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This book is dedicated to our brothers and sisters on the frontline of evangelism in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the inner cities of North America and the many other places where followers of Jesus are paying a high price to proclaim his gospel in truth. Many of them have not had the time or opportunity to pursue the original cultural context of the New Testament, but I pray with all my heart that this book will be useful to them in their service to our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Word leaping out of heaven like a mighty warrior; his commandment goes forth as a sharp sword (cf. Rev 19:15).

19:14. The armies of heaven were sometimes revealed in the *Old Testament (2 Kings 2:11; 6:17; Is 66:15; Hab 3:8; cf. Ps 68:17; Jer 4:13), although God's "hosts" were usually pictured on chariots there, whereas here they ride horses—the customary means of attack for the Parthians. In each case the portrayal matches the most devastating sort of aggressors known in the writer's time. White horses were often considered superior and associated with royalty, and were connected with the Parthians more than with other peoples. Most Palestinian Jews believed that Israel would participate in the final battle (*Dead Sea Scrolls; cf. Ps 149:6-9), but the image in this case seems to be the angelic host (also viewed as warriors on horseback, e.g., 2 Maccabees, *4 Maccabees).

19:15. The words of God's mouth could be described as a sword (Hos 6:5; cf. the *Similitudes of Enoch) and the *Messiah's decrees as a rod (Is 11:4); the mouth of Isaiah's servant also resembles a sharp sword (Is 49:2). (The writer of *4 Ezra 13 also describes a fire going forth from the Messiah to devour the wicked; the fire is said to represent the *law of God. In *Psalms of Solomon 17:24 and 35-36, the Messiah smites the nations of the earth with the word of his mouth. This is envisioned more literally than simply the image of a commander's orders going forth, as in Judith 2:2-3, although the latter may be what the image means.) God's sword is also described as his instrument of judgment (Is 34:5; Jer 12:12; 47:6), especially in the end (Is 66:15-16). The sword was a Roman symbol of an authority's right over life and death (capital punishment) but appears throughout the *Old Testa-

ment prophets as an image for judgment by war.

19:16. In Roman antiquity, horses and statues were sometimes branded on the thigh, but people were not (cf. Ex 28:36-38). This is a symbolic depiction; everyone in Revelation is identified by a name on his or her person (e.g., 7:3; 13:16). "King of kings" was the title of the king of Parthia but had been applied in Jewish tradition long before that Parthian usage to God himself, the suzerain King who rules over all the kings of the earth (see comment on 17:14; cf. Deut 10:17; Dan 2:47; Zech 14:9).

19:17-21

The Defeat of the Wicked

19:17-18. The saints have one feast (19:7-9), the birds of the air another (19:17-18). Revelation takes the image here from Ezekiel 39:17 (cf. Is 49:26; Zeph 1:7), which occurs after the final battle with Gog (cf. Rev 20:8). The description of such ultimate destruction of their mighty oppressors (cf. also *Sibylline Oracles) would have been a powerful encouragement to the persecuted Christians hearing the book.

19:19. In this depiction of the end, it is the armies, rather than the entire populations of the nations themselves, who are destroyed at this point (cf. 20:8); different Jewish views on the exact character of the final war tried to reconcile different Old Testament images of the end.

19:20-21. Some of these details (judgment by fire, the defeat of *Satan and his forces, with special attention to the evil leaders) are standard in accounts of the end time; others are unique to John's story line (the evil emperor and his sorcerer/propaganda minister being thrown into the furnace alive). Cf. Isaiah 30:33 and Daniel 7:11.

20:1-6

The Thousand-Year Kingdom

Many Jewish texts pictured an intermediate kingdom between the present and future eternal reign. (Whether this suggests that the period is literal or figurative in Revelation—and if figurative, figurative for what—has been debated since the first few centuries of *church history. "Amillennialists" like Augustine, Calvin and Luther usually have taken it as symbolic for the present age, whereas "premillennialists" like Irenaeus, Justin Martyr and Isaac Newton have read the period as future and after *Christ's return; "postmillennialists" like George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney have predicted a future millennial period preceding Jesus' return [this last view is generally rare today]. Those who take Revelation's millennium as in some sense future generally regard it as qualifying the absolute imminence of the final end, which might otherwise be supposed from 1:3. The structure of the *narrative here [19:20; 20:4, 10] is most naturally read as referring to a future period, but some have contended that this reading does not fit other biblical passages and have appealed to the cyclical structure of the rest of Revelation. The commentary follows the narrative as it appears to stand rather than taking sides on whether it should be read literally or figuratively, what the figure means or whether it is merely an *apocalyptic literary device. All three positions could use the presence of intermediate kingdoms in many ancient apocalypses to argue for their own position.)

