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# Finding Meaning in the Literary Patterns of Revelation

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## **Finding Meaning in the Literary Patterns of Revelation**

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The literary arrangement of the book of Revelation is very complex. Although it has been generally recognized that the structural composition of Revelation adds to the understanding of its messages, there has not been scholarly consensus with regard to its basic structure. Commentators and expositors have offered a variety of proposals as to what the structural organization of Revelation was intended to mean; few expositors share exactly the same view.

This paper explores some of the most representative proposals with regard to the structural organization of the last book of the Bible. These proposals should not be viewed as mutually exclusive and determinative. Although some offer more promising insights into the structural arrangement of Revelation than others, the variety of proposals express a broad spectrum of the book's design and composition, and also its overall theme. When brought together, they unpack the intention of the author of Revelation much more than otherwise possible.

### **Significance of Springboard Passages**

Revelation is characterized by a particular literary feature. It has been observed that the key to the larger significance of major sections of the book is often located in the concluding statement of the preceding section. Such a statement functions as the springboard passage concluding what precedes and introducing what follows. For instance, the section of the seven messages to the churches (chaps. 2-3) is preceded by the concluding statement of Rev 1:20 of the vision of the glorified Christ (1:9-20). This concluding statement functions at the same time as the introduction to Rev 2-3. The vision of the sealed hundred and

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forty-four thousand (chap. 7) elaborates and explains the concluding statement of Rev 6:16-17 in the form of a question regarding who will stand before the great wrath of the Lamb. The concluding statement of Rev 12:17, referring to the war against “the remaining ones of her offspring,” is developed in chapters 13-14. Rev 15:2-4 serves both as the conclusion of Rev 12-14 and the introduction to the seven last plagues.

Several springboard passages seem to provide the clue for the larger portions of the book. For instance, Rev 3:21 seems to provide the interpretive outline for chaps 4-7, and 11:18 for the entire second half of the book (Rev 12-22:5). Likewise Rev 6:9-10—finding its fullest confirmation in 8:2-6 and 13—gives the clue for the understanding of the nature and purpose of both the seven seals and the seven trumpet plagues.

The springboard principle enables the interpreter to find information that is imbedded in various passages of Revelation. It suggests that the inspired author has clearly defined his intention regarding the understanding of the text, a fact that rules out one’s search outside the book for creative interpretation. To ignore this principle would limit the understanding of the author’s own intention for the book.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Identification-Description Pattern**

Another important literary strategy of Revelation can aid the interpreter in more clearly understanding some difficult texts of the book. Whenever a new key player in the book is introduced, he/she is first identified in terms of his/her personal description or historical role and activities. Once the player is identified, John moves into the description of the player’s function and activities that are especially important to the vision. This literary strategy is first evident with reference to Rev 1:9-3:22. The identification of the resurrected Christ is provided in 1:9-20 in the list of his various characteristics. The messages to the seven churches follow in Rev 2-3. The various characteristics of Christ portray different aspects of his ministry to the needs and situations of the churches.

The same can be observed with reference to the vision of the seven seals. Before describing Christ’s opening one after another of the seven seals (Rev 6:1-8:1), John describes in chapter 5 Christ’s unique qualifications for the task of the unsealing of the seals of the sealed scroll. In Rev 11, the identification of the two witnesses (11:4) is followed by an account of their activities and experiences that are important to the vision. Also, before referring to Satan’s anger and his determination to engage in the final conflict (Rev 12:17), John provides his identification and the reason for his anger and fury (Rev 12:3-16).

This literary strategy seems to be especially helpful for the clear understanding of Rev 13 and 17. Although the focus of Rev 13 is on the final battle of

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<sup>1</sup> Paulien, “Interpreting Revelation’s Symbolism,” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 6 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 83.

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this world's history, not all the things pertaining to the sea beast in the chapter relate to the end-time. Before describing the role and activities of the sea beast during the "forty-two months" of the Christian age (13:5-7), John first in 13:1-4 identifies the beast in general terms. Then, with 13:8, he moves to describe the role and function of the beast in the final crisis. The same might be applied to Rev 17. Before describing the role and function of end-time Babylon and the resurrected beast in the final crisis (17:14-18), John describes their historical roles and function. As might be seen, the principle of the identification/description literary strategy will enable the interpreter to find the sound information that the inspired author imbedded in the text.

#### Approaches to the Structure of Revelation

As one looks at Revelation, he/she will discover something more than just the basic structure of the book. This section provides a glimpse into several peculiar structural features of Revelation pointed out by some contemporary scholars.

**Recapitulative or Repetitive Structure.** A number of repetitive structures can be observed in Revelation that fall into the groups of seven: the seven churches, the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowl plagues. A critical problem for the interpreters is the question whether these three septenaries should be understood as parallel or recapitulatory accounts of the same events, or as a continuous or progressive chronological sequence of the end-time events in which the trumpets follow on from the seals, and the bowl plagues from the trumpets. It was Victorinus of Pettau (d. ca. 304) who introduced the principle of recapitulation in Revelation that has been followed with some modification by subsequent interpreters.<sup>2</sup>

The recapitulative parallels between the seals and trumpets series appear to be evident. A comparison between the two series shows their parallel structures:

The Seven Seals	The Seven Trumpets
The four horsemen	The first four trumpets
The fifth and sixth seals	The first and second trumpet woes
The interlude (chapter 7): The sealing of God's people	The interlude (chapters 10-11): the little scroll, the measuring of the temple, and the two witnesses
The seventh seal: silence in heaven before the final judgment to be given to God's servants	The third trumpet woe (the seventh trumpet): the time has arrived for the judgment of the wicked

It can be observed that both the trumpets and the seals are arranged in groups of four, two, and one. Also, both the series are interrupted by interludes

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<sup>2</sup> Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary 52a (Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1997), xci-xcii.

