

THE TRIPARTITE STRUCTURE OF THE SIXTH SEAL, THE SIXTH TRUMPET, AND THE SIXTH BOWL OF JOHN'S APOCALYPSE (REV 6:12–7:17; 9:13–11:14; 16:12–16)

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For centuries the Apocalypse of John, commonly known as the book of Revelation, has posed problems for scholars who have sought to interpret it. Many of the problems are aggravated by the seemingly impossible task of determining with any certainty the literary structure of the book itself. The Apocalypse contains four sections explicitly divided into seven parts: the seven letters (2:1–3:22), the seven-sealed scroll (4:1–8:1), the seven trumpets (8:2–11:19), the seven bowls of God's wrath (15:1–16:21). The first of these sections contains seven letters dictated to John. The letters share a distinct form among themselves that sets them apart from the other three sections containing seven parts. In addition the other three sections contain six parts that in turn are each divided into three subparts. While no scholar has challenged the thematic unity of 16:12–16 (the sixth trumpet), many scholars have regarded the last two scenes of both 6:12–7:17 (the six seal) and 9:13–11:14 (the sixth bowl) as "interruptions" or "interludes" in the narrative.¹

I will argue in this paper that the three scenes of 6:12–7:17 and 9:13–11:14 should be viewed as a tripartite unity. The argument is based on the structural and thematic devices used by the author. In order to make a case for the tripartite thematic unity of the sixth seal, trumpet, and bowl, it must be established that there are three distinct literary units in each of them.

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¹ H B Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1966 [1905]) 95, R C H Lenski, *The Interpretation of St John's Revelation* (Minneapolis Augsburg, 1963 [1943]) 244, E Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Tubingen J C B Mohr, 1953) 67, 83, W Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids Baker, 1982 [1962]) 16, L Poellot, *Revelation The Last Book of the Bible* (Milwaukee Northwestern, 1976 [1962]) x, M Hopkins, "The Historical Perspective of Apocalypse 1–11," *CBQ* 27 (1965) 46, G E Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1972) 110–111, E Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (NTD 11, Gottingen Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1976) 50, 61, E S Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia Fortress, 1985) 171, R H Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT 17, Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1977) 47, M D Goulder, "The Apocalypse as an Annual Cycle of Prophecies," *NTS* 27 (1981) 353, P Prigent, *L'apocalypse de Saint Jean* (CNT 14, Lausanne Delachaux and Niestle, 1981) 117, 149, S W Becker, *Revelation The Distant Triumph Song* (Milwaukee Northwestern, 1985) vi–vii, 117, K A Strand, "Basic Visions in the Book of Revelation," *AUSS* 25 (1987) 112, M E Boring, *Revelation* (Interpretation, Louisville John Knox, 1989) 120–121, 127, 139

I. THE STRUCTURE OF THE SIXTH SEAL, TRUMPET, AND BOWL

The opening of the sixth seal is recorded in Rev 6:12, and the opening of the seventh seal is recorded in 8:1. The material between these two verses is generally acknowledged to contain three scenes:² 6:12–17, where humanity seeks to hide from the impending wrath of the Lamb; 7:1–8, the sealing of the 144,000 servants of God; and 7:9–17, the great multitude in heaven praising God.

Likewise the material between the sounding of the sixth trumpet in 9:13 and the sounding of the seventh in 11:15 is generally acknowledged to contain three scenes:³ 9:13–21, where four angels at the Euphrates release fantastic creatures who kill one-third of mankind; 10:1–11, where John is shown a little scroll that he is commanded to eat; and 11:1–13, an account of the two witnesses who prophesy for 1260 days.

There is no such acknowledgment of the threefold structure of the section concerning the sixth bowl (16:12–16). Nearly all scholars, however, acknowledge that 16:15 is a parenthetical warning and beatitude that interrupts the flow of the text.⁴ In fact, a reading of the text that omits 16:15 demonstrates the unity of the rest of the section:

The sixth poured his bowl on the great Euphrates river, and its water dried up in order to prepare the way of the kings from the east. And I saw from the mouth of the dragon and the mouth of the beast and the mouth of the false prophet three unclean spirits like frogs, for they are demonic spirits, doing signs, which go out upon the kings of the whole world to gather them together for the war of the great day of God the Almighty. . . . And they gathered them together to the place called in Hebrew Armageddon.