Revelation 20 and what follows especially expound the later chapters of Ezekiel: Israel's *resurrection (chap. 37), the war with Gog and Magog (chaps. 38—39) and the new Jerusalem's temple (chaps. 40—48).

20:1-3. On the dragon/serpent see comment on Revelation 12:3 and 9. Many early Jewish texts spoke of wicked angels being "bound," meaning chained and imprisoned, until a particular time, usually the day of judgment (especially *1 Enoch; cf. Tobit, *Jubilees and *Testament of Solomon).

Many Jewish texts include an intermediate period between the present and future ages; in some, it is an age of *messianic peace, but in others it is the final tribulation, which came to be called the "messianic travail." The length of the final intermediate period varies in those ancient Jewish texts that include it, producing such diverse figures as forty years, three generations, four hundred years and nearly as many other calculations as there are opinions recorded, sometimes counted by "weeks" or jubilees of years. A few early Jewish traditions divided history into seven one-thousand-year periods, of which the final period would be an age of peace. (*Plato's figure of one thousand years between death and reincarnation as the intermediate state of the Greek afterlife might have influenced this Jewish figure [cf. also the phoenix of Greek mythology, discussed by *rabbis], but this is unlikely; the *apocalyptic penchant for dividing history into ages, plus the natural appeal of a round number like one thousand [cf. one hundred in Is 65:20], and especially the Jewish application of Ps 90:4 to the seven days of Gen 1, are sufficient to explain the length of the period on purely Jewish terms.)

20:4. The *resurrection of the righteous was a standard part of Jewish hopes; the subsequent reign of God's people with him is less frequent but also appears in Jewish literature (in the Old Testament, cf., e.g., Is 60:5; Dan 7:14, 18). Roman citizens were normally executed by beheading (and

previous times, but with swords by the first century); they were first beaten and blindfolded and then forced to kneel.

20:5-6. The punishment of the rest of the dead after an interim period may be suggested by Isaiah 24:21-22, even though Daniel 12:2 (like a number of New Testament texts) does not distinguish the time between the resurrection of the righteous (after the tribulation Daniel mentions—Dan 12:13) and that of the damned. Jewish texts sometimes spoke of the “second death” of the wicked at the judgment. On the reigning priests see comment on Revelation 1:6.

20:7-10

The Folly of Gog and Magog

20:7-8. Gog, prince in the land of Magog, appears as the final enemy of Israel in Ezekiel 38–39, after Israel’s regathering and perhaps the time of the resurrection (chap. 37). Although scholars dispute whom Ezekiel has in mind, they agree that the enemies are from the north (like most of Israel’s enemies in that period); *Josephus identified them with the Scythians. Gog and Magog thus recur often in Jewish texts as the final major enemies of Israel (*rabbis, *apocalyptic texts, *Dead Sea Scrolls).

Many Jewish teachers expected a mass conversion of pagans to Judaism in the *messianic time, to be followed by mass apostasy in the time of Gog and Magog. The army of the nations is called Belial’s (*Satan’s) army in the *Dead Sea Scrolls (although this text corresponds more to the battle of Rev 19).

20:9. Some Jewish texts portrayed a wall of fire around Jerusalem (based on Zech 2:5; cf. Ex 13:21), and some depicted fire falling from heaven to consume the enemies (the *Sibylline Ora-

cles; based on such judgments as Gen 19:24; Lev 10:2; 2 Kings 1:10); here see especially Ezekiel 39:6. In the *Similitudes of Enoch, angels stir up Parthians to invade the Holy Land, but the ground opens to swallow them up. The Dead Sea Scrolls call the remnant community the “camp of the saints,” a picture that also resembles Israel in the wilderness awaiting their final entrance into the Holy Land. For the gathering of the nations against God’s people, see, for example, Zechariah 12:3 and 14:2; see comment on Revelation 16:13-16.

