

2.14 - Literary Structure

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CONTENTS

- 2.14.1 - Recapitulation of Events
- 2.14.2 - Sequential Events
- 2.14.3 - Structural Outline

All interpreters who come to the Scriptures are faced with attempting to grasp the literary structure of the text. It doesn't take the new believer very long to discover that passages which one had always assumed were strictly sequential are found, upon further investigation, to be presented in a nonsequential fashion suitable to the purposes of the writer. This becomes most evident by studying a *parallel gospel* which presents each gospel writer's material in parallel columns.¹ Some of the same issues arise when we come to the book of Revelation. How is the presentation of John to be understood? Are theseals, trumpets, and bowls sequential? Or do similarities between some of them imply the different passages are describing different details concerning the same event (repetition or *recapitulation*)? This process is complicated by the wide variety of conclusions interpreters reach concerning the literary structure of the book. Depending upon what elements of the book are seen as most determinative in outlining the material, different results are obtained.

A blessing and curse of John's Apocalypse are the many commentators who have attempted to interpret the book. This is especially true of the many outlines proposed for its literary structure. The diverse proposals are a maze of interpretative confusion.²

This rather complete lack of consensus about the structure of Revelation should caution the reader about accepting any one approach as definitive.³

Although there are many different views concerning the structure of the book of Revelation, two primary views have been recognized: the *sequential view* and the *simultaneous* or *recapitulation view*. Most other views are a variation on one of these. "The basic structural question is whether John intended his readers to understand the visions recorded in his work in a straightforward chronological sense or whether some form of recapitulation is involved."⁴

The structure of the Apocalypse is determined, in part, by one's understanding of whether thethree septet [sets of seven] judgments are sequential or simultaneous. The sequential view understands the seals, trumpets, and bowls as successive judgments that proceed out of each other. The simultaneous view sees a recapitulation of the septets in which the judgements are parallel to each other. Each recapitulation reviews previous events and adds further details.⁵

A fundamental issue in discerning the plan of the book of Revelation is how to explain the numerous parallel passages and repetitions within it. The book itself suggests that the number seven is an ordering principle by presenting seven messages, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. The parallels between the trumpets and bowls are especially close and seem repetitious. Some commentators have explained the repetition as the result of the use of sources. Others have seen the repetition as part of the author's literary design. The literary design has been seen as describing a linear sequence of events within history, including the past, present, and future. Another theory is that the same historical and eschatological events are described several times from different points of view.⁶

Other ways of dividing and organizing the book are also possible. For example, making a primary division based upon different visions,⁷ emphasizing the contrast between scenes in heaven versus their results on earth,⁸ or some other literary artifact such as spiritual transitions. Tenney calls attention to the fourfold literary structure marked by transitions where John "was transported in consciousness to a new scene of action where spiritual realities and future events were disclosed to him."⁹

In the Spirit

Section Topic	Transition Verse	Phrase	Location
Prologue: Christ Communicating	Rev. 1:1 [±]	-	-
Christ in the Church	Rev. 1:9-10 [±]	"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day"	"on the island that is called Patmos"
Christ in the Cosmos	Rev. 4:1-2 [±]	"Immediately I was in the Spirit"	"up here" (heaven)
Christ in Conquest	Rev. 17:3 [±]	"So he carried me away in the Spirit"	"into the wilderness"

Christ in Consummation	Rev. 21:10 ⁺	"And he carried me away in the Spirit"	"to a great and high mountain"
Epilogue: Christ Challenging	Rev. 22:6 ⁺	-	-

2.14.1 - Recapitulation of Events

The author of the earliest surviving commentary, Victorinus of Pettau, subscribed to the recapitulation view.¹⁰ This view emphasizes similarities between elements of the three series of symbols (seals, trumpets, bowls) and understands the similarities as an indication of identity. Although there are many variations on this scheme, the following diagram illustrates the general idea. The passages describing the trumpet judgments are seen as depicting additional details concerning the earlier seal judgments. Similarly, the passages describing the bowl judgments are understood as elaborating on the previous trumpet judgments. See [Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 128] for a more elaborate example.

Recapitulation of Events



Often, a *similar event* (e.g., an earthquake) found in association with two judgments leads to their association.

