

REVELATION 2—3: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SEVEN PROPHETIC MESSAGES

Robert L. Muse*

I. SCHOLARLY INTEREST

Scholars have generally referred to the seven short paragraphs in Revelation 2—3 as "letters." Most have based their conclusions on the command to John to "write" to the churches (cf. 2:1, 8, etc.).¹ Early scholars like Spitta and Charles argued that the so-called letters predated the final writing and editing of the Revelation. Spitta suggested that Revelation 2—3 represented genuine letters that accompanied the body of Revelation to its destination. Charles advanced the idea that the separate letters were probably circulated near the end of Vespasian's reign (A.D. 69–79) and eventually edited into the work. While John was shaping the final copy, Charles argued, the author made several additions to the letters in order to coordinate themes and motifs with the main idea in chaps. 4—22.²

W. Ramsay added his voice to the discussion by suggesting that Revelation 2—3 contained "literary epistles" that were commonly used in John's day.³ These epistles were never circulated separately but were written together in a "collection" according to the author's plan. Thus we have in Revelation 2—3 a

*Robert Muse is professor of Biblical studies at Ontario Bible College in Willowdale, Ontario.

¹See esp. F. Spitta, *Die Offenbarung von Johannes* (Halle, 1889); R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1920), 1. 37–47; E. Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (HNT 16; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1926) 18, 181–183; J. M. Rife, "The Literary Background of Revelation II–III," *JBL* 60 (1941) 179–182; A. Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Regensberger NT 9; Regensburg: Pustet, 1959) 36; G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (HNTC; New York: Harper, 1966) 27–29; L. Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 57–58; H. Hobbs, *The Cosmic Drama* (Waco: Word, 1971) 37–38; G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 36–38; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1974) 70–72; J. Sweet, *Revelation* (London: SCM, 1979) 77–78; J. M. Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979) 20–28. Other scholars prefer the more general term "message"; cf. H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (3d ed.; London: MacMillan, 1911) 23–25; I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967) 446–448; A. Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964) 70–72; H. Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (HNT 16a; Tübingen: Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1974) 53–54; J. M. Ford, *Revelation* (AB 38; New York: Doubleday, 1975) 373–375; E. S. Fiorenza, *Invitation to the New Testament* (Garden City: Image, 1981) 35–36.

²Charles, *Revelation*, 1. 46–47.

³W. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (Minneapolis: James Family, 1978; repr. of 1904 ed.) 38–39.

traditional "Christian epistolary" genre that may have been influenced by the Pauline corpus in a collection form.⁴

Ramsay's thesis is intriguing. But it has failed, generally, to produce evidence that the so-called "literary" epistle genre was commonplace in early Christian literature. Likewise the "collection" argument (cf. Goodspeed) also lacks proof that a collection form, comparable to Revelation 2—3, ever existed in the early communities. More recently, Ford has suggested that Revelation 1—3 was composed sometime after A.D. 60 and added to the main part of the book by a Christian editor from the "Baptist School."⁵ The seven "messages" are actually "prophecies" intended to stress the imminent return of Christ. Ford is sympathetic to Charles, but she does not expand on his letter hypothesis.

Modern commentators generally reject these redaction arguments because they lack text and literary evidence. C. J. Hemer argues that the general trend of historical-critical study of Revelation 2—3 today seems to tell clearly against such a separation of the seven messages.⁶ Beasley-Murray suggests that the length of any hypothetical pre-edited letter form would have been too brief to be rendered meaningful to the early communities. Thus he concludes that "the letters when shorn of their supposed amplifications become very short (so short as to make it difficult to envisage their being sent in isolation)."⁷

Charles and others apparently were not aware of ancient letter elements (e.g. the personal salutation and closing) that are clearly missing in the form contained in Revelation 2—3. In order to support the thesis of Spitta and Charles we must find an explanation for the missing letter components. Is it possible that a redactor simply cut out those basic elements in the process of editing the book? He may have, if he considered the greeting and closing to be redundant or, perhaps, out of place in his otherwise literary work.