Verse 15 serves to divide the section into three subparts: preparation for battle (16:12–14);⁵ Jesus' warning and beatitude (16:15); gathering for battle (16:16).

² Swete, *Apocalypse* 96; Lenski, *Interpretation* 244; Hendriksen, *Conquerors* 16; Poellot, *Revelation* x; Hopkins, "Historical Perspective," 46; Ladd, *Revelation* 171; Lohse, *Offenbarung* 49–55; Mounce, *Revelation* 47; Goulder, "Annual Cycle" 353; Prigent, *L'apocalypse* 380; Becker, *Revelation* vi–vii, 117; Strand, "Basic Visions," 112; Boring, *Revelation* 126–132; D. W. Richardson, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: An Interpretation* (Richmond: John Knox, 1964 [1939]) 63–64; J. W. Bowman, "The Book of Revelation," *IDB* 4.64–65; A. Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964) 104; E. Corsini, *The Apocalypse: The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ* (GNS 5; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983); J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (9th ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 160, 170.

³ Swete, *Apocalypse* 95, 126; Lenski, *Interpretation* 310; Lohmeyer, *Offenbarung* 1; Poellot, *Revelation* 134; Ladd, *Revelation* 140; Lohse, *Offenbarung* 61–67; Prigent, *L'apocalypse* 381; Mounce, *Revelation* 205; Boring, *Revelation* 138–148.

⁴ E.g. Mounce, *Revelation* 300.

⁵ The point here is that, with the exception of v. 15, 16:12–16 is one continuous narrative. The interruption of v. 15 serves to divide vv. 12–14 from v. 16 and produces three subparts. The first subpart itself could be broken down into parts (as could any of the other subparts): v. 12, the drying up of the Euphrates; v. 13, the sending out of the three frog-like foul spirits; v. 14, the explanation of the spirits.

Thus from the opening of the sixth seal to the opening of the seventh there are three scenes (subparts), from the sounding of the sixth trumpet to the sounding of the seventh there are three subparts, and from the pouring out of the sixth bowl to the pouring out of the seventh there are three subparts. The fact that there are three subparts of each does not prove much. But if it could be established that there exists a unity among the three scenes of the sixth seal and the sixth trumpet as there is among the three scenes of the sixth bowl, it could be argued that they are in some sense parallel, and it may imply that three of the four sections of the book that are explicitly divided into seven parts are to be considered parallel to one another.

II. THE UNITY OF THE SECTION CONCERNING THE SIXTH SEAL

As I have already noted, most scholars argue that chap. 7 is an "interlude" or a separate vision inserted between the sixth and seventh seals. While there are a few scholars who include 7:1-17 as part of the sixth seal, as far as I know only Austin Farrer and Haken Ulfsgard argue for the unity of the three scenes.⁶ I believe that a strong case can be made for seeing the three scenes of the sixth seal as being the same activity viewed from three different perspectives. This activity is the preparation for the final judgment. When the sixth seal is opened the eschatological judgment is threatened. There are various signs in heaven as well as upheaval on earth. The inhabitants on the earth, fearful of the coming judgment that Christ brings, hide themselves in caves and call upon the mountains to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb (6:12-17). Thus the first scene closes with the sinful among mankind preparing for the judgment as best they can, futilely hiding from the coming Christ.

The second scene opens with four angels at the four corners of the earth holding back the winds of the earth. They are given a command not to harm the earth until God's servants are sealed upon their foreheads. Twelve thousand servants from each of the twelve tribes of Israel are sealed (7:1-8). These 144,000 are defined here as the servants of God and are further defined in 14:4 as the ones redeemed from mankind. Thus the second scene also depicts the preparation for the coming of Christ. This time it is God's preparation of his saints on earth.

