the centre of our theology should change what it feels like for another person to be in our power.

That is where careful reading becomes personal. Notice the person whose life your interpretation has made easier to overlook.

So. There we have it. In my opinion, a more sensible way to read the book of Revelation, and very possibly closer to how its original hearers might have understood this wild, unsettling writing.

I like to think of it as a two-thousand-year-old action movie—without the film. Weapons flying. Blood everywhere. People running. A voice fills the room, and the scenes unfold in the listeners'

imagination. The comparison is modern, of course, but it helps me remember that this writing was meant to be experienced, not merely decoded.

As with a powerful film, the spectacle is not the whole story. Beneath it lies the deeper question: what kind of power deserves our loyalty, and what kind of victory is worth hoping for? At the centre stands the Lamb who was slain. At the end comes the promise of tears wiped away and nations healed.

That is the story I hear through these extraordinary visions: love and compassion overcoming violence and hatred. Perhaps one of the greatest stories of all time. Its disturbing passages still deserve honest attention, but they need not surrender the whole book to fear.

I hope these pages have given you hope. Hope that cruelty is not permanent. That people crushed by power have not been forgotten. That our small acts of courage and care belong to something worth continuing, even when we cannot see how the story will end.

And I hope that confidence brings us closer to the people who need us. If we believe love will have the final word, we can begin making room for it in the words we speak, the power we exercise and the lives we touch today.

That is the hope I want to leave with you: in the end, love wins.

What this asks of us

The book ends with the hope of life renewed in God's presence. Our reading should direct us towards that healing while remaining honest about passages we cannot fully explain. Hope becomes a present responsibility when it changes how other people experience our power.

How have I allowed my theology to excuse indifference or protect my own position, and what will I change so that the people around me experience more truth, compassion and justice?

How we live now

These commitments gather the practical response developed in the ten chapters; they are an invitation to act, not a substitute for reading the text.

- 1. Read honestly.** I will begin with the text and its first hearers, and remain willing to correct my interpretation.
- 2. Use power to protect.** I will measure my use of authority by the safety and freedom it gives others.
- 3. Examine my loyalties.** I will question any advantage that depends on accepting someone else's suffering.
- 4. Share the cost.** I will offer practical support to people who face consequences for telling the truth.
- 5. Seek justice.** I will work for protection, accountability and repair without making revenge my purpose.
- 6. Care for the future.** I will do worthwhile work now, even when I cannot know what tomorrow holds.
- 7. Accept correction.** I will help make my community a place where harm can be reported and put right.
- 8. Learn beyond my group.** I will recognise compassion in others and cooperate without claiming ownership of their identity.
- 9. Practise daily.** I will turn conviction into a specific, repeatable act of truthfulness or care.
- 10. Live towards healing.** I will ask whether my hope makes me more available to the people who need me.

Sources and notes

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[27] Australian Red Cross Lifeblood, “James Harrison’s story” and “Vale James Harrison OAM.” The donation total includes his sustained work across blood and plasma donation; medical impact is described as part of a wider programme. <https://www.lifeblood.com.au/news-and-stories/stories/james-harrison> ;
<https://prod2.lifeblood.com.au/news-and-stories/media-centre/media-releases-and-statements/vale-james-harrison-oam>

[28] Author’s recollection of a conversation with a taxi driver during a visit to Yangon; the driver supplied no site, date or documentary source. The detention-and-torture explanation remains unverified. The Burmese Wikipedia entry for Kyimyindaing Township records a “Come and die” tradition associated instead with fighting during the First Anglo-Burmese War. This is a research lead, not verification of either an etymology or the driver’s account. <https://my.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?oldid=792342>

[29] Jonathan Holt Titcomb, *Personal Recollections of British Burma and Its Church Mission Work* (1880), chapter III. The account describes Colbeck’s residence and chapel at Kemmendine and uses “our Christian empire” in its discussion of education. Neither establishes missionary knowledge of a particular detention or torture site. <https://anglicanhistory.org/asia/burma/titcomb1880/03.html>