But such explanations are difficult to support. First, redundancy is a clear stylistic device throughout Revelation. The introductory formula ("To the angel of the church") is repeated at the beginning of each letter. The "hearing" phrase

⁴Ibid., pp. 38–39; see further E. J. Goodspeed, *New Solutions of New Testament Problems* (Chicago, 1927).

⁵Ford, *Revelation* 55–56.

⁶C. J. Hemer, *A Study of the Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia with Special Reference to their Local Background* (unpublished dissertation; Manchester, 1969).

⁷Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 71. For background literature on the letter form see P. Wendland, "Die urchristlichen Literaturformel" (HNT 1; Tübingen: Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1912) 339–345; F. X. J. Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter: A Study in Greek Epistolography* (Washington: Catholic University dissertation, 1923); O. Roller, *Das Formular den Paulinischen Brief* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1933); C. W. Keys, "The Greek Letter of Introduction," *AJP* 56 (1935) 28–44; P. Schubert, *The Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgiving* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1939); T. Y. Mullins, "Petition as a Literary Form," *NovT* 5 (1962) 46–54; R. W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic and Word of God* (New York: Harper, 1966); "The Apostolic Parousia: Form and Significance," in *Christian History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1967) 249–268; J. L. White, *The Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter* (SBLDS 2; Missoula: Scholars, 1972); C. Kim, *Form and Structure of the Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation* (SBLDS 4; Missoula: Scholars, 1972); W. G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); R. Russell, "Pauline Letter Structure in Philippians," *JETS* 25 (1982) 295–306.

(2:7a, 11a, etc.) and the “conqueror” sayings (2:7b, 11b, etc.) are nearly all repeated in the two chapters. Also the personal nature of the author’s commentary elsewhere suggests that an arbitrary exclusion of the personal salutation and closing is illogical. The personal note in 1:9 (“I, John, your brother”) indicates that the author was not composing a strict literary piece. If the messages of Revelation 2—3 are personal letters from John, we might expect to find a salutation and a closing of each letter. These elements are a standard part of all personal letters in antiquity, yet there is no evidence to suggest that Revelation 2—3 ever existed in a form that included these letter components.

What are we to conclude from all this? That it is very unlikely that the paragraphs of Revelation 2—3 ever functioned as separate letters. If the messages did circulate in Asia Minor at a time prior to the final composition of Revelation, it has yet to be demonstrated what form they actually took.⁸

The common Greek letter in antiquity, in its simplest form, was composed of the following elements: (1) introduction (including prescript, greetings, etc.); (2) text or body of the letter; (3) closing or conclusion.⁹ Scholarship informs us respecting the Pauline letter structure that probably developed from the basic Greek letter form. The characteristics are fivefold: (1) salutation (writer to recipient, “greetings”); (2) thanksgiving; (3) body (including a formal opening, connecting and transitional formulae, concluding “eschatological climax” and “apostolic parousia”); (4) paraenesis; (5) closing (including final greetings, doxology and benediction).¹⁰

The basic structure of the seven messages in Revelation 2—3 has the following stylistic features: (1) addressee greeting; (2) *graphon* (“write”) imperative; (3) message formula; (4) body of the message (including “knowledge” formula, statement of praise and/or blame, encouragement and/or warning); (5) conclusion (including exhortation to “listen” and a promise).¹¹

At first glance there appear to be some connections between the Pauline letter and the messages of Revelation 2—3. A salutation-greeting begins each message, but the tone and style of Paul’s epistles are quite unlike the tone and structure of John’s messages. The following may serve to illustrate our point:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ,
called an apostle. . . ; to all God’s
beloved in Rome, who are called
saints:

Grace to you and peace from
God our Father and the Lord Jesus
Christ (Rom 1:1, 7).

To the angel of the church in
Ephesus write: The words of him
who holds the seven stars in his
right hand, who walks among the
seven golden lampstands (Rev 2:1).

Paul’s salutation is personal and informal, while John’s introduction appears

⁸See further Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 76–77; Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 446–447; Fiorenza, *Invitation* 56; Kraft, *Offenbarung* 52; Wendland, “Literaturformel” 339–341.

⁹See Doty, *Letters* 14; Funk, *Language* 250–252.

¹⁰White, *Body* 69–70; Funk, *Language* 263–265; Doty, *Letters* 29–30.

