

WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

BASIC THEOLOGY

The theology of the Revelation has been succinctly summarized by the armchair theologian as simply, “God’s people win!” While this is surely an oversimplification, the statement is nevertheless the essence of what the book is about. One may describe the fundamental thrust of the book in three parts:

The Problem of Evil

The Revelation, like the predictions of Jesus and Paul (Mt. 24:15-31; II Th. 2:3-12), anticipates a brief period of terrible evil, and if one follows the lead of the post-apostolic writers, a period at the end of the age. (The preterist, of course, sees the book as largely concerned with the 1st Jewish Revolt in AD 66 and the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.) Here, we shall follow the approach of early Christianity in which society will be overwhelmed by satanically inspired agents who will openly defy God and seek to divert all worship to Satan, themselves, and the state (Re. 13). This “tribulation” initially occurred in the 1st century struggle of Christians within the Roman Empire, but this early trauma foreshadowed an even greater one to come at the end. Terrible martyrdom will result for any who do not conform (Re. 6:9-11; 13:15; 20:4). With unrelenting enmity, the powers of evil will be unleashed upon the people of God (Re. 12:12-17; 13:7).

THE BIBLE AND THEODICY

Theodicy is the vindication of God’s goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil. The Old Testament addresses issues of theodicy in several psalms, the Book of Job, and various passages in the prophets.

In the teachings of Jesus, the destruction of evil begins in the triumph of the cross and resurrection, but it still awaits a final resolution at the end of the ages.

The Book of Revelation is the Bible’s final address to the problem of evil.

Divine Wrath

Not only will the powers of evil in society be unleashed, the cosmos also shall be thrown into violent upheaval (Re. 6, 8, 16). Much, if not all, of this cosmic upheaval will be in the form of God’s wrath (8:2; 16:1). There is more than an incidental parallel here with the Old Testament account of the exodus. The redemption of Israel from Egyptian bondage “with a mighty hand” (Dt. 7:8) parallels the redemption of God’s people from the powers of evil (19:lff.). Just as Pharaoh set himself against Yahweh and the Israelites (Ex. 5:1-2, 7:13; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34-35; 10:20, 27; 11:9-10), so the Beast and his kingdom set themselves against God Almighty and his people (Re. 9:20-21; 13:5-6; 16:10, 12-16; 19:19). Just as Yahweh sent plagues upon Egypt (Ex. 3:18-20), so God shall send plagues upon the evil kingdom of the Beast (14:9-13; 16:10). Just as Israel was protected from the plagues upon Egypt (Ex. 8:22; 9:4, 26; 10:23; 12:12-13), so God shall protect his people from the outpourings of his wrath on the world (Re. 3:10; 7:1-3; 12:14-16). Just as Israel was delivered from Egypt by Moses amidst the upheaval of one final effort to destroy them (Ex. 14:5-9), so the people of God will be delivered by the awe-inspiring figure of Jesus Christ in his glory and power (Re. 16:12-16; 17:12-14; 19:11-21). The victors will sing the Song of Moses and of the Lamb (Ex. 15:1; Re. 15:2-3)

The Consummate Coming of the Kingdom of God

The New Testament idea of “kingdom” is primarily that of sovereignty, reign, and rule rather than merely domain. The Revelation depicts a startling contrast between the temporal rulership of earthly kings and the eternal sovereignty of Jesus Christ. While there is the inevitable grasping after power among earthly potentates (Re. 17:2, 9-13, 18; 18:3, 9), ultimate sovereignty belongs to Jesus Christ (Re. 1:5) and his people (Re. 1:6; 2:26-27; 3:21; 5:10; 20:6; 22:5). Though the kingdom of God may seem to be encroached upon by the kingdom of evil (Re. 1:9), the kingdom of God shall triumph in the end (Re. 11:15, 17; 12:10; 16:10, 14-16; 17:12-14; 19:16-21; 20:4-6; 21:24)

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *How does apocalyptic literature speak to the problem of evil in the world?*
- *How would you define the “wrath of God?” How is it different than human anger?*
- *How can the kingdom of God be both a present reality and a future hope?*

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

Before beginning the text of the Revelation, it will be well to consider briefly how the book is set up and what events are described.

