

# **THE STRUCTURE OF REVELATION**

Keith Underhill  
5<sup>th</sup>. December 1973

The structure of Revelation is inseparably bound up with its interpretations. Discussions centred on the first chapters (1-3), and the last chapters (21-22) are in general agreement. Concerning the great bulk of Revelation (chapters 4-20) there are three main views.

(1) Preterist. Revelation describes events which are *all* past. Adams gives a basic two-fold division: chapters 4-12 describing the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and chapters 13-20 the fall of the Roman Empire.

(2) Futurist. Revelation describes events which are still yet in the future, starting with a seven year period immediately preceding the second coming. According to this view the things described are all to take place in chronological order from chapter 4 to chapter 20 (so Tenney, Walvoord).

(3) Historicist. Revelation covers the entire history of the church from the resurrection to the final judgement. Interpreters who take this view usually understand the book to be dominated in structure by the number seven (Fairbairn, Hendriksen, Kline), so that in this large middle portion are five distinct visions each covering the same complete field of history, but from different aspects. The basic structure here is that of recapitulation, although Kline emphasizes that the eschatological element increases as the visions unfold.

This whole question of structure is too vast for consideration in a short paper, so that only certain aspects can be detailed, those which specifically point to the answer. One of the basic questions to be asked is, 'Are there indications of references to the final day of judgement for unbelievers and blessing for believers?' If there is only one, then the preterist view cannot be sustained. If there is more than one then the historicist view must be held over against the futurist.

## **1. INDICATIONS OF CONSUMMATION**

**A. Chapter 6:12-17** describes the sixth of the series of seven seals. The following points must be seriously considered.

6:12-13 Three times in Revelation a σεισμὸς μέγας (great earthquake) is described. First with the opening of the sixth seal (6:12), second with the pouring out of the sixth trumpet (11:13), and third with the pouring out of the seventh bowl (16:18). This great earthquake is connected with other great cosmic disturbances in the instance of the sixth seal and seventh bowl. The language is reminiscent of Jesus' Olivet discourse (Matthew 24:29), and many places in the prophets where great changes in the heavens are spoken of as taking place (Isaiah 13:10, Joel 2:10,30-31). In turn, these striking descriptions are based on the events of the exodus (Exodus 7:20-24, 10:21-23, cf. Ezekiel 32:7-8). Such events are always in the context of redemption, the great and terrible Day of the Lord, which will also be a day of judgement upon the enemies of God. So it was on the day of Christ's death which was an intimation of the last great resurrection (Matthew 27:51-54); and the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:19-20), the first part of the Day of the Lord anticipating the completion of final destruction (2 Peter 3:7,10-11). This the Scripture gives no evidence that these cosmic changes will be effected *before* the last day, such as at the destruction of Jerusalem (the question of interpretation of these events is not relevant here). An appeal to Matthew 24:29 will not stand up to scrutiny (cf. Luke 21:25-26) for Jesus refers to "all the tribes of the earth" mourning, and the gathering of the elect from the four winds (the world-wide catastrophe as in Luke).

6:14 There are two almost identical places in Revelation, again in reference to the seventh bowl (16:20), and also the great white throne (20:11), where the context of the final judgement would seem very clear. The vanishing of the sky and earth under the picture of a scroll being rolled up is employed elsewhere (Isaiah 34:4, Hebrews 1:12) with clear reference to the ending of the world, and thus the creation of a new heavens and a new earth (Revelation 21:1).

6:15-16a There is one other instance in Revelation where men seek death, under the fifth trumpet (9:6). The men seeking death are described in almost the same language after their destruction by Christ at His coming.

Revelation 6:15

βασιλεῖς  
The kings of the earth and the great men  
χιλίαρχοι ισχυροί  
and the generals and the rich and the strong,  
πᾶς δοῦλος ἐλεύθερος  
and every one, slave and free.

Revelation 19:18

βασιλέων χιλίαρχων  
The flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the  
ισχυρῶν  
flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and  
πάντων  
their riders, and the flesh of all men, both  
ἐλεύθερων δούλων  
free and slave, both small and great.