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between the sixth and the seventh seal and trumpet respectively. It also becomes evident that both begin with the first century and conclude with the time of the end, something not noticeable in the seven bowl plagues series. In addition, as the “Introductory Sanctuary Scenes” structure below indicates, the seals and the trumpets presumably cover the entire Christian age. On the other hand, the seven last plagues are evidently set at the conclusion of this earth’s history.

The application of the recapitulative principle can be very helpful to the interpreter of Revelation. The information and insight obtained from clear passages may unlock the theological meaning of the parallel difficult ones. For instance, Rev 7 itself might be the clue for the understanding of chapters 10-11, particularly with regard to the identity of the two witnesses. Also, one can notice that the seven trumpets and the seven bowl plagues series are deliberately paralleled in terms of their language and content:

	<b>The Seven Trumpets</b>	<b>The Seven Bowl Plagues</b>
1st	Earth (8:7)	Earth (16:2)
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Sea (8:8-9)	Sea (16:3)
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Rivers and fountains (8:10-11)	Rivers and fountains (16:4)
4 <sup>th</sup>	Sun, moon, and stars (8:12)	Sun (16:8-9)
5 <sup>th</sup>	Darkness from the abyss, locusts (9:1-11)	Darkness over the throne of the beast (16:10-11)
6 <sup>th</sup>	River Euphrates (9:14-21)	River Euphrates (16:12-16)
7th	Loud voices: the kingdom has come and Christ reigns (11:15-16)	A loud voice: It is done (16:17-21)

Although the two series are evidently not the same, the examination of their structural parallels can help the reader gain the deeper theological meaning that the inspired author intended in writing the book of Revelation.

**Theories of the Structure of Revelation.** A number of scholars assume that the number seven plays an important part in the structural design of Revelation. The proposals, however, range from a fourfold to eightfold structure, each of which is based on the number seven. In order to acquaint the audience with the complexity of the question of the structure of Revelation, it will suffice to list some of the major views. However, care is taken to present the full spectrum of these views on the subject. Since enough criticism is offered in different commentaries, the various views are explored without a detailed criticism.

Eugenio Corsini, for instance, argues that Revelation falls into four groups of seven events (the seven letters, the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls) which determine the whole structure and message of the book.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Jacques Ellul finds five septenaries—the churches, the seals, the trumpets, the bowls, and a group of visions introduced with the formula: “Then I

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<sup>3</sup> Eugenio Corsini, *The Apocalypse*, Good News Studies 5 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), 62-63.

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saw.”<sup>4</sup> Some scholars divide the book into six sections, each of which is based on the number seven. For Merrill C. Tenney the six divisions are the churches, the seals, the trumpets, the bowls, the seven personages (the woman, the dragon, the child, Michael, the beast from the sea, the beast from the earth, and the Lamb), and the seven new things (the new heaven, the new earth, the new peoples, the new Jerusalem, the new temple, the new light, the new paradise).<sup>5</sup> Austin M. Farrer also sees Revelation divided into six sections, each of which containing seven subdivisions.<sup>6</sup>

Farrer’s scheme was adopted with some minor modifications by A. Yarbro Collins, who suggests an eightfold structure, including the prologue and epilogue: (1) prologue (1:1-8); (2) the seven messages (1:9-3:22); (3) the seven seals (4:1-8:1); (4) the seven trumpets (8:2-11:19); (5) seven unnumbered visions (12:1-15:4); (6) the seven bowls (15:1-16:21) with Babylon appendix (17:1-19:10); (7) seven unnumbered visions (19:11-21:8) with Jerusalem appendix (21:9-22:5); and (8) epilogue (22:6-21).<sup>7</sup> This structure with the “unnumbered” sections and two appendices appears arbitrary and is problematic. In addition, more than just a few scholars argue for the sevenfold structure and see septets in each of the seven main visions.<sup>8</sup> At this point the comment of Gerhard Krodel is very instructive: “We should not construct cycles of sevens where John did not number his visions.”<sup>9</sup>

No doubt some element of truth exists in many of these various proposals. The very proliferation of all such theories and the lack of consensus on the structure of the book caution us against accepting any one approach as definitive.<sup>10</sup> More recently, David Aune argues, on the basis of Rev 1:19, for a two-fold structure: (1) 1:9-3:22, which centers on the theophany of the exalted

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 36-37.

<sup>5</sup> Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 38.

<sup>6</sup> Austin M. Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images* (Glasgow: University Press, 1949; reprint, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 45.

<sup>7</sup> A. Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion 9 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), 13-39; idem, *The Apocalypse*, New Testament Message 22 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1979), xii-xiv; so also Alan Johnson, “Revelation,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 411; on the criticism of this structure see Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 17; and Aune, xciv.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 16 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1926), 181-185; J. W. Bowman, “Revelation, Book of,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), 4:64-70. For other representative sevenfold outlines see Bowman, 66-67.