Alford, following Isaac Williams, draws attention to the parallel connection between the Apocalypse and Christ's discourse on the Mount of Olives, recorded in Mat. 24:4-28. The seals plainly bring us down to the second coming of Christ, just as the trumpets also do (compare Rev. 6:12-17⁺; 8:1⁺, and Rev. 11:15⁺), and as the vials also do (Rev. 16:17⁺): all three run parallel, and end in the same point. Certain "catchwords" (as Wordsworth calls them) connect the three series of symbols together. They do not succeed one to the other in historical and chronological sequence, but move side by side, the subsequent series filling up in detail the same picture which the preceding series had drawn in outline. . . . the earthquake that ensues on the opening of the sixth seal is one of the catchwords, that is, a link connecting chronologically this sixth seal with the sixth trumpet (Rev. 9:13⁺; 11:13⁺): compare also the seventh vial, Rev. 16:17⁺, 18⁺. The concomitants of the opening of the sixth seal, it is plain, in no full and exhaustive sense apply to any event, save the terrors which shall overwhelm the ungodly just before the coming of the Judge. . . . the loosing of the four winds by the four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, under the sixth seal, answers to the loosing of the four angels at the Euphrates, under the sixth trumpet.¹¹

Other times it is a *similarity in pattern* which leads interpreters in this direction:

The strongest argument for the recapitulation view is the observation of repeated combined scenes of consummative judgment and salvation found at the conclusions of various sections throughout the book. The pattern of these scenes is always the same, consisting of a depiction of judgment followed by a portrayal of salvation; cf. respectively Rev. 6:12-17⁺ and 7:9-17⁺; 11:18⁺a and 11:18⁺b; 14:14-20⁺ and 15:2-4⁺; 16:17-21⁺, including 17:1⁺-18:24⁺, which functions as an intensified judicial conclusion of the whole book, and 19:1-10⁺; 20:7-15⁺ and 21:2-8⁺, including the following section of 21:9⁺-22:5⁺, which serves as an intensified salvific conclusion to the entire book.¹²

Even *similarity of phrase* has been seen as indicating recapitulation:

A third phrase which recurs four times, and which may serve as a division point is "thunders, voices, lightnings, and an earthquake [Rev. 4:5⁺; 8:5⁺; 11:19⁺; 16:18⁺]." . . . The last three mark respectively the conclusions of the judgments of the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls, and have consequently been interpreted by some to indicate that their judgments are concurrent, or at least continuous. Does the repetition of the phrase mean that the same reaction takes place three times, or that there are three types of judgments of increasing intensity converging at the same point?¹³

The main weakness of the recapitulation view is that it emphasizes *similarity* between passages over *distinct differences* which remain. But, *similarity does not equal identity*. Those who believe that details are intentionally revealed in the text for the reader to notice are unlikely to embrace the recapitulation view because it glosses over these differences.

2.14.2 - Sequential Events

The sequential view understands the general flow of the book and especially the series of seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments as following a chronological sequence. Similarities between different chronological judgments are understood as part of God's design, but not necessitating identity because differences in the text make plain that identity is not involved. In the most widely-held sequential view, the events attending the seven bowls are subsumed within the seventh trumpet and the events of the seven trumpets are subsumed within the seventh seal.



We can understand this development by a simple illustration. We have all seen firework displays in which giant rockets are shot into the air exploding into a great ball of fire. This, as it falls toward the earth, bursts into a great number of balls of fire of various colors which, as they fall further toward the earth, burst again into smaller balls of various colors. So it is with the judgments of God. At first we see nothing but a sealed scroll. As the seals are removed each one appears to be a judgment and we would expect that when we come to the last seal, it would be the last judgment. But, instead, the last seal discloses seven angels, each with trumpets. These, in turn, are various judgments, and the seventh trumpet, in turn, reveals not another single judgment, but seven vials of the wrath of God. In both instances there is a series of seven with the last disclosing seven more. In addition to this structure there is a parenthesis between the sixth and the seventh in all three series.¹⁴

The more literal one's interpretation, the more one will tend to follow the sequential view. The more one emphasizes literary [genre](#) and symbolism and moves further afield from the Golden Rule of Interpretation, the more likely the recapitulation structure or other literary structure will find appeal. While the sequential view holds the basic flow of the book to be chronological, it does not preclude recapitulation in some of the related visionary scenes which are not strongly anchored within the sequence.¹⁵ The reasons given for the sequential view include:

There are five principal arguments for the basic futurist perspective. (1) It is argued that Rev. 1:19⁺ divides the whole book into three temporal parts . . . (2) Rev. 4:1b⁺ ("I will show you what must happen after these things") affirms . . . that the visions of wrath in the remainder of the book are to occur after the events of the church age . . . (3) It is assumed that the order of the visions generally represents the order of future events . . . (4) If the order of the seals, trumpets, and bowls does not portray historical events in the order of their historical occurrence, and if the trumpets and the bowls are not subsumed within the seals, then . . . the trumpets and the bowls are separated from the introductory throne vision of Rev. 4:1⁺-5:14⁺, from which the seals and the rest of the visions in the book seem to naturally flow. (5) The increasing intensity of the judgments throughout the book is another argument.¹⁶

Each set of judgments is more intense and destructive than the previous ones. The second trumpet destroys one-third of seas while the second bowl turns all of the seas into blood (Rev. 8:8-9⁺; 16:3⁺). . . . Although there are many similarities between the septets, the differences are more crucial and determinative. The seals generally differ in content from the trumpet and bowl plagues. There is no parallel alignment between the first, fifth, and seventh judgments of the septets. . . . The two Greek phrases [καὶ εἶδον](#) [kai eidon] and [μετὰ ταῦτα](#) [meta tauta] indicate a sequential movement . . . a chronological movement . . . The seven seals are followed by the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls follow the seven trumpets . . . The bowls evidence a sequential pattern as they are called "the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished" (Rev. 15:1⁺). . . . The seventh trumpet is linked to the seven bowls. The 144,000 people are an example of an event under a trumpet judgment following a seal judgment. One hundred and forty-four thousand people are protectively sealed on their foreheads after the sixth seal and before the release of the plague by the four angels (Rev. 7:1-8⁺). The fifth trumpet brings a demonic plague on humankind and torments "only the men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads" - the sixth seal precedes the demonic plague of the fifth trumpet.¹⁷

When the seventh seal is opened (Rev. 8:1-5⁺), no immediate events as such follow on earth—except for the earthquake—as in the first six seals, unless the opening of the seventh seal includes among its events the blowing of the seven trumpets of judgment (Rev. 8:6⁺-11:15⁺). This appears to be precisely the case. . . . The seventh trumpet likewise is not immediately followed by any specific events on earth (Rev. 11:15⁺ff.), except for an earthquake and a hailstorm (Rev. 11:19⁺). However, just before the seventh trumpet is sounded, we read, "The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon" (Rev. 11:14⁺). When the seven angels prepare to pour out "the seven last plagues," symbolized by the bowls, we read that with these bowls "God's wrath is completed" (Rev. 15:1⁺, 7⁺). Thus it seems reasonable to identify the content of the seventh trumpet with the seven bowls of judgment (Rev. 16⁺-19⁺).¹⁸

Another reason why the bowl judgments cannot represent a recapitulation of the previous trumpet or seal judgments is found in the difference in access to the heavenly [Temple](#) during the period of the judgments. Due to the great significance of the final bowl judgments, the heavenly Temple is closed for their duration (Rev. 15:8⁺). Yet in the midst of the seal and trumpet judgments, the Temple is not sealed (Rev. 7:15⁺; 11:19⁺; 14:15⁺, 17⁺; 15:6⁺). This indicates that the bowl judgments (Rev. 16⁺) cannot be merely descriptive of further detail related to the corresponding trumpet or seal judgments, but are unique in themselves and must occur at an entirely different period of time which follows upon the opening of the seals and sounding of the trumpets. See commentary on [Revelation 15:8](#) and [Revelation 16:17](#). One of the frequently-heard criticisms of the sequential view is that it lacks sensitivity to the literary form or apocalyptic genre of the book.¹⁹ As the reader recognizes by now, the single largest factor which divides interpreters of the book is *how literal* one takes its contents. Whenever literary genre, apocalyptic similarities, and devotional qualities are elevated in importance over a literal interpretation, the result will most likely be non-futurist and embrace significant recapitulation. By

adopting a recapitulation view, it can be argued that one of the key values of the book of Revelation is forfeited, its guidance in organizing related passages:

The value of the book of Revelation is not that it provides a lot of new information, but rather that it takes the scattered Old Testament prophecies and puts them in chronological order so that the sequence of events may be determined. . . . This is the reason for so many references to the Old Testament.²⁰

Perhaps one of the simplest sequential organizations offered is that of Morris.²¹

