

The Structure of Revelation 6-19

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Any interpretation of Revelation must deal with a number of issues: an approach to reading the symbolic language; classification of literary genre;¹ the choice of an overall interpretive framework; and the structure of the text. This paper will focus on the structure of chapters 6-19 in which John sets forth a kaleidoscope of images portraying “what must soon take place” (1:1).² Chapters 4-5 set the stage for mediating the revelation to John and chapters 20-22 describe post-eschaton realities. It is in chapters 6-19 that John sets forth his vision a coming tribulation and its eschatological resolution. Before discussing the structure of specific sections I will summarize six conclusions which will then be demonstrated in a more detailed argument.

First, chapters 6-19 are naturally divided into five clearly demarcated sections that depict various aspects of the eschatological tribulation. Three sections are structured around a series of seven: seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. In 12-14 and 17-19 John provides two portraits of an anti-Christ order that persecutes God’s people and comes under judgment at the eschaton. John deals with similar themes using various images in these five sections. However there are no inner connections linking one section to the next and no common structuring principle governing the structure of the five sections. In light of this, it seems best to start with a focus on the structure of each of the five sections and the flow of thought within each.

Second, in chapters 6-19 John covers similar ground using a different set of symbols. For example at three points he provides a picture of believers who have remained faithful during the tribulation and are celebrating in God’s presence in a post-eschaton setting: the multitude before the throne (7:9-17), the 144,000 on Mt. Zion (14:1-5), and the people of God singing beside the sea (15:1-4). While the imagery varies, these pictures point to the same reality. The placement of these images serves a different function in each context. In the seal section the multitude before the throne is a picture of those who have stood/persevered in the eschatological tribulation on the basis of the enabling grace that God extended (symbolized by sealing). The picture of the 144,000 on Mt. Zion (14:1ff) immediately follows the portrayal of the anti-Christ order in chapter 13, and seems designed to encourage the Church with a reminder of the ultimate outcome after the tribulation and their experience of persecution. The image of God’s people beside the sea introduces the bowl judgments and appears to function as another reminder of

¹ Revelation is best classified as an apocalypse. My doctoral dissertation proposed the following definition of the genre: “An Apocalypse is a literary work structured around a first person narrative account of a mediated revelation. In an apocalypse the author relates the revelation he received by telling the story of the event in which it was given. The basic components of an apocalypse are a narrative setting (e.g. Rev. 1.9-20) and an account of the revelatory event itself (Rev. 2.1ff).” (Jewish xx) David Aune, *Revelation* (3 volumes; WBC; Word, 1997, 1998), 1-xx, argues that the definition of the genre must also identify characteristic content and social function. The problem is that given the diversity of subject matter and social function of the extant Jewish, Christian and Gnostic apocalypses, it is difficult to propose a meaningful definition of the common content and function. Gordon Fee, *Revelation* (NCCS; Cascade: 2010), xx, is representative of those who argue that Revelation is a combination of three genres: apocalypse, prophecy and epistle. One difficulty is that an epistolary style does not characterize the whole text and, in reality, the epistolary elements simply provides the means for communicating the apocalypse to the churches (xx). The other problem is that while the author describes the revelation as prophetic (xx), the revelation itself is not cast in the form of traditional oracular prophecy.

² The assumption underlying this paper is that at the time of writing John likely envisioned that the revelation he received would be realized in the near future. As it turned out the churches for whom he wrote did have a partial experience of the tribulation realities he portrays (Preterism) and down through the centuries the church has had many experiences of tribulation dynamics (Idealism). The degree to which there will be an eschatological realization of the revelation given John will be determined by God alone (Futurism).

what lies beyond the experience of tribulation judgments. John covers a number of other topics multiple times using different images: expressions of judgments on the unbelieving world,³ portraits of an anti-Christ order,⁴ the Church's experience of persecution,⁵ the Church's experience of God's grace and preservation,⁶ the Church praying for God to act,⁷ and as will be argued shortly—multiple images of the eschaton.⁸ In the interpretation of Revelation it is important to both recognize this parallel material and also to respect the unique literary context in which the individual pericopes occur.

Third, each of the five sections concludes with an eschaton image which is designed to conclude that particular section: the trumpet section (11:15-19) concludes with an image of heaven's rejoicing that the eschaton has arrived; chapters 12-14 conclude with two images of an eschatological gathering of unbelievers for judgment;⁹ the bowls section concludes with symbols of the catastrophe of the eschaton (17:17-21, cf. v. 17: 'it is done'); and 17-19 conclude with a military symbol of Christ coming in judgment against the anti-Christ order (19:11-21). The conclusion of the seal section (8:1) is ambiguous in that when the seventh seal is opened John records, "there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." The symbol seems to reference Zephaniah 1:7, "Be silent before the Lord, for the Day of the Lord is at hand." Against this background the silence here seems to have in view heaven's awe that God's kingly rule has been fully manifest in the world.¹⁰ The fact that the other four sections conclude with an eschaton image would support the interpretation that the seventh trumpet is also about the eschaton itself.