<sup>9</sup> Gerhard A. Krodel, *Revelation*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 60.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 46; for an extensive appraisal on the various approaches to the structure of Revelation see Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 108-151.

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Christ, and (2) 4:1-22:9, a series of episodic vision narratives introduced with a heavenly journey. Aune's simple structure is very persuasive, and it is clearly suggested by John (cf. Rev 1:19; 4:1).<sup>11</sup> However, despite its attractiveness, this avenue of interpretation overlooks the fact that Rev 12 begins a new (eschatological) division of the book; this clearly sets the book into three distinctive divisions.

#### **Introductory Sanctuary Scenes**

Kenneth A. Strand divided Revelation into eight basic visions, with a prologue and an epilogue. He found each of the visions to be preceded by a "victorious-introduction scene with temple setting."<sup>12</sup> Building on Strand's research, Richard M. Davidson and Jon Paulien argue for a sevenfold structure of the book of Revelation, with the prologue and epilogue, based on the temple setting.<sup>13</sup> They have convincingly shown that each of the seven major divisions is introduced by a sanctuary scene. It would thus appear that the entire book is set up on the sanctuary system typology:

##### Prologue (1:1-8)

1. Introductory sanctuary scene (1:9-20)  
The messages to the seven churches (chapters 2-3)
2. Introductory sanctuary scene (chapters 4-5)  
The opening of the seven seals (6:1-8:1)
3. Introductory sanctuary scene (8:2-5)  
The blowing of the seven trumpets (8:6-11:18)
4. Introductory sanctuary scene (11:19)  
The wrath of the nations (12:1-15:4)
5. Introductory sanctuary scene (15:5-8)  
The seven last plagues (chapters 16-18)
6. Introductory sanctuary scene (19:1-10)  
The eschatological consummation (19:11-21:1)
7. Introductory sanctuary scene (21:2-8)  
The New Jerusalem (21:9-22:5)

##### Epilogue (22:6-21)

These seven introductory sanctuary scenes seem to form the skeleton of the book of Revelation. They indicate that the heavenly temple in Revelation is seen

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<sup>11</sup> Aune, c-cv.

<sup>12</sup> Rev 1:10b-20; 4:1-5:14; 8:2-6; 11:19; 15:1-16:1; 16:18-17:3a; 19:1-10; 21:5-11a; see Kenneth A. Strand, "The Eight Basic Visions in the Book of Revelation" (107-121), and "The 'Victorious-Introduction Scenes' in the Visions in the Book of Revelation" (267-288), in *AUSS*, 25 (1987). Both were reprinted with some modification in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1*, 35-72.

<sup>13</sup> Richard M. Davidson, "Sanctuary Typology" (112-115), and Jon Paulien, "Seals and Trumpets: Some Current Discussions" (187-188) in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1*; Jon Paulien, "The Role of the Hebrew Cultus, Sanctuary, and Temple in the Plot and Structure of the Book of Revelation," *AUSS*, 33.2 (1995): 247-255; Aune also notes these introductory temple scenes (see *Revelation 1-5*, xcvi-xcvi). The point of departure between Davidson and Paulien and Strand is Rev 16:18-17, which Strand treats as an introductory vision with temple setting that sets chaps. 17-18 as a separate vision. Paulien sees chaps. 17-18 as an elaboration of the seven-bowls vision of chaps. 15-16.

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as the center of all divine activities. In fact, the entire Revelation-vision (4:1-22:5) is apparently perceived from the vantage point of the heavenly temple.<sup>14</sup> This can be observed from the fact that, besides constant reference either to the temple or features found there, all the divine actions that take place upon the earth are described as preceded by scenes of divine activities in the heavenly temple.

The structure based on the introductory sanctuary scenes indicates two definite lines of progression: first, there is a complete circle moving from earth to heaven and then back to earth again. Then, there is a definite progression from the inauguration of the heavenly sanctuary to intercession, to judgment, then to the cessation of the sanctuary function, and finally to its absence. The following table reflects a chiasmic structure of the book:

- |                              |        |
|------------------------------|--------|
| (1) Rev 1:12-20              | EARTH  |
| (2) Rev 4-5 (Inauguration)   | HEAVEN |
| (3) Rev 8:3-5 (Intercession) | HEAVEN |
| (4) Rev 11:19 (Judgment)     | HEAVEN |
| (5) Rev 15:5-8 (Cessation)   | HEAVEN |
| (6) Rev 19:1-10 (Absence)    | HEAVEN |
| (7) Rev 21:1-22:5            | EARTH  |

It can be observed that the first and the seventh parallel segments are set on the earth, while the second through the sixth are set in heaven. The second and the sixth describe a sanctuary worship scene: they refer to the throne, worship, the Lamb, the twenty-four elders, and praise to God Almighty. However, while in the second there is the largest quantity of sanctuary allusions, in the sixth sanctuary scene any "explicit sanctuary images are absent. The heavenly sanctuary has faded from view."<sup>15</sup> Also, while the third scene portrays the continual services of intercession in the temple, involving the burning of incense, the fifth scene points to the cessation of intercession in the temple. It is filled with smoke from the glory of God, and no one can approach to the throne of grace to receive mercy and forgiveness. The fourth sanctuary scene is set in the center. In this literary arrangement chapters 12-14 form the central portion of the book, where the church standing on the threshold of the great end-time conflict is the focal point of the entire book of Revelation.