[30] Calista Vinton Luther, *The Vintons and the Karens: Memorials of Rev. Justus H. Vinton and Calista H. Vinton* (Boston: W. G. Corthell, 1880), chapters VII–VIII. Used for the retrospective account of prayer for British intervention, famine relief across religious boundaries, and imperial assistance with Frank’s Chapel. This family memoir celebrates the missionaries and presents a partisan view of conquest and ethnic relations; its explanations of British motives are not adopted as established fact. <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks09/0900241h.html>

[31] Revelation 5:5–6; 7:4–9; 21:12–17; Genesis 49 for Israel’s ancestral tribal setting. See IVP New Testament Commentary Series, “The 144,000 and the Unnumbered Multitude (7:1–17),” for the shaped tribal list and the hearing-and-seeing comparison. The same-community interpretation is argued here, not presented as an explicit identification made by John. <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/ivp-nt/144000-Unnumbered-Multitude>

[32] “The Twelve Tribes of Israel out from Every Nation, Tribe, People, and Language in Revelation 7:9–17,” *Harvard Theological Review*, especially section D on the relationship of the two visions. This study argues for regathered Israel and discusses competing readings; it is cited as a substantial alternative, not as agreement with this book’s preferred multinational interpretation. Revelation 14:1–5 supplies the first-fruits and virginity imagery. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/harvard-theological-review/article/6C9C508DEE1BEB15ACAF99338281F220>

[33] The Gospel Coalition, “Introduction to Revelation,” section “Interpretation & Views”; Cornelis Venema, “Interpreting Revelation,” Ligonier Ministries. Used for the distinction between preterism, futurism, historicism and idealism, including partial and full preterism. These sources write from

particular theological positions; their doctrinal judgements are not adopted as neutral definitions. The description of this book's own approach is the author's.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/revelation/> ; <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/interpreting-revelation>

[34] John Ortberg, "How to Better Understand the Book of Revelation," teaching text attributed to Ortberg on JesusCentral, dated 19 April 2006. Used for the Chicago Bulls illustration, original-audience question and pastoral interpretation of the forehead and hand. The online text contains transcription irregularities; its broader argument is paraphrased. Compare Exodus 13:9, 16; Deuteronomy 6:6–8; Revelation 13:15–17 and 14:1. This citation is to the accessible teaching text, not to the unread full study guide Revelation: Experience God's Power.

<https://www.jesusc central.com/learning/Journal/index.php?add=Read&ccZ=&jid=7&lgZ=&ll=9&llid=&poster=7&scZ=&show=My&vrZ=>

[35] John Ortberg, "How Christians Should Be Thinking About the Rapture," Become New, 26 September 2025. The discussion here draws on the publicly accessible transcript excerpt at approximately 05:13–06:59, concerning privileged knowledge, anxiety and attention to the original audience. The complete audio and full transcript were not reviewed; the episode summary is not treated as a substitute for them.

<https://www.podscan.fm/podcasts/become-new-with-john-ortberg/episodes/how-christians-should-be-thinking-about-the-rapture>

[36] Dallas Theological Seminary, course BE107 (2016), unit 8, video 3, teaching transcript, especially its description of futurism and acknowledgement of symbolic referents; Got Questions Ministries, "What is the futurist interpretation of the book of Revelation?", updated 4 January 2022. These are advocates' descriptions, used to represent the position fairly, including the latter's warning against newspaper-driven prediction. The questions and evaluation in the comparison are this book's own. <https://media.dts.edu/player/print-transcript.aspx?course=be107-2016-en&language=en-US&unit=8&video=3> ; <https://www.gotquestions.org/futurist-Revelation.html>

[37] For Alcázar's 1614 commentary and the Counter-Reformation setting, see Luis del Alcázar, biographical overview, and Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, vol. 2, discussion of Alcázar; Froom's historicist theological judgements are not adopted here. For early future expectations, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.28 and V.30. For Ribera's late-sixteenth-century interpretation, see the historical discussion in Biblical Research Institute, "What Prophecy Means to This Church"; its confessional evaluation is distinguished from the historical outline. For nineteenth-century dispensationalism and its spread, see *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, "Dispensationalism". These developments are not treated as proof of a simple direct transmission from Ribera to Darby. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luis_del_Alc%C3%A1zar ; <https://text.egwwritings.org/read/1579.3220> ; <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103528.htm> ; <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103530.htm> ; <https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/what-prophecy-means-to-this-church/> ; <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Dispensationalism>

[38] Jehovah's Witnesses, "Who Go to Heaven?", *Bible Questions Answered*, article 116, especially "How many will be resurrected to heaven?" and the discussion of a symbolic versus literal 144,000.