¹¹The initial order of (5) is exhortation and promise (cf. 2:7, 11, 17), but the last four messages reverse the order (2:26–29; 3:5–6, 12–13, 21–22).

to be quite impersonal and stylized. The formula "To the angel of the church" followed by a descriptive phrase connected to the Son of man mentioned earlier in 1:13–16 is rigidly maintained in each of the messages. The impression given by the text is that of a literary structure of definite composition and style.

There is also a body of a message in Paul's epistles and John's seven messages. Close observation indicates that similar themes and language appear in both, but it is difficult to maintain an argument tying both writers into a common body structure or form. Statements of praise and blame, encouragement and warning are common to both writers.¹² Likewise Paul and John write threats of personal condemnation and visitation to local communities where sin and error have arisen.¹³ There seems to be a common thematic language and idiom reservoir from which each draws. But, again, the author of the Apocalypse maintains a rather wooden, impersonal stance toward the matters that concern him. Paul, on the other hand, writes in a style that is flexible and personal.

Lastly, Paul and John both utilize a "knowledge" formula. Paul uses a "disclosure" formula, utilizing terms like *gnōrizō* ("I make known"), *ginōskein* ("to know"; Gal 1:11; Phil 1:12) and *oidate* ("you know"; 1 Thess 2:1, 11; 3:3; 5:2) in a technical way to disclose to the church or remind it of old and new information for their considerations. John uses the simple defective perfect *oida* ("I know"; Rev 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15) as an introductory formula for critical evaluation of each church. John's style, again, is rigid and rather wooden in his employment of the formula for analysis of each church situation. The *oida* formula appears to be a stylized literary device in the seven paragraphs of Revelation 2–3. But Paul's formula is much less rigid and fixed. For Paul there appears to be an emotional factor that blends with his style in order to give it structural impact.

We conclude that there are some general and specific connections between the Pauline epistles and the Johannine messages of Revelation 2–3. But there are no formal literary connections as such as to identify John's brief paragraphs with Paul's letter form. Kraft rightly concludes that "letters" usually have formula components and epistolary forms within their structure. The paragraphs of Revelation 2–3 have no such components or forms. They are thus a unique form of communication between John and the seven communities of Asia Minor.¹⁴

¹²Paul's praise is usually contained in the early part of the thanksgiving section of his letters (cf. Rom 1:8–10; 1 Cor 1:4–6; Eph 1:15–17; Phil 1:3–5; etc.). But he also gives thanks for their "work" (1 Thess 1:2–3). Revelation 2–3 has no thanksgiving section. But the author offers praise to the several churches by means of a variety of introductory praise formulae: "I know your works" (2:2, 19; 3:8); "I know your tribulation" (2:9); "I know where you dwell" (2:13).

¹³Paul condemns the Corinthians and threatens to go to them "with a rod" (1 Cor 4:21). He threatens the same action in 2 Cor 3:2. The messages of John also contain strong threats of visitation by Christ to the local community: "Repent. . . ; if not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand" (2:5); "If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you" (3:3). The judgment language is similar in all these cases, but in the former it is Paul who threatens a visitation of the church. In the Revelation of John the visitor is Christ himself.

¹⁴Cf. Kraft, *Offenbarung* 52–53.

How then may the seven messages of Revelation 2—3 be classified with respect to their literary form? Scholars have had different opinions on the matter. D. W. Hadorn suggested some time ago that the so-called “letters” of Revelation are the clear and inspired Word of God (“*Hier redet Gott*”) written in the form of seven-strophe hymns.¹⁵ His literary analysis did not convince many scholars. He did note, however, that the messages had a strong prophetic tone, like Amos 1—2. Others have followed suit in their research, positing a variety of theses connected to the prophetic tone and structure of Revelation 2—3.¹⁶

E. Lohmeyer identified the key phrase *tade legei* (“thus says,” literally “these things he says”; 2:1, 8, etc.) with the “God-given word” of the OT prophets in the style of an ancient royal decree.¹⁷ Swete suggested further that the *tade legei* formula (perhaps from Amos 1:6 LXX, “Thus says Yahweh,” *tade legei*) removes the notion that chaps. 2—3 are simple letters and replaces it with the general idea that the chapters are actually “utterances, pronouncements, judgments passed upon the churches.”¹⁸