A definite progression also moves from the continual daily (*tamid*) to the yearly services of the Old Testament sanctuary services. It appears actually that the structure of Revelation is based on the daily and yearly sanctuary services pattern. Recent studies have drawn striking parallels between the first half of the

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<sup>14</sup> Aune, "The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John," *Biblical Research*, 28 (1983): 7.

<sup>15</sup> Paulien, "Seals and Trumpets: Some Current Discussions," in *Symposium on Revelation—Book I*, 187-188.



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book and the order of the daily service (*tamid*) in the temple in the first century when John wrote.<sup>16</sup>

The basic description of the daily order of the *tamid* service is found in the tractate *Tamid* in the Mishnah, a second century AD collection of Jewish laws, traditions, and practices based on earlier tradition.<sup>17</sup> The *tamid* service began when a selected priest entered the first department of the temple, where he trimmed the lampstand and refilled them with a fresh supply of oil (*Tamid* 3:7, 9; cf. Rev 1:12-20). The great door of the Temple remained open (*Tamid* 3:7; cf. Rev 4:1; the Greek text indicates that the door had been opened before John saw it in the vision). Both the Mishnah and Revelation refer to the slaying of a lamb (*Tamid* 4:1-3; cf. Rev 5:6). The lamb's blood was poured out at the base of the altar of burnt offering in the outer court of the Temple (*Tamid* 4:1; cf. Rev 6:9). After the pouring out of the blood, the priest offered incense at the golden altar in the Holy Place (*Tamid* 5:4; Luke 1:8-11; cf. Rev 8:3-4). While the priest ministered the incense on the golden altar, the audience kept silence for a short period of time (*Tamid* 7:3; cf. Rev 8:1). At the end, trumpets were blown announcing the conclusion of the service (*Tamid* 7:3; cf. Rev 8:2, 6).

This shows clearly that the progression of the first half of the book follows the same order as did the daily of the sanctuary. At this points Jon Paulien remarks:

Not only does this portion of the Apocalypse contain potential allusions to all the major details of the *tamid* liturgy, it alludes to them in essentially the same order. Thus, the material making up the septets of the churches, seals, and trumpets would be subtly associated with the activities in the temple related to the continual or *tamid* service. If the introductory scenes to the seals and the trumpets septets signify inauguration and intercession, reference also to the *tamid* service would be appropriate.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, the second half of Revelation is evidently based on the annual service of Yom Kippur. As Strand demonstrates, already Rev 11:1-2 contains explicit allusions to the Day of Atonement.<sup>19</sup> Yom Kippur was the day of judgment; the central activities of this festival took place in the most holy place. In Rev 11:19 is the first reference to the *naos* (the inner sanctuary of the

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<sup>16</sup> Paulien summarizes the parallels in "The Role of the Hebrew Cultus," 225-256; Daniel T. Niles (As *Seeing the Invisible* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961], 112-114) was the first who noted the connection between Rev 1-8 and the Mishnah, but as Paulien notes, he unsuccessfully attempts to pursue the parallels throughout the book. See Alberto R. Treiye's criticism of the comparison (*The Day of Atonement and the Heavenly Judgment* [Siloam Springs, AR: Creation Enterprises International, 1992], 669-672).

<sup>17</sup> The following parallels reflect Paulien's study (cf. *The Mishnah "Tamid"* 1-7, trans. Herbert Danby [London: Oxford UP, 1974], 582-589).

<sup>18</sup> Paulien, "The Role of the Hebrew Cultus," 256.

<sup>19</sup> Kenneth A. Strand, "An Overlooked Old-Testament Background to Revelation 11:1," *AUSS*, 22 (1984): 322-325.

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temple). From these points in Revelation there is repeated focus on the *naos*, where the central activities of Yom Kippur took place (Rev 11:19; 14:15; 15:5-8; 16:1, 17). "Judgment language and activity, a central theme of Yom Kippur, is also a major concern of the second half of the Apocalypse" (cf. Rev 14:7; 16:5, 7; 17:1; 18:8, 10, 20; 19:2, 11; 20:4, 12-13).<sup>20</sup>

The introductory sanctuary scenes structure renders a number of implications for the literary understanding of the book of Revelation. First of all, it shows that Rev 11:19 must be taken as the dividing line between the historical and eschatological parts of Revelation, rather than Rev 14:20, as suggested by Strand. It means that Rev 1-11—the seven churches, seals, and trumpets—focuses on the entire Christian age, and Rev 12-22 on the final events of this earth's history. The structure affirms, for instance, the view that the vision of Rev 4-5 does not refer to the investigative judgment scene, but rather the enthronement of Christ that occurred at Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:32-36). It also indicates that the seals and the trumpets have to be understood to cover the broad sweep of Christian history, while the seven last plagues are set in the time of the end.

#### Annual Cycle of Festivals

A number of scholars have suggested that the structure of Revelation is also modelled on the annual feasts of the Hebrew cultic calendar established by Moses on Mount Sinai: Passover, Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feasts of Tabernacles (cf. Lev 23).<sup>21</sup> The life of ancient Israel revolved around these festivals; no wonder that one would discover their eschatological implication in the book of Revelation, since, as we have seen, the book draws heavily on the Old Testament imagery. While such assertions are easily overdrawn, the evidence seems to support the view that the general outline of Revelation follows in sequence the Jewish annual feasts.