The third scene opens with John's vision of an innumerable multitude in heaven from all nations, a multitude standing before God's throne and the Lamb in heaven, praising God.⁷ John is told that the multitude consists

⁶ Farrer, *Revelation* 104; H. Ulfsgard, *Feast and Future: Revelation 7:9-17 and the Feast of Tabernacles* (ConBNT 22; Lund: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1989) 32-33. For scholars who treat chap. 7 as part of the sixth seal but offer no rationale for their approach see Richardson, *Revelation* 63-64; Bowman, "Book of Revelation" 64-65; Corsini, *Apocalypse*; Seiss, *Apocalypse* 160, 170.

⁷ While there are several throne scenes in Revelation there is only one other that pictures a great multitude before God: 19:1-7. The contrast with this scene is important. In chap. 19 the judgment has come (cf. vv. 2, 7). In chap. 7 the multitude is said to have been delivered by God from tribulation, though the judgment has not yet come (cf. 7:14-17).

of those who have escaped the great tribulation (7:14). That the Lamb is still in heaven shows that the judgment has not come quite yet: Christ has not returned to earth. But the scene depicts the saints in heaven, prepared for the judgment. Though the judgment is not mentioned in this scene, it is implied in vv. 16–17 where it is stated that the multitude will never again suffer because God will dwell with them and the Lamb shepherds them. God has prepared them for the judgment just as the saints who remain on earth. They are prepared because they have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). Thus the third scene completes the picture of the preparation for the coming of the Lamb. Now the unbelievers on earth, the saints on earth, and the saints in heaven (together, the entire human race) are prepared for the Lamb’s final advent.

Ulfsgard has summarized the unity of the section concerning the sixth seal:

It is important to note that the sixth seal consists of three distinct sections, 6:12–17, 7:1–8 and 7:9–17. In the first section, the breaking of the seal is followed by cosmic woes that cause anxiety among mankind and lead to the exclamation of 6:17: “. . . the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?” Then, in 7:1–8 John is told that God’s people is to be saved through the protective seal and that judgment will be postponed during the process of sealing. . . . Finally, in the last section, 7:9–17, John sees a great multitude praising God. . . . Thus, ch. 7 must be understood as part of the progressive “action” of the seal series, showing the question of 6:17 answered in two ways, first in the audition of 7:1–8, and then in the vision of 7:9–17. *The idea of ch. 7 as a “Zwischenstück” is unfortunate, since it too easily seems to imply that the chapter, or its second half, is some kind of a proleptic vision of the final blessedness in heaven* [italics mine]. In fact, the whole of ch. 7 refers back to the fifth seal (6:9–11), in which the martyr souls were told to remain quiet for yet a while, *until* the number of fellow servants and brethren is full [italics his]. This “interim” is exactly the situation dealt with in ch. 7.⁸

III. THE UNITY OF THE SECTION CONCERNING THE SIXTH TRUMPET

Turning to the sixth trumpet, I observe that those who argue that the second and third scenes of the sixth seal are an interlude often argue that the second and third scenes of the sixth trumpet are another interlude and are directly analogous to the interlude of the sixth seal.⁹ I believe that they are analogous, but that they form a unity with the first scene of the sixth trumpet. This unity is indicated in the text itself. Before the sounding of the fifth trumpet John saw an eagle flying in heaven and crying, “Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the sounding of the remaining trumpets of the three angels who are about to blow” (8:13). This verse identifies each of the three last trumpets (trumpets 5–7) as a “woe.” The fifth trumpet is depicted in 9:1–11. Following it, v. 12 states that one

⁸ Ulfsgard, *Feast and Future* 32–33.

⁹ Swete, *Apocalypse* 95, 126; Lenski, *Interpretation* 310; Poellot, *Revelation* 134; Ladd, *Revelation* 140; Mounce, *Revelation* 205.

"woe" has passed. Then the sixth trumpet is blown (9:13). But it is not until 11:14, following the third scene of the sixth trumpet, that the reader is told that the "second woe" has passed. The text itself unites all three scenes of the sixth trumpet as the "second woe."

This device, however, merely indicates that the author saw a unity among the three scenes. It does not tell us what unites them. Again, I believe, these are three views of the same activity. This time the activity is the witness of Christians in the world.