Fourth, it is possible that in the seal, trumpet, and bowl sequences, the sixth is a symbol of a climactic, penultimate judgment close to the eschaton. The sixth trumpet and sixth bowl portray a particularly destructive war. Given that John often uses various images to portray the same reality, it is likely that the sixth trumpet and sixth bowl have the same war in view. The sixth seal (6:12-17) portrays images of cosmic dislocation and the response of fear this creates among unbelievers. What is noteworthy about this section is that the imagery closely parallels a cluster of Old Testament passages using the imagery of cosmic dislocation to depict the seriousness of God acting in judgment against Israel.¹¹ If the sixth trumpet and sixth bowl describe a climactic war, then the sixth seal may be a symbol for either the same war or for a broader range of climactic judgments.¹²

This interpretation that the sixth describes a climactic judgment is also supported by the observation that in the seal, trumpet, and bowl series the sixth is set apart rather than being an

³ Four seals (6:1-8); Four trumpets (8:6-12); Fifth trumpet (9:1ff); Five bowls (16:1-11).

⁴ Two Beasts (13:1-18); Woman on Beast (17:1-18).

⁵ Two Witnesses (13:3-13); Dragon/Beasts (12:17-13.18); Rooted in Satan's opposition to Christ (12:1-17).

⁶ Sealing 144,000 (7:1-8); Measuring Temple (11:1-2); Preservation and vindication of two witnesses (11:3-13); Preservation of the Woman (12:6, 13-16).

⁷ Martyrs praying (6:9-11); Prelude to Trumpets (8:3-5); Altar's amen (16:7).

⁸ Seventh seal (8:1); Seventh trumpet (11:15-19); Grain and grape harvests (14:14-20); Seventh bowl (16:17-21); Rider on white horse (19:11-21).

⁹ 14:14-20 describes an eschatological grain and grape harvest. Several considerations point to these as parallel images for judgment on the unbelieving world: 1. the imagery reflects Joel 3:13 where the grain and grape harvest are parallel; 2. these two images conclude a section which focus on a portrayal of an anti-Christ order and it's eschatological judgment; 3. there are no contextual indicators pointing to the grain harvest as the gathering of either believers or the whole world.

¹⁰ The seventh trumpet portrays the complimentary truth, viz. heaven's rejoicing that the eschaton has arrived.

¹¹ Joel 2:10; 2:30; Isa 2:10; 34:4; Hosea 10:8.

¹² Osborne, *Revelation*, 269, describes the sixth seal as being 'at the threshold of the parousia.'

integral part of what precedes. The first four seals and trumpets form a unit while the fifth seal and trumpet are essentially stand-alone pericopes and bowls 1-5 form a unit. This leaves the sixth seal, trumpet, and bowl as pericopes clearly demarcated from what comes before and after.

It is also noteworthy that the first part of the first interlude in the trumpet section (10:1-7) makes the point that God will bring the eschatological tribulation to a conclusion and not delay the end. This comes between the sixth and seventh trumpet and may be a way of saying that once the climactic war of the sixth trumpet takes place, God will not delay before bringing the eschaton. It thus seems possible that the sixth seal, trumpet and bowl point to a climactic judgment close to the eschaton.

Fifth, the multiple images of the eschatological tribulation focus on realities that will characterize the period as a whole, rather than describing specific events narrated in chronological sequence. This is clearly the case for the main body of chapters 12-14 and 17-19. The focus of both sections is on a portrait of an anti-Christ order and its eschatological destruction. In neither case does John narrate a series of events during the tribulation. If one argues that the section portraying the activity of the two witnesses (11:3-13) refers to the activity of two specific prophets then this might be an instance of narrating a specific sequence of chronological events. However if the two witnesses are a symbol of the role and destiny of the Church, then this section too would depict something which characterizes an on-going reality during the entire tribulation rather than a single series of events.

The fifth seal (6:9-11) is about the heavenly vindication of the martyrs. If John were narrating a series of events then one would expect that it would be introduced with a description of the persecution that resulted in martyrs.¹³ Instead this scene is preceded by a depiction of war and its destructive consequences as one expression of God's judgment. The point of this rather abruptly introduced pericope would appear to be that whenever there are martyrs during the tribulation, the dynamics portrayed here will be played out: martyrs will enter heaven praying for the vindication of God's cause and then be invited to enjoy the "rest" which their faithfulness has earned (cf. 14:13).