**Passover.** The introductory vision to the messages to the seven churches appears to reflect the paschal concept and theme (Rev 1:5, 17-18). Nowhere else in the book is there such a concentrated emphasis on Christ's death and resurrection. Christ is referred to as "the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead," the one "who loves us and released us from our sins by his blood" (Rev 1:5). "I am the first and the last, and the living one, and I was dead and behold, I am living for ever and ever, and I have the keys of the death and the hades" (Rev 1:17-18). Jon Paulien suggests that Christ's intense scrutiny of the churches is reminiscent of the Jewish household's search for leaven in the house to remove

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<sup>20</sup> Paulien, "The Role of the Hebrew Cultus," 256-257.

<sup>21</sup> Including Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images*; M. D. Goulder, "The Apocalypse as an Annual Cycle of Prophecies," *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981): 342-367; Niles, *As seeing the Invisible*; Davidson, "Sanctuary Typology," 119-125; Paulien, "Seals and Trumpets," 190-192; idem, "The Role of the Hebrew Cultus," 257-261. This section reflects Davidson's and Paulien's research.

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it just before Passover (cf. Exod 12:19; 13:7).<sup>22</sup> Also, M. D. Goulder sees strong parallels to “an ancient tradition for each church to have a paschal candle burning in worship from Easter to Pentecost.”<sup>23</sup> The call for a meal of mutual fellowship (Rev 3:20) is reminiscent of the paschal meal. Since Passover was the only festival that the first-century Christians considered fulfilled in the earthly Christ (cf. John 19:35-37; 1Cor 5:7), “it is fitting that it would be associated with that portion of the book where He is portrayed in His ministry to the churches on earth.”<sup>24</sup>

**Pentecost.** Rev 4-5 is fittingly associated with Pentecost. The inauguration/enthronement ceremony of Christ in the heavenly temple took place during the ten days following his ascension, reaching its climax on the day of Pentecost. It is then that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the earth (cf. Rev 5:6). The song of the twenty-four elders as representatives of the redeemed humanity in Rev 5:9-10 recalls Exod 19:5-6, and the “lightnings and sounds and thunders” proceeding from the throne (Rev 4:4; cf. Exod 19:16), the sound of the trumpet (Rev 4:1; cf. Exod 19:16-19), and the summons to “come up” (Rev 4:1; cf. Exod 19:20, 24) recall the Mount Sinai event.<sup>25</sup> The giving of the law to Moses parallels to the taking of the book of the covenant by Christ in Rev 5. It should be noted that Exod 19:1-20:23 and Ezek 1—another major literary background to the throne vision of Rev 4—were the traditional Jewish lectionary readings for the Feast of Pentecost.

**Feast of Trumpets.** The series of the blowing of the seven trumpets of Rev 8-9 echoes the seven monthly new-moon festivals that covered the span between the spring and fall festivals that climaxed in the Feast of Trumpets (cf. Num 10:10). The Feast of Trumpets summoned the people of Israel to prepare for the coming day of judgment, known as the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur. This leads to a conclusion that the seven trumpets in Revelation “represent the ongoing sequence of seven months with the seventh trumpet representing the Feast of Trumpets itself. It is, interestingly, within the seventh trumpet (Rev 11:18) that we find the first explicit use of judgment terminology in Revelation. In Jewish thought the seventh-month Feast of Trumpets ushered in the time of judgment that led up to the Day of Atonement (cf. 11:18-19). Correspondingly, from Rev 11:19 to near the end of the book there is an increasing focus on judgment.”<sup>26</sup>

**Day of Atonement.** While the first half of Revelation appears to be modelled on the *tamid* or daily service of the Hebrew cultic system, Rev 12-22 reflects the annual service of Yom Kippur. We have seen earlier that, starting with Rev 11:1-2, the elements of Yom Kippur are alluded to throughout the second half of the book.

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<sup>22</sup> Paulien, “The Role of the Hebrew Cultus,” 258.

<sup>23</sup> Goulder, “The Apocalypse as an Annual Cycle of Prophecies,” 355.

<sup>24</sup> Paulien, “The Seals and Trumpets,” 190.

<sup>25</sup> Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” 122-123.

<sup>26</sup> Paulien, “The Role of the Hebrew Cultus,” 259-260.

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**Feast of Tabernacles.** The last in the sequence of the five main Jewish festivals was the Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkoth that followed Yom Kippur. This feast, known also as the Feast of Ingathering, came after the gathering of the harvest into the granary. Its purpose was to keep afresh, in the minds of the people, Israel's wilderness wandering to the promised land. The feast was an occasion for a special celebration and rejoicing before the Lord (Lev 23:40) filled with palm-branches waving, singing and music, and a great feast.<sup>27</sup> The final section of Revelation contains many allusions to the Feast of Tabernacles. The harvest is over and the wilderness wandering of God's people is over (Rev 14-20). God's people are ingathered into the New Jerusalem where God is now "tabernacling" with them (Rev 21:3). There is much celebration accompanied with singing (Rev 7:9-10; 14:3; 15:2-4; 19:1-10), the playing of harps (14:2), and the waving of palm branches (Rev 7:9). In addition, the primary features of the Feast of Tabernacles—water and light commemorating the water from the rock and the pillar of fire during the wilderness wandering—have their ultimate fulfillment in Rev 22:1-5.