The first scene begins with a command from God's altar ordering the releasing of four angels at the Euphrates. They gather an army of two hundred million fantastic creatures who kill one-third of mankind. The rest of mankind, which sees this plague, refuses to repent (9:13-21). Some commentators understand the plague as demonic in nature, usually by analogy with the demonic plague of the fifth trumpet. Others understand it as referring to the evils of war.¹⁰

But the army that John sees contains elements in the Apocalypse that are symbolic of divine, not demonic, judgment. The members of the army are said to have fiery breastplates and to issue fire from their mouths (9:17-18). Fire is consistently associated with God in the Apocalypse. Some examples are the seven torches of fire before God's throne (4:5), the sea of glass mingled with fire around God's throne (15:2), and God's fiery judgment on Babylon the Great (17:16-17; 18:8).¹¹ Only once is fire associated with anything demonic. In 13:13 the second beast calls down fire from heaven in order to convince the world to worship the first beast. (What better way to convince the world, than the use of something associated with God?) Most importantly, the creatures of the army in the sixth trumpet emit fire from their mouths just as God's witnesses in the third scene of the sixth trumpet (11:5).

The creatures, however, emit not only fire but also sulfur and smoke. In the Apocalypse this combination is always associated with God's judgment. Hell is described as the lake of fire and sulfur (14:10; 19:20; 20:10; 21:8). God's judgment on those who worship the beast involves fire, sulfur and smoke (14:9-11).

The fire, smoke and sulfur are called "plagues" (9:18, 20). The two witnesses of chap. 11, the third scene of the sixth trumpet, also have the power to bring plagues on mankind (11:6). In fact, plagues are always the expression of divine wrath in the book of Revelation (cf. 15:1, 6, 8; 16:9, 21; 18:4, 8; 21:9; 22:18) with the possible exception of the mortal plague that afflicts one of the seven heads of the beast in 13:3, 12, 14 (the text does not state the origin of the plague).

¹⁰ Lenski, *Interpretation* 299; Hendriksen, *Conquerors* 122; Poellot, *Revelation* 130-131; Lohse, *Offenbarung* 61; Ladd, *Revelation* 135; Becker, *Revelation* 149; Seiss, *Apocalypse* 219; Corsini, *Apocalypse* 186.

¹¹ The other occurrences are 1:14; 2:18; 3:18; 8:5, 7, 8; 10:1; 11:5; 14:10; 15:2 (twice); 16:8, 9; 19:12, 20; 20:9, 10, 14, 15; 21:8.

Despite the plagues, mankind refuses to repent (9:20–21). In the book of Revelation repentance is expected only after divine acts, such as the exhortation of Christ (2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19) or the plagues of the fifth and sixth bowls (16:9–10).

The numerical symbolism associated with the fantastic creatures also points to a divine connection. First, it is said that these creatures are permitted to kill one-third of mankind. God and Christ are consistently given threefold descriptions in the book:

Grace to you from him *who is*, and *who was* and *who is to come* . . . and from Jesus Christ, *the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth* (1:4–5).

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, *who was* and *is* and *is to come* (a threefold description, each made up of three parts, 4:8).

I am the *Alpha and the Omega*, *the first and the last*, *the beginning and the end* (22:13).

In addition Satan, who seeks to usurp God's authority, is identified by a negative threefold description:

The beast you saw *was*, and *is not*, and *is to ascend from the bottomless pit and go into perdition* . . . *it was*, and *is not*, and *is to come* (17:8).

Second, their number (twenty thousand times ten thousand) is reminiscent of the description of the angels in heaven (5:11) except that it is doubled. While the number two is used in several ways in Revelation, it is used in the third scene of the sixth trumpet as the number of God's witnesses on earth (11:3, 4 [twice], 10).

Thus there are numerous symbolic features that connect the fantastic creatures of 9:13–19 (the first scene of the sixth seal) with divine activity. In addition, at least three of the features are shared with the witnesses of chap. 11 (the third scene of the sixth trumpet): fire from their mouths, the ability to bring plagues on mankind, the symbolism of the number two.