Sequential Chronology

Chapters	Description	Duration
Rev. 1 [±] -3 [±]	Church Age	Unknown Duration
Rev. 4 [±] -19 [±]	Period of Judgment	Seven Years
Rev. 20 [±]	Kingdom Age	One Thousand Years
Rev. 21 [±] -22 [±]	Eternal Age	Endless Years

2.14.3 - Structural Outline

It is our conviction that the events of the book are mainly sequential and flow naturally from the threefold division given by John in Revelation 1:19[±]. We will follow an outline derived from the work of McLean.²²

I. Prologue: *Things Which You Have Seen* (Rev. 1:1-20[±])

II. Letters to the [Seven Churches](#): *Things Which Are* (Rev. 2:1[±]-3:22[±])

III. Future Revealed: *Things Which Shall Take Place After These Things* (Rev. 4:1[±]-22:5[±])

A. God's Wrath/Great Tribulation (Rev. 4:1[±]-19:21[±])

1. Introduction to the Seven Seal Judgments (Rev. 4:1[±]-5:14[±])

a) Throne of God in heaven (Rev. 4:1-11[±])

b) The Scroll of the Lamb (Rev. 5:1-14[±])

2. The Six Seal Judgments (Rev. 6:1[±]-7:17[±])

a) First Seal: White horse (Rev. 6:1-2[±])

b) Second Seal: Red horse (Rev. 6:3-4[±])

c) Third Seal: Black horse (Rev. 6:5-6[±])

d) Fourth Seal: Ashen horse (Rev. 6:7-8[±])

e) Fifth Seal: Martyrs under the altar (Rev. 6:9-11[±])

f) Sixth Seal: Great day of God's wrath (Rev. 6:12-17[±])

g) Narrative Preview: Redeemed of God (Rev. 7:1-17[±])

(1) Sealing of the 144,000 (Rev. 7:1-8[±])

(2) Martyrs from the great Tribulation (Rev. 7:9-17[±])

3. The Seventh Seal: Seven Trumpets (Rev. 8:1[±]-18:24[±])

a) Breaking Seventh Seal: introduction to the Seven Trumpets (Rev. 8:1-6[±])

b) First Trumpet: one-third of the earth destroyed (Rev. 8:7[±])

c) Second Trumpet: one-third of the sea destroyed (Rev. 8:8-9[±])

- d) Third Trumpet: one-third of the water destroyed (Rev. 8:10-11⁺)
- e) Fourth Trumpet: one-third of the celestial destroyed (Rev. 8:12⁺)
- f) Introduction to the Three Woes (Rev. 8:13⁺)
- (1) Fifth Trumpet: First Woe, men tormented (Rev. 9:1-12⁺)
- (2) Sixth Trumpet: Second Woe, one-third of mankind killed (Rev. 9:13⁺-11:14⁺)
- (3) Seventh Trumpet: Third Woe, the Seven Bowls (Rev. 11:15⁺-18:24⁺)
- (a) Seventh Trumpet, proclamation of God's kingdom (Rev. 11:15-19⁺)
- (b) Narrative Synopsis (Rev. 12:1⁺-14:13⁺)
- i) A Woman, Male child, Satan in conflict (Rev. 12:1-6⁺)
- ii) Angelic war in heaven (Rev. 12:7-12⁺)
- iii) War on earth (Rev. 12:13-17⁺)
- iv) [Beast](#) out of the sea (Rev. 13:1-10⁺)
- v) Beast out of the earth (Rev. 13:11-18⁺)
- vi) Narrative Preview (Rev. 14:1-13⁺)
- (c) Introduction to the Seven Bowls (Rev. 14:14⁺-15:8⁺)
- i) Son of Man with a sickle (Rev. 14:14-16⁺)
- ii) Wine press of God's wrath (Rev. 14:17-20⁺)
- iii) Seven angels of the Seven plagues (Rev. 15:1⁺)
- iv) Worship of God and the Lamb (Rev. 15:2-4⁺)
- v) Seven angels receive the Bowls (Rev. 15:5-8⁺)
- (d) Seven Bowl Judgments (Rev. 16:1⁺-18:24⁺)
- i) First Bowl: malignant sores (Rev. 16:1-2⁺)
- ii) Second Bowl: sea destroyed (Rev. 16:3⁺)
- iii) Third Bowl: rivers destroyed (Rev. 16:4-7⁺)
- iv) Fourth Bowl: scorching heat (Rev. 16:8-9⁺)
- v) Fifth Bowl: darkness (Rev. 16:10-11⁺)
- vi) Sixth Bowl: preparation for war (Rev. 16:12-16⁺)
- vii) Seventh Bowl: worldwide destruction (Rev. 16:17-21⁺)
- viii) Narrative Synopsis (Rev. 17:1⁺-18:24⁺)
- [a] Description and Destruction of the [Harlot](#) (Rev. 17:1-18⁺)
- [b] Condemnation and Destruction of Babylon (Rev. 18:1-24⁺)
- 4. The Advent of Jesus Christ (Rev. 19:2-21⁺)
- a) Introduction and praise of the advent (Rev. 19:1-10⁺)
- b) Parousia of Jesus Christ (Rev. 19:11-16⁺)
- c) Judgment of the beast, false prophet, and people (Rev. 19:17-21⁺)