This official account supplies the position summarised here, including salvation for the great crowd and the definite-number and first-fruits arguments. Cited to represent the teaching accurately, not to endorse it. <https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/questions/go-to-heaven/>

[39] Calista Vinton Luther, *The Vintons and the Karens* (1880), chapter VII, describes religious restrictions, support for British intervention and threatened reprisals. Self-support, Illustrated in the *History of the Bassein Karen Mission from 1840 to 1880* (1883), chapter XI, explicitly links violence against Karen villages in 1853 to their attachment to the British. These are retrospective missionary histories with sympathetic and pro-British framing, including prejudicial descriptions of Burmans; those judgements are not adopted here. They support distinguishing motives and episodes, not quantifying how many victims suffered for each reason or generalising to every ethnic group. <https://www.gutenberg.net.au/ebooks09/0900241h.html> ; <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks09/0900491h.html>

Biblical references are the primary evidence for textual claims. The World English Bible offers a public-domain comparison text at <https://ebible.org/engwebp/REV.htm>. Paraphrases here are the author's summaries. This book offers an argued reading rather than a verse-by-verse commentary; disputed dates, final judgement and the chronology of fulfilment remain open questions where indicated.

Reference glossary

This glossary summarises the interpretations argued in this book. It is a guide back to the discussions, not a replacement for reading the passages in context. “Our reading” identifies the position taken here; “Caution” marks a difficulty or a limit to that claim. Biblical references refer to the book of Revelation unless another book is named. Entries are arranged alphabetically, with numbers at the end.

Accuser

See Satan and the dragon. Accusation is one of the adversary’s activities (12:10). Our application concerns slander and the use of accusation to destroy people; it does not condemn truthful testimony or the reporting of abuse. Holding someone accountable for harm can be an act of justice. See chapter 3, “The accuser”.

Anti-D

A medicine made from donated plasma that helps prevent an RhD-negative mother from developing antibodies against an RhD-positive baby’s red blood cells. This is a medical term, not a biblical symbol. James Harrison’s donations contributed to its production. See chapter 9 and source note 27.

Apocalyptic literature

Writing that unveils reality through visions, symbolic figures and dramatic contrasts. Our reading begins with what these images could communicate to John’s first hearers, drawing on their world and Israel’s Scriptures. The genre exposes the claims of dominating power and offers hope beyond its apparent permanence. Caution: symbolism does not mean that nothing is expected to happen. Calling the book a secret code that enemies could not understand goes beyond the evidence. See chapter 1. Ortberg’s context-first approach reinforces the need to ask what the first hearers could recognise; see source note 34.

Babylon

The wealthy, violent city portrayed as a woman in chapters 17–18. Our reading connects this imperial city with Rome and examines the exploitation beneath its splendour, including trade in human lives (18:13). Its contemporary force lies in exposing prosperity sustained by others’ suffering. Caution: the assault on the figurative woman in 17:16–17 remains troubling. Our reflection on misogyny is an ethical application, not proof that John intended a modern critique of the abuse of women. See chapter 5, “Babylon”.

Beast

The sea beast embodies dominating power that demands worship and attacks the faithful (13:1–10). Our reading gives priority to the Roman imperial setting rather than identifying a contemporary politician as the fulfilment. The image also helps us examine coercive power today. Caution: that application requires evidence about conduct; calling an opponent “the beast” cannot substitute for an argument. See chapter 3, “The beast”.