What, then, does this army of fantastic creatures symbolize? It represents Christians as witnesses in the world. They bring a message of spiritual death to those who will not repent. That they share some of the features of the demonic scorpions of the fifth trumpet (breastplates, cf. 9:7, 17; powerful tails, 9:7, 19) reveals that the world sees them as demonic, as Jesus was viewed on occasion (cf. Matt 12:22–30; Mark 3:23–27; Luke 11:14–23). But they are different from the satanic scorpions of the fifth trumpet in that though the scorpions can only torture humans for five months, the army of the sixth trumpet can kill. The contrast is important, for it states the author's view that Satan can harm the soul but that Christians through the preaching of God's word of judgment on the unrepentant can wield God's power of divine judgment that kills the soul.

The second scene of the sixth trumpet opens with John seeing an angel from heaven with a little scroll in his hand. John is told to eat the scroll and is informed that, when he eats it, it will be sweet in his mouth but bit-

ter in his stomach (cf. Ezek 2:8–3:3; Jer 5:16). He does eat, and it was indeed sweet in his mouth and bitter in his stomach (10:1–11). John's eating of the book is not just his experience. He is here a type of all Christian prophets.¹² The sweetness of the book in his mouth symbolizes the experience of the Christian prophet who receives God's word. The bitterness in his stomach symbolizes the sometimes bitter life of the Christian who lives and prophesies God's word. Thus after John eats the book he is told that he must again prophesy (10:11). The second scene, then, depicts Christians viewing themselves as prophets. Boring understands the scene precisely this way:¹³ "Every person who struggles to preach and teach the word of God knows this taste, this satisfaction, and this sickness in the stomach."

The third scene depicts John's command to measure the temple, followed by the vision of the two witnesses. These witnesses and their power are first described (11:4–6), and then the events following the end of their testimony. The witnesses are killed by the beast from the bottomless pit (11:7), and they lie dead in Jerusalem for three and one-half days as the world rejoices (11:8–10). They do not remain dead, however. God resurrects them and takes them to heaven while initiating a terrifying earthquake in the city (11:11–13).

As Kenneth Strand has observed, the two witnesses function not as two individuals but as one entity.¹⁴ He also notes that the symbolism used to describe them is drawn from a number of OT prophets including Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Zechariah and Ezekiel.¹⁵ In addition the two-witness theme is mirrored in other places in Revelation, which speaks of a twofold expression for the preaching of the Christian message. There is "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ" (1:2, 9) to which John bears witness in this book and for which John was exiled. The martyrs seen under God's altar in heaven in 6:9 were slain for the same twofold word and testimony. The offspring of the persecuted woman in 12:17 "keep the commandments of God and have the witness of Jesus." In 14:12 the saints are defined as "those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." In 20:4 the martyrs who reign with Christ for one thousand years were beheaded "because of the witness of Jesus and because of the word of God." This close identification of the twofold witness with the saints demonstrates that the two witnesses in the third scene of the sixth trumpet should be understood as the assembly of the saints, the Church. Thus the third scene also portrays the activity of Christian witnesses, just as the first and second scenes did. The perspective of this scene is God's empowering of Christian testimony (the OT prophetic images, the resurrection of the witnesses, and so forth), whereas in the first scene the perspective was

¹² Becker, *Revelation* 161; Mounce, *Revelation* 216; Ladd, *Revelation* 147; Poellot, *Revelation* 140; Lohse, *Offenbarung* 63; Boring, *Revelation* 142.

¹³ Boring, *Revelation* 142.

¹⁴ K. Strand, "The Two Witnesses of Rev 11:3–12," *AUSS* 19 (1981) 130.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the world's view of Christian testimony and in the second it was the Christian's own view of this testimony.

In addition these two witnesses share the burden of prophecy that John was given in the previous scene. They prophesy (11:3) just as John was told to prophesy (10:11). They are called prophets (11:10) as well as witnesses (11:3). Therefore, just as there are connections between the first and third scenes of the sixth trumpet, there are also connections between the second and third scenes.

IV. IMPLICATIONS: THE STRUCTURE OF THE APOCALYPSE

It has now been established that the sections concerning the sixth seal, trumpet, and bowl are each a tripartite unity. What are the implications of this for understanding the Apocalypse itself? First, it rules out some proposed readings of the book. For instance, 8:1 is the opening of the seventh seal. The placing of this verse at the beginning of chap. 8 instead of the end of chap. 7 is itself an interpretation. It implies that the last two scenes of the sixth seal are an interlude, not an integral part of the sixth seal. Therefore the seventh seal is seen as more closely connected to what follows it (the seven trumpets) than what precedes it (the other six seals).