### Chiastic Structure

An increasing number of contemporary authors observe a chiasmic structure in the book of Revelation. Some recent studies argue for the sevenfold chiasmic structure. Such a structure has been proposed by E. Schüssler Fiorenza:<sup>28</sup>

- A. 1:1-8
- B. 1:9-3:22
- C. 4:1-9:21; 11:15-19
- D. 10:1-15:4
- C'. 15:5-19:10
- B'. 19:11-22:9
- A'. 22:10-21

Despite the attractiveness of this structure, the parallels between the corresponding parts are not easy to demonstrate.

Kenneth A. Strand noted that the book falls naturally into two parts, historical and eschatological, with a dividing line in chapter 14.<sup>29</sup> While Strand's two-fold division into the historical and eschatological is undeniably evident in Revelation, the context does not support the dividing lines he suggested for chapter 14. The context suggests the dividing line between the historical and

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<sup>27</sup> For the second-temple practice of the Feast of Tabernacles see the Mishnah *Sukkah* 1-5 (Danby, 172-181).

<sup>28</sup> See E. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Composition and Structure of the Apocalypse," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968): 344-356; idem, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, Proclamation Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 35-36; Beale (131) proposes a ninefold structure.

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Worthington, OH: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1976), 43-59; C. Mervyn Maxwell follows the same division ("The Message of Revelation," *God Cares* 2, [Boise: Pacific Press, 1985], 60-61).

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eschatological division to be rather in Rev 11:19. A careful study indicates that the first half of Revelation focuses on the realities of the whole Christian age, the focus of the entire second half of the book—rather than just chapters 15-22—is set into the eschatological framework focusing on the events surrounding the Second Coming.<sup>30</sup>

This article suggests the following outline of Revelation that seems to synchronize more precisely the chiastic parallel segments:

- A. Prologue (1:1-8)
- B. Promises to the overcomer (1:9-3:22)
- C. God's work for man's salvation (4:1-8:1)
- D. God's wrath mixed with mercy (8:2-9:21)
- E. Commissioning John to prophecy (10:1-11:18)
- F. Great controversy between Christ and Satan (11:19-13:18)
- E'. Church proclaims the end-time gospel (14:1-20)
- D'. God's final wrath unmixed with mercy (15:1-18:24)
- C'. God's work for man's salvation completed (19:1-21:4)
- B'. Fulfillment of the promises to the overcomer (21:5-22:5)
- A'. Epilogue (22:6-21)

It must be noted that the first half in this chiasm focuses on the entire history of the Christian age, while its chiastic counterparts focus exclusively on the time of the end. The segment at the center points to the central theological theme of the book.

By comparing the prologue and the epilogue, the parallels become self-evident:

- 1:1-----"to show to his servants" -----22:6
- 1:1 ----- "the things which must soon take place" ----- 22:6
- 1:1 ----- Jesus sends his angel ----- 22:6, 16
- 1:3 ----- "blessed is the one . . . who keeps . . ." ----- 22:7
- 1:3----- "the words of the prophecy" ----- 22:7
- 1:3 ----- "the time is near" ----- 22:10
- 1:4 ----- "the seven churches" ----- 22:16
- 1:8 ----- "the Alpha and the Omega" ----- 21:13

The parallels clearly indicate that the themes and concepts that begin the book are drawn to their conclusion. Their obvious purpose appears to be to take readers back to the beginning, to prevent them from resting in a kind of self-sufficient utopia dream, and to motivate them to endurance in the midst of oppression and persecution until the time of the very end.

Likewise the contents of the messages to the seven churches parallel the material regarding the new Jerusalem. The last two chapters of the book might rightly be titled: "The overcomer will inherit these things" (Rev 21:7), because

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<sup>30</sup> A constructive criticism of Strand's view is offered by Norman R. Gulley, "Revelation 4-5: Judgment or Inauguration?" *JATS*, 8/1-2 (1997): 64-65; see also Paulien, "The Seals and Trumpets," 192.

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many promises given to the overcomers in chapters 2-3—to eat of the tree of life, to escape from the second death, to receive a new name, to have authority over the nations, to be dressed in the white, not to have their names blotted out of the book of life, to be acknowledged before the Father, to be pillars in the temple and to never leave it, to have the name of God written on them, and to sit with Jesus on his throne—find their fulfillment in 21:6-22:5.

Segment C shows that Rev 4:1-8:1 is paralleled to 19:1-21:4. Both begin with heavenly-worship scenes. Chapters 4-5 and 19 contain the throne, the twenty-four elders, the four living beings, worship with exclamations of praise.<sup>31</sup> All these elements are found in a group only in these two chapters. However, while Rev 4:1-8:1 focuses on the realities of the entire Christian age, its chiastic counterpart is clearly an end-time passage. While in chapters 4-5 God is praised as the Creator, and Christ as the Redeemer, the reason for the praise in chapter 19 is the destruction of Babylon. Further parallels are found between the seven seals and 19:11-21, including the white horse and the rider with the crown(s). The statement: “And behold a white horse, and the one sitting upon it (6:2)” is repeated verbatim in Rev 19:11. However, while in 6:2 the rider on the white horse wears a garland, the victory crown, in 19:12 the rider wears the diadem, the royal crown. It is not until the eschatological conclusion that Jesus wears the royal crown and reigns among his people on earth.