B. [Millennial Kingdom](#) (Rev. 20:1-10[±])

1. Satan is bound in the abyss (Rev. 20:1-3[±])

2. Saints resurrected (Rev. 20:4-6[±])

3. Final judgment of Satan (Rev. 20:7-10[±])

C. Great White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:11-15[±])

D. The New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1[±]-22:5[±])

IV. Epilogue (Rev. 22:6-21[±])

Notes

¹See [A. T. Robertson, [A Harmony of the Gospels](#) (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1950)] and [Robert L. Thomas, [A Harmony of the Gospels](#) (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Publishers, 1978)].

²Gregory K. Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 108.

³Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 46.

⁴Ibid., 45.

⁵John A. McLean, "[Structure of the Book of Revelation.](#)" in Mal Couch, ed., [Dictionary of Premillennial Theology](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), 373.

⁶Adela Yarbro Collins, "[Book of Revelation.](#)" in David Noel Freeman, ed., [The Anchor Bible Dictionary](#) (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1996, c1992), 5:696.

⁷"The seven visions are as follows: (1) Seven churches (Rev. 1:9[±]-3:22[±]); (2) Seven seals (Rev. 4:1[±]-8:1[±]); (3) Seven trumpets (Rev. 8:2[±]-11:19[±]); (4) Seven symbolic figures (Rev. 12:1[±]-14:20[±]); (5) Seven bowls (Rev. 15:1[±]-16:21[±]); (6) Seven judgments (Rev. 17:1[±]-19:10[±]); (7) Seven triumphs (Rev. 19:11[±]-22:5[±])."—Edward Hindson, [Revelation: Unlocking the Future](#) (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), 5.

⁸"When God has described a scene as taking place 'in Heaven', and caused Heavenly voices to give the key to what is to follow in another scene which immediately takes place 'on earth'; and this is done seven consecutive times; is it not strange that writers on the Apocalypse should overlook this exceedingly simple arrangement."—E. W. Bullinger, [Commentary On Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1984, 1935), 117.

⁹Merrill C. Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1957), 32-33.

¹⁰"This position was taken by Victorinus of Pettau, the author of the oldest surviving commentary (d. ca. 304)."—Collins, [Book of Revelation](#), 5:696.

¹¹A. R. Fausset, "[The Revelation of St. John the Divine.](#)" in Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, [A Commentary. Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments](#) (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, 1877), Rev. 1:1.

¹²Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 121.

¹³Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 34.

¹⁴Donald Grey Barnhouse, [Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 155.

¹⁵"This article argues for the successive view of the septet judgements, that is, the trumpets sequentially follow the seals, and the bowls sequentially follow the trumpets. The successive structure does not negate a recapitulation of other visionary scenes that preview eschatological events to come (Rev. 7:9-17[±]; 14:8-13[±])."—McLean, [Structure of the Book of Revelation](#), 373.

¹⁶Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 118-120.

¹⁷McLean, [Structure of the Book of Revelation](#), 374.

¹⁸Alan F. Johnson, [*Revelation: The Expositor's Bible Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), 71.

¹⁹"The main objection is that it interprets Revelation without sufficient sensitivity to its literary form, giving a straightforward, literal reading of the book, rather than using a figurative approach, which would be more appropriate to the book's symbolic genre."—Beale, [*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*](#), 161.

²⁰Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, [*The Footsteps of Messiah*](#), rev ed (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003), 10-11.

²¹Henry Morris, [*The Revelation Record*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1983), 28.

²²McLean, [*Structure of the Book of Revelation*](#), 376-377.

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