Outline of the Book

1:1-8	Prologue
1:9-20	John’s Call to Prophecy (the vision of the glorified Christ)
2:1-3:22	The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor
4:1-5:14	The Vision of Heaven (the throne of God, the Lamb, the heavenly attendants)
6:1-8:5	The Judgments of the Seven Seals (chap. 7 interlude: the sealing of 144,000 and the triumph of the countless multitude)
8:6-11:19	The Judgments of the Seven Trumpets (10:1-11:16 interlude: the angel and the little scroll; the two witnesses)
12:1-13:18	The Woman, the Dragon, the Beast, the False Prophet
14:1-20	The Lamb, the 144,000, the Angel Messages, the Harvest of the Earth
15:1-16:21	The Judgments of the Seven Bowl-Cups
17:1-19:10	The Reign and Ruin of Babylon
19:11-22:5	The Revelation of Jesus Christ and the City of God
22:6-21	Epilogue

Structure of the Book

One of the fundamental challenges for the reader of the Revelation is that it seems he/she must know everything before he/she can know anything. This is acutely felt as one attempts to analyze the structure of the book. A most crucial issue is whether one is to approach the book chronologically, as though the events occur in succession, or whether there is the visionary recapitulation of events which double back on themselves. Hence, the question to be answered is whether in the three septets of judgment they are to be treated as linear (i.e., each judgment occurs consecutively), as cyclical (i.e., each series parallels the others), or intensifying (i.e., the last judgment in each series becomes the seven judgments in the succeeding series). Most interpreters see at least some amount of recapitulation (much like what happens in Daniel 2 and Daniel 7).

Progressive Parallelism

One approach, popular within the school of amillennialism, views the book as essentially the same story repeated seven times using different imagery and metaphors (e.g., William Hendriksen). Here, the basic message of the book occurs in seven visions, each describing the church.

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| 1. Chapters 1-3 | Vision of the seven churches |
| 2. Chapters 4-7 | Vision of the redeemed and the seven seals |
| 3. Chapters 8-11 | Vision of the seven trumpets and the two witnesses |
| 4. Chapters 12-14 | Vision of the woman, the dragon, the beast, and the Lamb |
| 5. Chapters 15-16 | Vision of the seven final plagues |
| 6. Chapters 17-19 | Vision of Babylon the Great and its fall |
| 7. Chapters 20-22 | Vision of the Holy City |

Two primary challenges attend this approach. First, it is not immediately apparent that the elements in each vision are, in fact, parallel. It is not so difficult to find parallels between the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven last plagues, but beyond that, the parallelism begins to break down. Second, it is difficult to find clear literary seams between these seven sections. Hence, while this understanding of the structure of the book has prominence within Reformed Theology, we will not follow it here.

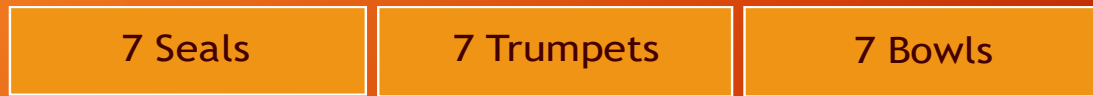
Simple but Limited Parallelism

This view sees the three septets of judgments (i.e., seals, trumpets, bowl-cups) as parallel to each other. Each seems to conclude the age (8:1; 11:15; 16:17). Especially in the judgments of the trumpets and bowl-cups, one can see strong parallels in content (e.g., G. R. Beasley-Murray).

Intensifying Recapitulation

This view (followed here) sees the three septets of judgment as an intensification of the larger prediction of judgment. As such, the seventh seal becomes the seven trumpets and the seventh trumpet becomes the seven bowl-cups (e.g., G. E. Ladd).

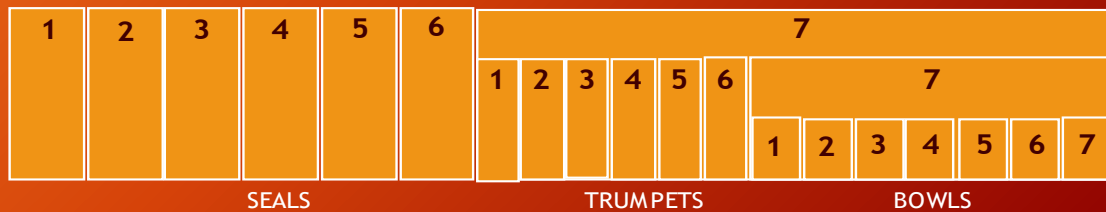
LINEAR



CYCLICAL

SEALS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
TRUMPETS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
BOWLS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

INTENSIFYING



Apocalyptic use of Numbers

Numbers in the Bible, but especially in apocalyptic literature, often have values that are beyond strictly mathematics. Some of the more important ones are:

THREE (symbolizing completeness)

FOUR (symbolizing boundaries)

SEVEN (AND MULTIPLES) (symbolizing completeness, rest, fulfillment, restoration)

TEN (symbolizing completion)

TWELVE (symbolizing order)

FORTY (symbolizing a complete cycle)

THOUSAND (AND MULTIPLES) (symbolizing a very large amount)

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *How might the structure of the book affect the way one interprets it?*
- *What do you make of the non-mathematical use of numbers, especially in comparison to a modern context in which numbers are invariably used only mathematically?*