In both cases it is the wrath of the Lamb which they bear, the Lamb who is seated on the throne (6:16, 19:15). Such similarity of content and language presumes the same events are being referred to. Prophetically this action by earthly men is connected with the Day of the Lord already mentioned (Isaiah 2:10-11, 19, 21). It is a refrain whenever men have to face the judgement and wrath of God (Hosea 10:8, Luke 23:30). But note that it is the kings of the earth and all men who are being described, hardly appropriate to the destruction of Jerusalem.

6:16b-17 The events described are to take place on the great day of the wrath of the Lamb (see Jude 6, Romans 2:5). Kline comments: "The case for the non-recapitulationist absolutely breaks on 6:17". The Scripture is definite in applying the wrath of Christ to the final day of judgement (Matthew 25:41-46, Luke 17:28-30, 2 Thessalonians 1:8, 2 Peter 3:7, Jude 14-15), an activity which could not be contemplated during this gospel age as the gospel is freely offered to all nations. The day of wrath and the Day of the Lord are synonymous (Revelation 16:14, Zephaniah 1:14-16). It is such a great and terrible day that none can stand before it, so all are represented as subdued (see Joel 2:11). At the opening of the seventh seal, therefore, there is silence in heaven as all opposition has been overcome (1 Samuel 2:9, Isaiah 47:5, Zechariah 2:13).

Enough contextual evidence has been given to show conclusively that the sixth seal is itself the **final** judgement of God upon **all** wicked men. While some elements might fit into a realized eschatological view of Matthew 24, Revelation 6:16b-17 is conclusive that the end-time is being referred to.

**B. Chapter 11:15-19** describes what happens when the seventh trumpet is blown, and is simultaneously the third woe (11:14).

11:15,17 The conclusion to the trumpet series is that the Lord begins to reign over the kingdoms of the world. Before the time reference can be indicated, it is necessary to point out that the Scripture represents a complex coming of Christ's kingdom. With His presence on earth the βασιλεία had come (Matthew 12:28), yet the fullest manifestation of the

kingdom was yet to come, at His resurrection (16:28), and then at the second coming (26:64, cf. 24:30 and parallels). The only way that this language in Revelation can be applied to the destruction of Jerusalem is by comparing it with the Olivet discourse (Matthew 24) interpreted in a realized way, but this has already been shown to be untenable. At the most it could refer to Christ's resurrection victory here. Revelation speaks of kingdoms of the world, of the beast (16:10), of the ten kings with the beast (17:12), and of the woman who is Babylon (17:18). The Lamb will overthrow all these (see 11:13, 16:14, 17:14) and, "when all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subjected to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be everything to everyone" (1 Corinthians 15:28). So also Revelation 19:6-7 also points to God's reign and the marriage supper of the Lamb, which is the consummation of all things.

**11:18** Part of the worship given by the 24 elders in connection with the final realization of the kingdom also concerns God's righteous anger having been dispensed on the nations (6:16-17, see Psalm 21:3). It is the time of the judgement of the dead (20:12-13) which must be the general judgement day when the wicked will be destroyed and the saints rewarded (μισθός, 1 Corinthians 3:14, 2 John 8).

**11:19** This verse cannot be applied with certainty (yet Adams is certain that here is a reference to the destruction of the Jewish temple), but particular reference should be made to the context of 16:18,21 where the same event is described.

Again, there *are* elements in this seventh trumpet which could reasonably be applied to the destruction of Jerusalem, as it marks the final end of the old economy; but there are *other* elements, especially the judgement, which cannot be thus harmonized. At the same time, there should always be comparison with the rest of Revelation, and again and again it has been seen that there is reduplication where one member is almost universally agreed to apply to the consummation.

**C. Chapter 14:17-20** has many features in common with what has already been studied.

**14:17-18** This describes the harvesting of the earth under the figure of gathering grapes from the vine (cf. Isaiah 63:2-4, Joel 3:13). This is a common representation of judgement as harvesting (Matthew 13:24-30,36-43). It is the harvest of the whole earth that is in view, that is, the final judgement, both of the redeemed (14:14-16), and of the wicked (14:17-20).