There are many other parallels. For instance, chapter 6 also raises the question: “How long, O Lord, holy and truly, will you not judge and avenge our blood upon those who dwell on the earth?” Rev 19:2 states that God has judged and “avenged the blood of his servants.” Also the scene of the breaking of the sixth seal refers to kings, magistrates, military commanders, the rich, the strong, slaves, and free men running in terror trying to hide themselves at the coming of Christ. On the other hand, Rev 19:18 refers to kings, military commanders, the strong, slaves, and free men found among the slain at the coming of Christ. Parallels are also found between Rev 7:9, 13-14 and the invitation to the wedding supper of the Lamb in 19:7-10; both texts portray God’s redeemed people dressed in white robes. Also, both 7:15-17 and 21:3-4 speak of God’s tabernacle with his people, and that God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Finally, the silence “for about half an hour” of the seventh seal (8:1) might correspond to the “silence” of the millennium in Rev 20.

The parallels in segment D are also interesting. Both passages have visions introduced with sanctuary scenes. However, while in 8:2-6 there is the continual service of intercession in the heavenly temple, 15:8 points to the cessation of intercession in the temple. This suggests that the seven trumpets are God’s judgments mixed with mercy, while the seven bowl plagues are the execution of

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<sup>31</sup> For structural parallels between the two texts see William H. Shea, “Revelation 5 and 19 as Literary Reciprocals” *AUSS*, 22 (1984), 251-257.

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God's final wrath unmixed with mercy. Further comparison shows evident parallels between the two series:

	<b>The Seven Trumpets</b>	<b>The Seven Bowls</b>
1 <sup>st</sup>	Earth (8:7)	Earth (16:2)
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Sea turns into blood (8:8-9)	Sea turns into blood (16:3)
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Rivers and fountains (8:10-11)	Rivers and fountains (16:4)
4 <sup>th</sup>	Sun, moon, and stars (8:12)	Sun (16:8-9)
5 <sup>th</sup>	Darkness from the abyss, locusts (9:1-11)	Darkness over the throne of the beast (16:10-11)
6 <sup>th</sup>	River Euphrates (9:14-21)	River Euphrates (16:12-16)
7 <sup>th</sup>	Loud voices: the kingdom has come and Christ reigns (11:15-16)	A loud voice: It is done (16:17-21)

This chiasmic outline sets the seven trumpet plagues in the historical section, while the execution of the bowl plagues comes at the time of the end. This structure suggests that the trumpet and bowl plagues are deliberately parallel in terms of language and content; the trumpet plagues are intended to be the foretaste and forewarning of the future execution of God's judgments in their fullness in the seven final plagues.

Finally, segment E parallels Rev 10:1-11:18 with 14:1-20. In the first, John is, first, commissioned to "prophesy again concerning many peoples and nations and tongues and kings" (10:11); then there are two witnesses prophesying to "those who dwell on the earth" (11:1-14). Chapter 14 describes first God's faithful people (14:1-5), and then the proclamation of the everlasting gospel "to those who dwell on the earth, and every nation and tribe and tongue and people" (14:6-13). Both sections refer to the giving of glory to God (11:13; 14:7) and fear (11:18; 14:7). Furthermore, Rev 11:18 states that the time has come to give the reward to God's servants and to "destroy the destroyers of the earth." Rev 14 first describes the gathering of God's faithful people in term of the wheat harvest (14:14-16), and, then, the judgment of the wicked in terms of the trampling of the winepress (14:17-20).

This brings us to the central segment of the structure (Rev 12-13), indicating that the great controversy between Christ and the counterfeit trinity—Satan and his two associates, the sea and earth beasts—is the focal point of the entire book. This section defines the framework of the material in the book from the perspective of the great controversy with a special emphasis on the final conflict at the conclusion of the history of this world.

#### **Threefold Structure of Revelation**

While recognizing the potentials in the various options with regard to the structural organization of the book, it appears that the threefold structure of the book of Revelation, with a prologue (1:1-8) and an epilogue (22:6-21), is the most obvious. Such a structure is self-evident on the basis of Rev 1:19, and

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11:19 introduces a completely new division, most probably describing the content of the little scroll of Rev 10. The first main division comprises the messages to the seven churches (1:9-3:22); the focus of the second major division is on the opening of the seven-sealed scroll (chapters 4-11); and the third one deals with the eschatological consummation of this earth's history and the ultimate establishment of God's kingdom (12-22:5).

Interestingly, each of these three major divisions opens with an introductory vision of Christ. Rev 1:9-20 introduces the messages of the seven churches (chapter 2-3); chapters 4-5 begin the section of the opening of the seven-sealed scroll (chapters 6-11); and 12:1-12 begins the eschatological division of the book (chapters 12:13-22:5). Each introductory vision portrays Christ in a unique role. The portrayal of Christ in the introductory sections seems to be the key to the understanding of the remaining part of each division, defining its respective theme and content.