Blood and the winepress

The overwhelming bloodshed of 14:17–20 is read here as apocalyptic hyperbole conveying the severity and completeness of judgement, rather than a measured forecast of a future battlefield. The discussion connects that winepress with the disputed blood on the rider’s garment and his sword proceeding from his mouth (19:13–21). Our reading emphasises the authority of divine speech. Caution: symbolic violence remains violence within the vision; the imagery does not settle precisely how judgement occurs or the fate of everyone judged. See chapter 5, “Blood”.

Blood of the Lamb

The Lamb’s death is central to his victory and to the faithful community’s deliverance (5:9; 12:11). Our reading connects sharing that victory with truthful witness and costly faithfulness to his way. Caution: the ethical application does not remove the death’s saving significance in John’s vision, or establish one particular theory of atonement. We cannot demand that other people suffer to prove their faith. See chapter 4, “Faithfulness”.

Empire

In this book, empire names power organised around domination, extraction and demands for overriding allegiance. Rome supplies the immediate historical setting; later applications include religious institutions when they protect power through coercion or silence. “Systems” describes organised relationships that sustain such power, not forces that remove individual responsibility. Caution: the book of Revelation is not a prediction naming every later empire. Comparisons must be argued from conduct, with attention to differences in scale, power and freedom to refuse. See chapters 1, 3, 5 and 7.

False prophet

The figure associated with signs and deception that sustain allegiance to the beast (13:11–17; 19:20). Our reading understands the second beast and false prophet as connected portrayals of power that persuades people to worship domination. Its lamb-like appearance and dragon-like speech warn that reassuring religious language can conceal coercion. Caution: a deceptive appearance does not give us access to another person’s private intentions. Examine actions and consequences. See chapter 3, “The disguise”, and chapter 5, “The rider”.

Fire and the second death

The lake of fire receives the devil, beast, false prophet, Death and Hades; people also face judgement (20:10–15). Our reading understands the imagery as symbolic and hyperbolic, expressing the permanent defeat of hate, deceit and death. Read alongside the victorious slain Lamb and the ending of death and pain (21:4), its hope is life freed from destructive power. Caution: John’s language of human judgement and enduring torment remains difficult. The imagery cannot be reduced to impersonal forces alone, and this reading does not settle everyone’s final destiny. Its ethical demand is to reject hatred and deceit as methods of serving God. See chapter 5, “Fire”.

Futurism

An approach locating much of the book’s prophetic fulfilment in events still ahead of us. Futurists differ over timing, symbolism and other details. Our reading challenges interpretations that detach the visions from their first hearers; it does not assume that all futurists hold the same scheme. See chapter 1, “Where we stand”. The comparison in “Two ways of reading” addresses a common dispensational form; it distinguishes that position from headline speculation and does not equate futurism with indifference. Future expectations predate Darby; his contribution concerns a distinctive nineteenth-century dispensational system, popularised through Scofield’s 1909 Reference Bible and other networks. See source note 37.

Historicism

An approach reading the visions as a course of history unfolding from John’s time onwards. It differs from simply taking the ancient historical context seriously. This book does not assign the visions to a continuous sequence of later historical events. See chapter 1, “Where we stand”.

How long

The murdered witnesses’ cry for judgement and vindication (6:9–11). Our reading hears a protest that God allows to be voiced, rather than a failure of faith. The vision promises that their suffering matters and that wrong will be answered, but supplies no usable deadline. Waiting does not require accepting ongoing abuse. Seek protection and justice now. See chapter 4, “How long”.

Idealism

An approach emphasising recurring patterns of evil, faithfulness and divine victory rather than identifying every vision with one event. Our reading shares its interest in recurring patterns while keeping the first audience central. Symbolic interpretation alone does not make a reading idealist. See chapter 1, “Where we stand”.

Justice

The answering of wrong, vindication of those harmed and ending of the powers that sustain suffering. Our reading connects the martyrs' appeal, Babylon's exploitative economy, judgement and the final images of healing (6:9–11; 18:11–24; 21:4; 22:1–2). Judgement confronts oppressive systems and people's participation in them; individuals also answer for their deeds (20:12–13). The call to leave Babylon challenges our complicity, with responsibility attentive to power and freedom of choice. Caution: this ethical emphasis does not erase punitive imagery or establish that every judgement is restorative. Compassion includes protection and accountability. See chapter 5, "Justice".