**14:19** Again there is reference to the wrath of God. In Revelation the idea of God's anger is specifically applied only in two types of instance: in those passages which should be interpreted as the times of the consummation (θύμος – 14:10,19, 19:15 and ὄργή – 6:16,17, 11:18, 14:10, 16:19, 19:15); and in the case of the seven bowls of God's wrath which clearly imply impending consummation, as they are the climax and completion of God's wrath (θύμος – 15:1,7, 16:1). Therefore it is inescapable that the full and final retribution is in view in this verse.

**14:20** The judgement is in terms of treading the wine-press, and John later indicates that it is the Word of God Himself who will tread "the wine-press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" (19:15). In both it is the nations (9:15) on the earth that are in view (14:18) coming under the wrath of God. Can this possibly be two separate occasions? The specific language of Revelation will not allow for this.

**D. Chapter 16:17-21** to which much reference has already been made as the seventh and final bowl of God's wrath to be poured out.

16:17 As an introduction to these seven bowls it was exclaimed that “with them the wrath of God is ended” (15:1). And from the throne came the words, “It is done!” that is, God’s anger is exhausted (completed), the full recompense has been meted out (Isaiah 66:6). The background for these bowls of wrath are again in the Exodus (Exodus 7 – 10) and so here is the final realization of that typical judgement on Egypt.

16:18-19 Destruction was prophesied of Babylon of old (Isaiah 13:10-16) and the same thing will happen to the Babylon of these new covenant days (the precise reference of ‘Babylon’ need not concern us here). As the last display of God’s wrath in the bowls (the cup of the fury of God’s wrath has been drained) not only the great city, but also the cities of the *nations* are destroyed. Once again, it is a world-wide judgement.

16:20-21 Heavy hailstones also fell at the seventh trumpet (11:19). The sky, the mountains and islands were also depicted as disappearing at the sixth seal (6:14) and when the Lamb sits on the throne of judgement (20:11). All these references form a very strong argument to the presence of recapitulation in the book of Revelation.

**E. Chapters 17-22** almost entirely refer to the consummation as they describe the defeat of Babylon and of the beast (chapters 17-19), and finally the day of judgement (chapter 20). The following details point towards this:

17:14 That great battle in which the Lamb will defeat the beast is certainly Armageddon (16:16, 19:11-16, 20:7-10).

19:20 The hosts of evil having been defeated are “thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with brimstone”. The capture of the beast and the false prophet and their defeat have already been described (16:14,16), and their destruction undeniably marks the end of all things (see 20:10,14, 21:8).

## **F. Conclusion**

From chapter 4 onwards, Revelation comes to refer to the end of time, the Parousia, the final destruction of God’s enemies, the entrance into glory for believers. This recurring theme shows beyond question that Revelation is repetitive. The same events are described from different points of view over and over again. There are at least two conclusions to be drawn:

- (1) The content of Revelation cannot be confined to descriptions of the fall of Jerusalem and Rome, and thus, Adam’s structure cannot be retained.
- (2) Further exegesis of Revelation would conclusively show that more than just the events immediately preceding the Parousia are being described (so the Futurist view); but the exegesis above also shows that a strictly chronological structure for Revelation is inadmissible.

To buttress this latter conclusion, two other verses will show that Revelation makes frequent reference to the last day well before 20:11ff., which is where the futurist believes it is first introduced in its reality.

10:7 What is the mystery referred to here, which will be accomplished when the seventh trumpet is blown? There are only three other references to μυστήριον (mystery) in Revelation. The reference in 1:20 is not relevant, but Adams believes that the mystery referred to as being fulfilled was that “the Gentiles should come into the church on an equal footing with the Jews, not first having to become Jews themselves” (Ephesians 3:3-6). Undoubtedly this makes good sense, but it has already been shown that the seventh trumpet can only refer to the final judgement, and μυστήριον does have a wider

connotation (see Romans 11:25, 1 Corinthians 15:51, Ephesians 5:32, 2 Thessalonians 2:7). The seventh trumpet was to declare that “there should be no more delay” (10:6), a reference to the martyr’s cry for vengeance (6:10, see 8:2-5). It is specifically Babylon who has martyred God’s saints (17:6, 18:24, 19:2) and in her destruction vengeance had been meted out. This is then also described under the sixth and seventh trumpets (11:13,15-19) which refers to the destruction also of the nations on which the harlot sat (17:15). The mystery should therefore be considered more in terms of Babylon and all associated with her as anti-Christ (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:7), and the fulfilling of that mystery as their destruction and the final triumph of the Lord, and the total manifestation of the kingdom (11:15). It should also be noticed that the destruction of Babylon and the beast on which she sits (17:7) are described twice, although in reverse order (non-chronological?) (16:17-21, cf. 14:8, 18:2, and 16:12-16, cf. 19:20).