**1. Messages to the Seven Churches (Rev 1:9-3:22):**

**Christ as the High Priest**

The first major division of Revelation opens with the vision of the glorified Christ walking among the seven lampstands as the High Priest (Rev 1:9-20). He is here pictured fulfilling the covenant promise given to ancient Israel: "I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people" (Lev 26:12). In walking among the churches, Christ is present with the churches serving them individually. He knows everything about each one of them. Much more than that, he has the solution to their problems and needs. This is why he commissions John to write the things revealed to him and pass them on to the churches (Rev 1:11). Each of the messages to the churches begins and concludes alike, introducing Christ and concluding with an appeal to listen to the Spirit. What is found in between is Christ's special message suited to the actual situation, condition, and needs of the church to which the respective message is addressed, together with the particular historical situation of the city in which the church was located. Christ visits each church to help her to be ready to meet the coming crisis. If the churches want to know how to live and make a decisive "turn around" in their religion, they need only listen to the messages of the one who knows them.

This suggests that the first three chapters of Revelation, together with the special introduction of Christ, provide the foundation upon which the prophetic portion of the book (chapters 4-22) builds. These chapters define the nature and purpose of the entire book of Revelation: to reassure the church throughout history of Christ's perennial promise: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20).



**2. Opening of the Sealed Scroll (Rev 4-11):  
Christ as the Eschatological Ruler**

The second major division of Revelation is introduced with the vision of Christ as the promised king of Davidic lineage (chapters 4-5). This introductory scene depicts in figurative language the enthronement of the resurrected Christ on the throne of the universe and the inauguration into his universal dominion and lordship over the world. With his taking the seven-sealed scroll—as the token of the transference of all authority and sovereignty to him—Christ is enthroned on the throne of the universe at the right hand of the Father. Now, he is the preordained eschatological ruler of the Davidic lineage (cf. Rev 5:5) “who, on the basis of the saving work completed by him, is called to discharge with authority God’s plan for the end of history.”<sup>32</sup>

Rev 4-5 is thus the starting point for the interpretation of what chapters 6-11 describe. These chapters provide the panoramic survey of history in the scene of the opening of the seven seals and the blowing of the seven trumpets from Christ’ ascension to heaven until his return to earth. The section describes events and conditions within historical time which are preparatory to the opening of the sealed scroll in the eschatological consummation.<sup>33</sup> It provides the biblical philosophy of history, providing God’s people with the assurance of God’s ultimate control of events and different movements and activities occurring on earth in relation to the church. Although God’s faithful people might experience oppression and hardship in the hostile world, they are provided with the certainty that their Lord and King who rules on the throne of the universe is in ultimate control. He will bring the history of this world to its ultimate end and deal definitely with the problem of evil.

**3. Contents of the Sealed Scroll (Rev 12:1-22:5):  
Christ as Apocalyptic Michael**

The last of the three major divisions of the book of Revelation (chaps. 12-22:5) appears to be the disclosure of a part of the sealed scroll of Rev 5. This section brings us to the conclusion of the history of the great conflict between Christ and Satan. This great conflict is introduced in 12:1-12, where Christ is portrayed in his role as the apocalyptic warrior Michael. As the commander of the heavenly armies, Christ is a constant victor over Satan. He has defeated Satan by his death on the cross, his ascension, and throwing him from heaven down to earth, and also during the entire period of the Christian era. Satan is frustrated by constant defeat and becomes furious against the “remaining ones of the woman’s offspring.” With a firm determination to win the final battle, he associates himself with two allies, the sea beast and the earth beast. By forming

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<sup>32</sup> Jürgen Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, The Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 76.

<sup>33</sup> Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 57.

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the counterfeit trinity, he uses every available means to prevent the accomplishment of God's plans for the world. What follows in the rest of the book (chaps. 13-22) is the description of the events leading to the conclusion of the cosmic drama and the ultimate establishment of God's eternal kingdom.

Rev 12 is intended to provide God's people with the certainty that they are not left on their own in the closing events of this world's history. The saints are clearly in the front line of the final battle. As Christ defeated Satan before and has fought the battle on behalf of his people during the history of Satan's attempt to destroy them, so he will be with his end-time people in the final crisis. The future might at times look gloomy, and the eschatological events threatening and frightening; yet the believers must keep in mind that Satan has already lost the battle. Christ the Victor will wage war for his followers until the forces of darkness are finally defeated. The satanic triumvirate and the oppressors of God's people will find their definite end in the lake of fire (Rev 19:20-20:15), while God's people will triumphantly find their rest in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:1-22:5).

The foregoing brief analysis of the three introductory visions to the major divisions of the book of Revelation defines the main theme of the book as intended by the inspired author and explains the book's theological perspective. It demonstrates that the real purpose of the last book of the Bible is not just to inform about the events in the world (whether historical or eschatological), but to help the faithful understand God's plan and purpose for them as history approaches its end. It is not to let them understand the future, but to acquaint them with the God of Revelation who holds the future and to provide them with the certainty of Christ's presence with his faithful people throughout history in general, as well as during the time of the end in particular (cf. Matt 28:20).

In conclusion, it appears that the rich structural design of the book of Revelation was well planned by the inspired author. This design is, thus, very significant for understanding the sweeping thematic progression of the book. It warns the reader against studying and interpreting a passage or section in isolation from the rest of the book. Any interpretation of the text must be in agreement with the general purpose of the book as a whole.

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