It is possible that the demonically inflicted suffering of the fifth trumpet (9:1-11) also describes a judgment that can embrace the whole of the eschatological tribulation.¹⁴ The duration of this judgment is "five months" (9:5). In real life, people would only experience a locust plague for a few days before the locust moved on to another area. Specifying the judgment as five months may speak both of the severity of the judgment and to the fact that this can characterize the entire period of the eschatological tribulation.

In the case of the sequentially structured first four seals, four trumpets, and five bowls, one could argue that these are meant to be understood as a single series of events with the seals, trumpets, and bowls understood as taking place either after each other or at the same time. However it is also possible that sequential ordering is more for the purpose of dramatic presentation.

¹³ The first explicit treatment of the persecution and martyrdom is in 11.7-12 and this is developed in 12-13.

¹⁴ The suffering inflicted by the demonic powers may refer to any kind of physical or spiritual adversity sponsored by the demonic. However it may also have in view a demonically inspired increase of evil and sin which in turn creates suffering for unbelievers.

The first four seals appear to describe a single reality: war and its destructive consequences—famine, disease and death. When war takes place (seals 1 & 2), the reader need not await the experience of famine, disease and death (seals 3 & 4). These four seals are experienced as one reality and the section makes the simple point that one of God’s options in acting in judgment is to allow for war and its destructive consequences. The first four trumpets appear to make the point that God acts in judgment against the created order on which humanity depends for life. The five bowls appear to use Exodus imagery to illustrate that God acts in judgment against humanity directly (bowls 4, 5) and against the creation which supports human life (bowls 1, 2, 3). These various images could depict options that God has in acting in judgment at any time during the eschatological tribulation. In principle it is possible that these judgments could happen either intermittently or continuously throughout the eschatological tribulation.¹⁵

This interpretation is consistent with the way material is structured in all the other sections of Revelation that have been surveyed. If John does not narrate specific sequences of chronological events in the other sections, then it is less likely that he is doing so in the four seals, four trumpets, and five bowls.

Sixth, the principle of recapitulation in understanding the structure of Revelation needs to be understood in terms of each of the five sections providing a different kaleidoscope of images that portray the same period from various perspectives. However each section has a unique structure and combination of images. This can be seen by a summary comparison of the content of the seal, trumpet and bowl sections:

Seven Seals

- Seals 1-4: Judgment through war and its destructive consequences
- Seal 5: Martyrs in heaven pray for the vindication of God’s cause
- Seal 6: Symbols of cosmic dislocation describe climactic judgments (perhaps the war of the sixth trumpet and bowl)
- Interlude 1: God’s people are sealed, enabling grace is poured out before tribulation dynamics begin to unfold
- Interlude 2: God’s people who have remained faithful in the tribulation celebrate in a post-eschaton setting before the throne
- Seal 7: Silence: heaven’s awe that the eschaton has arrived

Seven Trumpets

- Prelude: Tribulation judgments a response to prayers of God’s people
- Trumpets 1-4: Judgment against the created order on which humanity depends for life
- Trumpet 5: Demonically inspired suffering, perhaps by sponsoring an increase in evil and sin which translates into greater human suffering
- Trumpet 6: Climactic war
- Interlude 1/1: God will not allow the eschatological tribulation to continue indefinitely (10:1-7)
- Interlude 1/2: Reaffirmation of John’s prophetic vocation (10:8-11)
- Interlude 2/1: Church experiences both an inward spiritual protection, and also a vulnerability to suffering through persecution (11:1-2)

¹⁵ A possible alternative interpretation would be to interpret Seals 1-4 as depicting war and its consequences as one expression of judgment falling early in the tribulation, Trumpets 1-4 as portraying God acting in judgment against the created order in the ‘middle’ period, and then Bowls 1-5 as being images of judgment against both unbelievers and the created order as expressed in the latter period of the eschatological tribulation. However this seems unlikely given John’s lack of interest in specifying a chronology for the tribulation.

- Interlude 2/2: Two witnesses a picture of the Church's call to bear witness, to suffer, and to look forward to God's vindication (11:3-13)
- Trumpet 7: Heaven rejoices that the eschaton has arrived

Seven Bowls

- Prelude 1: God's people celebrate in a post-eschaton setting before the throne (15:1-4)
- Prelude 2: Bowl judgments come from God and must necessarily happen (15:5-8)
- Bowls 1-5: Exodus symbols for God acting in judgment against both unbelievers and the created order
- Bowl 6: Climactic war
- Bowl 7: Symbols expressing the catastrophe of the eschaton

The third and fifth sections are not structured around a series of seven symbolic acts, and both focus on a portrayal of an anti-Christ political order and its eschatological destruction. However while they deal with a common theme, the structure of each section and even content is again unique:

Chapters 12-14

- 12:1-17: Christ's defeat of Satan at the cross is the basis for Satan's hostility towards the Church. During the tribulation, the Church is preserved from destruction, but not from opposition.
- 13:1-18: Satan acts against the Church through an anti-Christ political order
- 14:1-5: God's people celebrate in a post-eschaton setting before the throne
- 14:6-13: Three angelic announcements, concluding with an extended warning to believers of the eternal consequences of denying Christ
- 14:14-20: Gathering of unbelievers for judgment (grain and grape harvest)

Chapters 17-19

- 17:1-6: Symbolic vision of a Beast (anti-Christ) & Woman (urban center)
- 17:7-17: Further information about the anti-Christ
- 17:18-18:24: Announcement of destruction of the Woman (urban center)
- 19:1-10: Heaven's rejoicing at God's judgment of Beast/Woman
- 19:11-21: Military symbol for Christ coming in judgment against the anti-Christ and its allies at the eschaton

In conclusion, I will make a few observations about the implications of this analysis as it concerns some recent proposals as to the structure of material in Revelation 6-19.

1. The observation that each of the five sections concludes with an eschaton image suggests that the section beginning with 17:1 ends at 19:21 with the picture of Christ coming in judgment against the anti-Christ order.¹⁶ One likely implication of this structural division is that in 20:1ff John begins to portray post-eschaton realities.

¹⁶ It is remarkable how many scholars do not keep 17:1-19:21 together as a single section: G.R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (rev. edition; NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1974), 32, separates 19:11-21 from previous section and makes it part of a section extending from 19:11-22:5. Boring, *Revelation*, 191ff, separates 19 from 17 and makes it part of a section extending from 19:1-22:21. Osborne, *Revelation*, 31, adds 20:1-15 to 17-19.

2. It is clear that the seven seals portray exactly the same time period as the other four sections. The suggestion that the revelation of eschatological events cannot begin until the seven seals have been broken and the scroll opened is not supported by the content of the seal section.¹⁷ It seems more likely that the opening of the seals is used as the first structuring device for disclosing some of the content of the scroll by using images of the tribulation that conclude with Christ's coming.
3. Chapters 12-14 need to be seen as a distinct section in their own right rather than as an interlude comparable to the interludes in the seal and trumpet sections.¹⁸
4. It seems unlikely that 8:2-5 and 15:1-4 have both a forward and backward reference.¹⁹ Revelation 8:1 concludes the previous section with a symbol of heaven's awe that the eschaton has arrived. Revelation 8:2-5 then introduces the next section with an affirmation that the judgments to be portrayed can be seen as a response to the prayers of God's people. It does not have any connection to the eschaton image that precedes it. Revelation 15:1-4 functions as a prelude to the bowl judgments and does not have a backward reference to preceding material. This is supported by the observation that in chapters 12-14 John has already used a picture of the Church celebrating before the throne in a post-eschaton setting (14:1-4). It is unlikely two pericopes later (after 14:6-20) he would intend a similar scene to have both a forward and backward reference. The bowl section is structured around Exodus imagery and this initial scene serves simply as an introduction.
5. I can see no evidence that John wants us to understand that the seventh seal contains within it the seven trumpets, and the seventh trumpet—the seven bowls.²⁰
6. The recent denial of any kind of recapitulation within chapters 6-19 and the argument that the author intends this section to be understood as a continuous chronological narrative of events in the eschatological tribulation is simply unsupported by any data in Revelation.²¹

Beale, *Revelation*, 109ff, notes the "...radical disagreement about the literary outlines of chs. 17-22." None of the nine views Beale surveys treat 17.1-19.21 as a single unit.

¹⁷ Mounce, *Revelation*, 139; Osborne, *Revelation*, 269. Beale, *Revelation*, 117, n. 45, for other advocates of this idea.

¹⁸ Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 32f; and Osborne, *Revelation*, 30, argue that 12-14 function as an interlude between the trumpets and bowls. However Osborne does acknowledge that even as it functions as an interlude, 12-14 also stands on its own.

¹⁹ Collins, *Combat Myth*, 15f; 18f; Beale, *Revelation*, 112-113.

²⁰ Cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 117, n 46, for a list of those advocating some version of this. Also Aune, *Revelation –I*, xciv, who argues that the seventh seal contains both the seven trumpets and seven bowls.

²¹ Aune, *Revelation –I*, xciii, states that the author "...intends the visions themselves to constitute a single chronological narrative of the eschatological events that will soon begin to unfold. This means that no form of the recapitulation theory is valid for the present text of Revelation." He implies that the author's use of a variety of diverse pre-existing traditions to fashion his portrayal of eschatological events accounts for the appearance of the phenomena of recapitulation.