16:15 The interjection at the pouring out of the sixth bowl (16:12-16) is in the context of Armageddon. Christ’s second coming in judgement is often spoken of as being like a thief (κλέπτης – Matthew 24:43,44, 1 Thessalonians 5:2,4, 2 Peter 3:10), although it is also used in Revelation to denote a prior judgement (3:3). In the context of this final battle (cf. 19:19) it can refer to nothing else but His second coming.

## 2. OTHER INDICATIONS OF RECAPITULATION

### A. Comparison of the trumpet and bowl series.

	<u>Trumpets (8:6-11:19)</u>	<u>Bowls (16:1-21)</u>
1	Hail and fire, mixed with blood, which fell on the <u>earth</u> ; a third of the earth was burnt up, a third of the trees, and all green grass was burnt up.	Poured on the <u>earth</u> , and foul and evil sores came upon men who bore the mark of the beast and worshipped its image.
2	Great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the <u>sea</u> ; a third of the sea became <u>blood</u> , a third of the living creatures in the sea <u>died</u> , and a third of the ships were destroyed.	Poured on the <u>sea</u> , it became like the <u>blood</u> of a dead man and every living things <u>died</u> that was in the sea.
3	Great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the <u>rivers</u> and of the <u>fountains of water</u> ... third of the waters became wormwood, many men died of the water.	Poured into the <u>rivers</u> and the <u>fountains of water</u> , and they became blood.
4	A third of the <u>sun</u> was struck, a third of the moon, third of the stars, so that a third of their light was darkened; a third of the day was kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night.	Poured on the <u>sun</u> , and it was allowed to scorch men with fire.
5	Star fallen from heaven to earth given key of <u>bottomless pit</u> from which rose smoke and locusts who tortured those without seal of God on their foreheads.	Poured on <u>throne of beast</u> , and its kingdom was in darkness.

6 Four angels bound at Euphrates released, Poured on the river Euphrates, water to kill a third of mankind. Number of troops of cavalry twice ten thousand by the East in preparation for Armageddon. ten thousand.

7 The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever, proclaimed by loud voices in heaven. "It is done." Great city split into three parts, cities of nations fell. Great voice from out of the temple (11:19) from the throne.

There is an almost exact correspondence between the trumpets and the bowls, particularly as far as the *place* of judgement is concerned. This is something too coincidental if totally different events are being described, as under the chronological (Futurist) scheme. As Fairbairn remarks: "... they are but different aspects of substantially the same course of procedure – different merely from the parties subjected to it being contemplated in somewhat different relations" (p. 410). The realities which the trumpets and bowls symbolize are different in purpose, although viewing the same events. The judgements under the trumpets only destroy one-third of the objects involved, whereas the bowls represent complete judgement (15:1) on all unbelievers. The trumpets are the Lord's war-note declaring that by the instruments employed, the whole created order will be brought under His dominion (11:15,17).

### **C. Revelation's self-description**

1:19 This verse shows the basic plan upon which the book is constructed (Adams, p. 57). This self-description gives a threefold division:

1. The things John had already seen (1:10-18)
2. The things which are (1:20-3:22)
3. The things to take place afterwards (4:1ff.)

Both Kline and Adams helpfully point out the fact that themes in the seven letters also form part of the main body of Revelation. One of the basic ideas is the anticipation of the eternal state. What Adams fails to note in his book is that these same themes which are present in the seven letters are also present in chapters 4 to 20, particularly the evil powers at work against God's people.

It then appears that the opening of the book sets the scene for the events which will be victory for the believer and destruction for the unbeliever, which will usher in the eternal state (chapters 21-22). This confirms the identifications throughout the prophecy which concern the last days.