Lamb

Jesus portrayed as a Lamb bearing the marks of slaughter, yet standing at the centre of heavenly authority (5:5–10). Our reading gives this image priority when asking what victory means: the one who has suffered is worthy to open the scroll. His way directs us towards love, truthful witness and self-giving courage. Caution: John also speaks of the Lamb's wrath (6:16–17). The Lamb cannot be made a symbol of indifference to injustice. See chapter 2.

Mark of the beast

Allegiance to the beast, linked with worship and enforced through exclusion from buying and selling (13:15–17). Our reading contrasts it with belonging to God and the Lamb. Devotion to money and its power is one contemporary expression of such allegiance. Caution: the mark is broader than greed, and people struggling under coercion should not simply be condemned as money-loving. The text does not identify a modern payment system or medical intervention. See chapter 3, "The mark". The hand-and-forehead imagery also invites examination of thought and action, with Exodus 13:9 and Deuteronomy 6:6–8 as scriptural background. See source note 34.

Multitude

The uncountable crowd from every nation standing before the throne and the Lamb (7:9–17). Our preferred reading understands the numbered people John hears about and the crowd he sees as two portrayals of the same redeemed community. The movement from hearing to seeing resembles the Lion and Lamb scene in chapter 5. Caution: this is an argued identification, not the claim that 144,000 is mathematically infinite. Other readings distinguish the groups. See chapter 5, "The multitude" and "Heard and seen"; also 144,000 below.

New Jerusalem

The city descending from God, where God dwells with humanity and mourning and death end (21:1–4). Our reading finds a hope directed towards renewed life with God, rather than permission to abandon the world and its suffering. Caution: our acts of compassion express allegiance to this hope; they do not guarantee or manufacture its fulfilment. See chapter 10, "The city".

Open gates and healing

The city's gates remain open, and the tree's leaves are for the healing of the nations (21:24–27; 22:1–2). Our reading sees an expansive hope that should encourage hospitality and care. Caution: John also describes exclusion from the city. The open gates alone cannot prove that every person is ultimately restored. Both features must remain in view. See chapter 10, “The gates”.

Overcoming

Victory understood through the Lamb and the testimony of those who follow him (12:11). Our reading refuses to equate success with survival, political control or the ability to overpower enemies. Costly faithfulness can matter even when domination seems to win. Caution: suffering is not proof that a cause is right, and preventable harm must not be romanticised. See chapters 2 and 4.

Preterism

An approach locating most or all fulfilment in the ancient past from our perspective. Partial preterism retains a future final return, resurrection and judgement; full preterism regards these too as fulfilled, usually in AD 70. Our reading shares the emphasis on the first hearers without claiming that everything was fulfilled then. See chapter 1, “Where we stand”, and chapter 6, “Near”. A major systematic exposition appeared in Alcázar's 1614 commentary; later forms differ. See source note 37.

Rider and birds

The rider called Faithful and True judges with a sword coming from his mouth; birds feast on the defeated (19:11–21). Our reading hears scriptural imagery of decisive judgement, including the feast in Ezekiel 39:17–20. Within the vision the birds eat flesh; whether this forecasts literal bodily slaughter is a separate interpretive question. Caution: human beings, as well as the beast and false prophet, face judgement. The passage is no commission for believers to enact violence. See chapter 5, “The rider”.

Satan and the dragon

John identifies the dragon as the devil and Satan: an accusing, deceiving, persecuting adversary (12:7–17). Our reading acknowledges a personal supernatural character within the vision. Caution: the meaning “adversary” does not prove that Satan is only a concept; the symbolism alone does not settle the existence of a being beyond the narrative. Either way, blaming the devil cannot excuse our own lies, oppression or dehumanisation. See chapter 3, “The accuser”.

Satan's release

The brief return of deception after the thousand years, followed by final defeat (20:3, 7–10). Our reading recognises its narrative role without claiming to know why God allows it. The recurrence of cruelty in a different guise offers a familiar contemporary parallel and calls for renewed resistance through the Lamb's way. Caution: this parallel does not prove that John intended an endless cycle. His vision ends the adversary's power. See chapter 6, “A thousand years”.