Kraft argued that *tade legei* is an introductory formula for the “messenger speech,” which was used by the messenger to declare the one who had spoken through his mouth. The speech form was a favorite of both oriental kings and OT prophets. The basic difference between the usual prophetic speech forms and the forms used in Revelation 2—3 is that the one speaking is not specifically named in the seven messages but alluded to figuratively.¹⁹ Thus, for Kraft, Revelation 2—3 consists of artistic, literary constructions that convey seven coded messages. The messages are given not through a name but through an authoritative symbol. They function to confirm the person of Jesus Christ in a kind of veiled speech. But, according to Kraft, only the few “chosen” in the early Church, those who had “ears to hear,” were able to understand the prophetic speech of John.²⁰

Ford and Fiorenza refer to Revelation 2—3 as literary prophecy.²¹ They say

¹⁵D. W. Hadorn, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (THKNT; Leipzig: Deichertsche; D. W. Scholl, 1928) 39–40.

¹⁶Cf. Lohmeyer, *Offenbarung* 19–20; E. Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (NTD 11; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1960) 20–26; M. Rissi, *Alpha und Omega* (Basel: F. Reinhardt, 1966) 18–19; Fiorenza, *Invitation* 56–58; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 72–73; Kraft, *Offenbarung* 52–53; A. Y. Collins, *The Apocalypse* (NT Message Series 22; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1979); Ford, *Revelation* 388–390; U. B. Müller, *Prophezie und Predigt im Neuen Testament* (SNT 10; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1975); G. Dautzenberg, *Urchristliche Prophezie. Ihre Erforschung, ihre Voraussetzungen im Judentum und ihre Struktur im ersten Korintherbrief* (BWANT 4; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1975) 21–22.

¹⁷Lohmeyer, *Offenbarung* 19.

¹⁸Swete, *Apocalypse* 24.

¹⁹Kraft, *Offenbarung* 53.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹See Ford, *Revelation* 373–375, who refers to the whole of chaps. 1–3 as “The Prophecies to the Seven Churches.” Cf. also Fiorenza, *Invitation* 35, 56, 62–64, who views the messages of Revelation 2—3 as prophetic literature.

that the two chapters are not "real" letters as such but prophetic messages symbolized by the number seven, directed to the church in Asia Minor in the first Christian century. These literary constructions serve the purpose of focusing Revelation as a whole on the church situation in that part of the world. The primary function of the seven messages is "prophetic exhortation" and "critical evaluation."

U. Müller's study²² attempted to build on the work of other scholars who recognized the prophetic character of Revelation 2—3. He developed a form-critical study on these chapters by identifying the phrase *tade legei* (cf. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14) as a "messenger formula" of OT prophecy.²³ This formula plays an important part in the messenger-speech form found in the opening section of each message in Revelation 2—3. The general elements identified are: (1) report of sending; (2) addressee; (3) place; (4) introduction to the commissioning; (5) commissioning of messenger; (6) messenger formula; (7) messenger's speech.

Müller indicates that Gen 32:3–5 (LXX) serves as a model for this form:

- (1) And Jacob sent messengers before him. . .
- (2) to Esau and his brother. . .
- (3) to the land of Seir, to the country of Edom.
- (4) And he charged them, saying. . .
- (5) Thus shall you say to my lord Esau:
- (6) "Thus saith thy servant Jacob (LXX *houtôs legei*):
- (7) I have sojourned. . ."

This closely approximates each of the introductions to the seven messages in Revelation 2—3.²⁴ Although John's use of the messenger formula is somewhat fluid, the basic elements of the structure are consistently maintained. Rev 2:1–2 illustrates the point:

- (1) Report of sending: Omitted. Strictly speaking, John is commissioned to write. He is not sent, but the sending has already been suggested in vv 9–20.
- (2) Addressee: "To the angel of the church" (2:1)
- (3) Place: "in Ephesus" (2:1)
- (4) Introduction to the commissioning: Omitted. But this is implied in vv 9–20.
- (5) Commissioning of messenger: "write" (2:1)
- (6) Messenger formula: "Thus says" (*tade legei*) (2:1)
- (7) Messenger speech: "I know your works" (2:2)

Müller's study attempted to go beyond his simple identification of the messenger-speech formula. He also attempted to classify each of the seven messages as a form of prophetic "sermon" (*Mahn- und Heilspredigten*) or *Geistrede* from Christ himself.²⁵ These so-called "sermons" were, according to Müller, tradi-

²²Müller, *Prophetie* 47–107.