There are references in Revelation to the time when the events described will take place, in both the first and last chapters (1:1 and 22:6, 1:3 and 22:10, 1:7 and 22:7, cf. 1:19, 4:1). When such statement as "the time is near", "what must soon take place", occur at the opening of the book it appears presumptuous to understand "what is to take place hereafter" (1:19) in terms of the entire history of the Christian church, including the return of Christ. But as these same statements occur at the end of Revelation also, Christ's return having just been described (all basically agree on this understanding of 20:11-15 and chapter 21), it is the interpretation which must be presumed, and it is not mere presumption.

10:11 Here is a description of at least some of the prophecies of Revelation which concern "many peoples and nations and tongues and kings". Already such a heavenly scene has been described (7:9). Can this innumerable multitude be anything less than the totality of

the redeemed in heaven? The language of 7:15-17 is too close to that of 21:4-6,22, 22:1,3 to imply anything else than the blessed eternal state. Thus, there is in view already an aspect which is wider than just Jerusalem and Rome, but one which is universal.

All these points serve to show that in the midst of opposition and persecution, in which the first century believers in Asia found themselves, they were pointed by John not just to the destruction of the Jewish temple and the Roman Empire, but to the evil forces behind these powers, to Satan himself and all his emissaries. The real comfort and hope of the believer is not the destruction of enemies which are seen (e.g. the Communists, false religion), “for we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual host of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). The believer rests in the hope that all evil will finally be destroyed, even death itself (20:14, cf. 1 Corinthians 15:26).

### **3. THE STRUCTURE OF REVELATION**

A detailed analysis of Revelation has not been given, but enough evidence has been presented to show that the subject matter of Revelation encompasses the whole period of the new covenant. It is not intended to be a prophetic history with detailed chronological notes of the events preceding Christ’s return. Rather, John brings forward various aspects of the judgement of God upon His enemies and the final triumph in which His weary saints will participate.

#### **(1) The church tempted and tried (1:1-3:22)**

The Author of Revelation, Jesus Christ, is first introduced (chapter 1). John is told to write letters to seven churches in Asia (chapters 2 & 3) in which they are rebuked for their sins and encouraged to persevere by the holding forth of gracious promises.

#### **(2) The seven seals (4:1-8:1)**

These are built on the foundation of the conditions just described in the Asian churches. The heavenly introductory scene is again preparatory, for it is only Christ, who by virtue of His self-sacrifice and exaltation, is able to destroy the works of death. The seven seals are general in character and introduce the various forces at work in the world, of good and evil, and finish with the triumphant Lamb reigning.

#### **(3) The seven trumpets (8:2-11:19)**

These chapters contain the seven trumpets of judgement, conceived of as warnings to the wicked of the coming doom, as they are only against *one-third* of creation. They spell out in more detail the physical and spiritual judgements which will come on the ungodly until Christ is triumphant over the kingdoms of this world, for the purpose of bringing them to repentance along with the preaching of the word.

#### **(4) The development and destruction of God’s enemies (12:1-14:20)**

The enemies who the Lamb will conquer are now more fully described as to their development and activity, the dragon (Satan), the two beasts, and Babylon (indirectly). The true church is also described in contradistinction, and the last judgement scene considered specifically with reference to God’s enemies.

#### **(5) The seven bowls (15:1-16:21)**

These judgements are not mixed with mercy, but are complete in their destruction of those who bear the mark of the beast. Rather than repent at these judgements the universal

response is to curse God. Thus there is, as the visions of Revelation progress, more and more emphasis on the final victory of God and less interest in the origins of that evil.

(6) Final judgements (17:1-21:8)

The destruction of Babylon (chapters 17 & 18), and the final dealings with the kingdoms of the earth (chapters 19 & 20) are here described, culminating in the last judgement and the new heavens and the new earth (20:11-21:8).

(7) The new Jerusalem (21:9-22:21)

The eternal blessedness of the redeemed in heaven is wonderfully depicted as the final and great hope of the tried and tested people of God. A conclusion to the book is appended (22:6-21).

### Bibliography

Jay E. Adams, *The Time is at Hand* (Philipsburgh: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973)

Patrick Fairbairn, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964)

William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961)

Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Revelation* (mimeographed class notes)

John E. Meeter, ed., *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield, 2* (Nutley: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973)

Merrill Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957)

John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966)