Seal and name

God's servants are sealed, and the Lamb's people bear his name and his Father's name (7:3; 14:1). Our reading understands these as signs of belonging and allegiance, set against the beast's mark. Caution: belonging to God does not mean immunity from suffering, nor does a modern group acquire exclusive ownership of the image by claiming it. See chapters 3 and 5.

Seven churches

The named communities in Roman Asia addressed by John (1:4, 11; chapters 2–3). Our reading treats them as real first recipients whose circumstances constrain interpretation. The messages challenge compromise and complacency as well as encourage endurance. Caution: later relevance does not make their lives mere scenery for predictions about our century. See chapter 1, “Seven churches”.

Soon and near

The repeated urgency of 1:1–3 and 22:6–12. Our reading recognises hope and genuine expectation addressed to the first hearers. Caution: two thousand years of continuing suffering leave an unresolved difficulty, especially if complete fulfilment was expected shortly. “Hold on” captures encouragement but does not fully explain the timing. We should neither redefine “soon” as “whenever” nor relocate it to our generation without evidence. See chapter 6, “Near”. Our generation's sense of urgency does not prove it holds a privileged key to the vision. See source note 35.

Thousand years

The long reign with Christ of those whose apparent defeat is overturned (20:4–6). Our preferred reading treats the number symbolically, stressing the immense scale of their vindication beside the adversary's brief final opportunity. Caution: it is not literally eternity, because John describes it ending. This reading does not resolve the chronology of the whole vision. See chapter 6, “A thousand years”.

Twelve tribes

Israel's covenant identity provides the imagery of the tribal list in 7:4–8. Our reading understands the shaped list and the repeated use of twelve as signs of the completeness of God's people. The city's tribal gates and apostolic foundations reinforce the imagery (21:12–14). Caution: a multinational reading must not erase Jewish identity or treat Israel as a discarded people. See chapter 5, “The twelve”.

Two witnesses

Prophetic figures whose imagery recalls Moses, Elijah and Zechariah's olive trees (11:3–13). Our reading gives weight to their possible representation of the witnessing community; their identity remains disputed. Their death and vindication declare that silencing testimony does not settle its truth. Caution: their destructive powers complicate a wholly nonviolent reading, and their story does not promise that faithful people escape harm. See chapter 4, "The witnesses".

Way of the Lamb

This book's phrase for allegiance expressed through compassion, truth, self-giving love and resistance to domination. It includes protecting the vulnerable, holding power accountable and refusing to make another person's suffering the price of our advantage. Caution: gentleness is not submission to abuse, and compassion is not the abandonment of justice. This is the ethical interpretation developed throughout the book, rather than a phrase John uses as a formal definition. See "The way of the Lamb" and chapter 9. The chapter-end reflections and "How we live now" gather its practical implications.

666 and 616

The beast's number in 13:18; 616 is an ancient alternative reading. Our preferred historical explanation connects the numbers with forms of Nero Caesar's name calculated through Hebrew letter values. Caution: the interpretation remains disputed and does not, by itself, date the whole book to Nero's reign. The idea of repeatedly falling short of seven is a secondary symbolic possibility. John never names 777 as God's number. See chapter 3, "The number" and "Falling short".

144,000

The number John hears in 7:4, also appearing in chapter 14. Our reading understands twelve times twelve times a thousand as a symbolic portrait of the whole community belonging to the Lamb. The numbered tribes express completeness; the crowd John sees expresses its multinational breadth. This interpretation rests on the numerical patterns, Israel's covenant imagery and the hearing–seeing parallel in chapter 5. Caution: John does not explicitly identify the two groups, and the first-fruits language allows other readings. Jehovah's Witnesses read the number as heavenly rulers, while also affirming salvation for a great crowd with an earthly hope; they do not restrict all salvation to 144,000. No reading of the number alone establishes a modern organisation's exclusive status. See chapter 5, "The multitude", "The twelve", "Heard and seen" and "No private claim".