Another view argues that the several sections of the book are to be understood sequentially, as if the opening of the seven seals is chronologically prior to the sounding of the seven trumpets, which in turn is prior to the pouring out of the seven bowls. This interpretation fails to see the essentially parallel nature of the sixth seal, trumpet and bowl. By constructing a literary parallel between the sixth seal, trumpet and bowl the author is indicating that the sections of his apocalypse are to be understood as parallel, not sequential.

The view that the Apocalypse has several sections that are parallel in that they recapitulate one another dates to the earliest extant commentary on the book by Victorinus of Pettau.¹⁶ It has had adherents in modern times as well.¹⁷ The tripartite unity of the sixth seal, the sixth trumpet and the sixth bowl argues that the recapitulation theory is the correct hermeneutical approach to the Apocalypse.

Such an approach could be used to explore the literary structure of the Apocalypse by noting the parallel between the seventh seal, trumpet and bowl. The opening of the seventh seal reveals a half-hour silence in heaven (8:1). The sounding of the seventh trumpet reveals loud voices in heaven proclaiming that the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of God and Christ, with the elders around the throne proclaiming that the time has come to reward saints and punish sinners. This is followed by the opening of the temple in heaven and disasters of lightning, voices, thunder, and earthquake and hail, presumably on earth (11:15–

¹⁶ *Victorini Episcopi Petavonis Opera* (CSEL 49; ed. I. Hussleiter; Leipzig: Freytag, 1916).

¹⁷ Cf. Hendriksen, *Conquerors* 16–23.

19). The seventh trumpet reveals another voice from heaven, this time from the temple and God's throne, saying, "It is done!" This is followed by lightning, voices, thunder, an earthquake of the highest magnitude, and hail, for which men curse God (16:17–21). The parallel nature of these three seventh parts cannot be mistaken. In addition, it should not be overlooked that each one expands on the previous one. The seventh seal reveals mere silence in heaven. The seventh trumpet reveals the end of the world from a heavenly view and implies the judgment on earth. The seventh bowl summarizes the heavenly view of the end and expands the earthly judgment using precisely the same elements in the same order: lightning, voices, thunder, earthquake, hail.

Can this pattern be found elsewhere in the book? Indeed it can. In 14:14–20 there is a double harvest of the earth. The first depicts "one like a son of man" seated upon a cloud. An angel from the temple tells him to harvest the earth. The first harvest appears to be the gathering of the saints before the dreadful second harvest that will follow. After the first harvest another angel comes from the temple and is instructed by yet another angel to harvest the earth. The harvest is gathered and thrown into the winepress of God, from which flows copious amounts of blood.

The pattern is similar to the seventh seal, trumpet and bowl. The judgment originates in heaven, but its main effects—especially punishment—are felt on earth. A new element is introduced, however: Not only is the judgment on the earth depicted, but also the blessings of the saints who were taken out of the world in the first judgment are implied.

This pattern is repeated in 19:1–21. The chapter opens with a great multitude in heaven praising God because he has judged Babylon the prostitute who corrupted the earth (19:1–4). This is followed by the marriage feast of the Lamb in heaven for all of the saints (19:5–10). The feast is in turn followed by the opening of heaven, revealing an army led by Christ on a white horse (19:11–16). Finally it is implied that the army wins its battle on earth, where the "great supper of God" is held. The supper depicts carrion-eating birds devouring the flesh of defeated mankind while the beast and false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire (19:17–21). The pattern of the other judgments is followed again in chap. 19. The judgment originates in heaven, and its consequences are played out on the earth. Here, however, the blessing-of-the-saints theme introduced in the two-harvest judgment is expanded in the "marriage feast" where the blessedness of the saints at the final judgment is not merely implied but explicitly depicted.