20:10. Judaism also anticipated the ultimate defeat and judgment of *Satan, a position in harmony with the *Old Testament view that God would reign unchallenged forever after the final day of judgment.

20:11-15

The Final Judgment

20:11. Although many writers also stressed a judgment of souls at death (some thoroughly *Hellenized writers like *Philo had little interest in a future *resurrection and judgment), Judaism had much to say about the day of judgment before God’s throne at the end of the age. The image of a new heaven and earth (cf. Rev 21:2) is from Isaiah 65:17.

20:12. Many early Jewish texts refer to heavenly tablets (*Jubilees, *1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, 3 Enoch, Testament of Abraham), containing records of human history or God’s laws; angels were continually writing down people’s sins. The “opening” of the books meant that everything was about to be made known (see, e.g., also *4 Ezra). The final judgment would be a public judgment—there would be no way of hiding one’s naked shame.

The image of the “book of life” appears in the *Old Testament (Ex 32:32-

33; Dan 12:1; Mal 3:16) and was developed in later Jewish literature (e.g., *Dead Sea Scrolls, *Jubilees). All would be judged according to their works (Ps 62:12; Prov 24:12; Jer 17:10; 32:19; Ezek 18:30), but former sinful works canceled by true repentance would not count against the righteous (Ezek 18:21-22).

20:13-14. Jewish texts often spoke of the final day on which the wicked would be cast into the abyss of fire (e.g., 1 Enoch). “Hades” (rendered “hell” in the KJV) was the abode of the dead (named for the Greek deity of the underworld, but not associated with him in Jewish texts), the equivalent of the *Old Testament realm of the dead, Sheol. In many Jewish texts, as here, the wicked were held there under judgment until their final destruction or place of torture.

20:15. Most Jewish people believed that all normal Jews (i.e., those who followed Judaism) would be saved, along with the small percentage of the righteous among the nations (*Gentiles); the rest would be damned. Israel’s faith had always been exclusivistic (worshiping one supreme God; John would add here the further exclusivism that God was truly worshiped only through *Christ—cf. 1 Jn 2:23), and the Old Testament prophets had proclaimed a day of judgment that would call the nations as well as Israel to account. It would be too late to *repent in that time.

21:1-8

Promise of the World to Come

Some pagan oracles predicted a future age of bliss, but the hope for a future age of peace, ruled by God alone, is a distinctively *Old Testament, Jewish and Christian hope.

21:1. Isaiah had already predicted the new heavens and new earth (Is 65:17; 66:22); the focus of attention in this

new creation would be the new Jerusalem (Is 65:18). Many Jewish depictions of the age to come (e.g., in *1 Enoch, *Jubilees and *Pseudo-Philo) emphasized the new heavens and earth. Some Jewish texts spoke of the renewal of the first creation; others spoke of its replacement by a new creation; Revelation holds to the latter position. Many texts described the end time in terms of the beginning, as a renewal of paradise (see comment on 22:1-5); so here the new creation recalls the goodness of the first creation before sin marred it (Gen 1:1).

Predictions of the sea’s evaporation (perhaps in *Sibylline Oracles 5:157-59, although in 5:447-49 the drying of the seas for ships does not do away with water) were far less common for *apocalypses. Some commentators point to much earlier Canaanite myths, but these would not have been sufficiently contemporary to be obvious to John’s readers. The sea’s disappearance here may accommodate a literal (and typically ancient Jewish) reading of Isaiah 65:17, which mentions heaven and earth but does not mention the sea; another explanation may be the sea’s symbolic link with evil powers earlier in Revelation (the borders of the Roman Empire in 13:1).

21:2. Like any city, “Jerusalem” meant both the place and the people who lived there; the new Jerusalem is thus a bride because its residents are a bride (19:7). Greco-Roman *encomia* (praises) of cities often turned to describing them as people, and Jewish people were familiar with *Old Testament personifications of Jerusalem and the Old Testament depiction of God’s people as his bride. Contemporary Jewish writers (e.g., Tobit, 2 Maccabees, Ecclesiasticus, *Philo and *Josephus) and Jewish coins also called Jerusalem the “holy city” (in the Old Testament,