There remains one final judgment scene, that of 20:9–22:5. It begins with Satan leading an army against the saints. Once again the judgment originates in heaven, for from heaven comes fire to consume Satan's army (20:9). Then the devil, the beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire (20:10).¹⁸ God then judges mankind from his great white throne, and those not found in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire

¹⁸ Most English translations (e.g. AV, RSV, NASB) do not understand the casting of the beast and the false prophet into the lake of fire as being simultaneous with Satan's being cast

(20:11–14). The famous description of the new Jerusalem follows (21:1–22:5). The pattern is the same as the other judgments. It is initiated in heaven, but the judgment's consequences are felt on earth. In addition, as in chap. 19 there is an expanded section on the blessings for the saints, in this case in the new Jerusalem.

If these judgments are listed in order, it is obvious that there is a progressive revelation concerning the final judgment:

Judgment 1: The seventh seal. Silence in *heaven* (8:1).

Judgment 2: The seventh trumpet. Voices in *heaven*. Implied *judgment on earth* (11:15–19).

Judgment 3: The double harvest. Initiated by angels' commands in *heaven*. First harvest an implied *blessing for the saints*. Second harvest brings *judgment on earth* (14:14–19).

Judgment 4: The seventh bowl. A voice announces the end from *heaven*. *Judgment on earth* identical in form to judgment 2 (16:17–21).

Judgment 5: The celebration in *heaven*. The *blessings for the saints* at the marriage feast of the Lamb. The army of Christ brings *judgment on earth* at the great supper of God. The beast and the false prophet are thrown into the *lake of fire* (19:1–21).

Judgment 6: Fire from *heaven* consumes Satan's army *on earth*. Satan, the beast, the false prophet, and those not in the Lamb's book of life are thrown into the *lake of fire*. *Blessings for the saints* in the new Jerusalem (20:9–22:5).

If it can be assumed that each of these judgments ends a section of the Apocalypse as do the ones that close the sections composed of seven parts, and that 1:1–9 and 22:6–21 are intended to be an introduction and a conclusion, the following would be the structure of the Apocalypse:¹⁹

- I. Introduction (1:1–9)
- II. Seven letters (1:10–3:22)
- III. Opening of the seven seals of the scroll (4:1–8:1)

into the fire. They normally view the judgment of Satan as being after the judgment of the beast and the false prophet. But the judgment in 20:10 should be seen as a recapitulation of the judgment in 19:20 with the addition of Satan's judgment. 20:10 literally reads: "And the devil who had deceived them was thrown (*eblethē*, aorist passive indicative) into the lake of fire and sulfur, where both the beast and the false prophet. . . and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever." The ellipsis of a verb governing "beast" and "false prophet" requires the translator to supply one in English. Most translators supply "where the beast and the false prophet were/are"—as if the two judgments are sequential, not synonymous. But the ellipsis of a third-person-plural form of *einai* is rare (BDF 71). A more common form of ellipsis would be the omission of a verb coinciding with the preceding verb. Thus the most natural translation of 20:10 would be: "And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were thrown" (cf. NIV). (Note: "Were thrown" [aorist] = at the same time, not "had been thrown" [pluperfect] = prior to the time when the devil was thrown in.)

¹⁹ For a more detailed analysis of the structure of the Apocalypse see A. E. Steinmann, *The Shape of Things to Come: The Genre of the Historical Apocalypse in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature* (doctoral dissertation; University of Michigan, 1990).

- IV. The sounding of the seven trumpets (8:2–11:19)
- V. The woman, the dragon, the two beasts, the 144,000 with the Lamb, three angels, the harvest of the earth (12:1–14:20)
- VI. The seven bowls of God's wrath (15:1–16:21)
- VII. The fall of Babylon, the marriage feast of the Lamb, the great supper of God (17:1–19:21)
- VIII. The millennium, the great white throne, the new Jerusalem (20:1–22:5)
- IX. Conclusion (22:6–21)

V. CONCLUSION

Recognizing the tripartite unity of the sections concerning the sixth seal, trumpet and bowl has far-reaching consequences for understanding the Apocalypse itself, and much of the disagreement among exegetes about the meaning and structure of the book is partly a result of the failure to recognize it. Even those commentators who have noted the thematic unity of the sixth seal and trumpet have not explored its nature and implications.