²³Cf. C. Westermann, who isolated a similar prophetic form in *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967). See also his essay, "The Way of the Promise Through the Old Testament," in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* (London: SCM, 1964) 200–224, and note H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 135–137.

²⁴See Rev 2:8–9, 12–13, 18–19; 3:1, 7–8, 14–15.

²⁵Müller, *Prophetie* 47–49.

tional NT forms. They were never simple imitations of OT judgment speeches but were creations of prophecy within the early Church for the purpose of stressing the *parousia* and judgment of Christ.²⁶ Revelation 2-3 reveals the voice of the Spirit and Christ (the two in one) in two judgment message forms: (1) the judgment warning, and (2) the message of unconditional salvation. The messages to Smyrna (2:8-11) and Philadelphia (3:7-13) fall under the latter category, while the remaining five messages are loosely categorized under the former. The form of the "warning" sermon may be traced to OT forms, but the "salvation" sermons appear to be artistic creations by the author John.²⁷

Regarding the judgment warning sermon (cf. 3:1-6), Müller tries to isolate two internal forms: (1) the warning and exhortation to repentance, and (2) the unconditional word of salvation. He views the structure as follows:

- (1) The accusation (*oida*, preceding judgment that surveys the church situation: "I know your works," 3:1b); "you have the name of being alive but you are dead" (3:1c)
- (2) The warning: (1) reminiscence and (2) cry to repent: "Awake" (3:2-3)
- (3) Conditional judgment threat: "If you will not awake" (3:3b)
- (4) The praise of the community and announcement of salvation: "you have still a few names" (3:4)
- (5) The conqueror saying: "He who conquers" (3:5). This is a conditional statement of salvation to the whole community.²⁸

The warning and exhortation to repentance sermon form is identified in (1) through (3), while the unconditional word of salvation is identified with (4). Müller traces these forms through the seven messages, concluding that the "sermons" to Sardis and to Ephesus exhibit the closest affinity with the "warning-exhortation" form.²⁹ The sermons to Pergamum, Thyatira and Laodicea are free and fluid variations of the form. Specific threats of judgment against special problems in the local Christian community seem to alter the form according to each particular case.

Müller's isolation of accusation, warning, conditional judgment and conqueror sayings, related to the conditional statement of salvation, is noteworthy. He has, however, erroneously omitted the knowledge formula (*oida*) in the general structure. This technical term has a function in all the messages independent of warning, accusation and salvation. It is the author's statement of divine objective observation from the Son-of-man figure who had been characterized earlier as having eyes "like a flame of fire" (1:14). The knowledge formula should be listed as (1) in the formal structure. Furthermore the accusation, warning, judgment and salvation sections that are described generally do not exhibit any kind of identical formulae within them to justify Müll-

²⁶Ibid., pp. 47-49. See also T. W. Gillespie, "A Pattern of Prophetic Speech in First Corinthians," *JBL* 97 (1978) 77-79, who identifies similar components of structure in the prophetic speeches in 1 Corinthians.

²⁷Müller, *Prophetic* 48-50.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 57-60.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 62-65.

er's clear statement of formal structure. Apart from the knowledge formula (which Müller neglects), the only clear traditional forms recognizable in all the messages are the "hearing" and "conqueror" sayings: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (cf. 2:7, 11a, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22); "To him who conquers, he who conquers" (*tō nikōnti*, 2:7, 17; *ho nikōn*, 2:11, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). The threats of conditional judgments are connected to visitation verbs: *erchomai*, 2:5, 16; 3:11; *hēxō*, 2:25; 3:3; *eiseleusomai*, 3:20. Müller concludes that the "comings" carry with them hints of eschatological punishment.³⁰ But this assertion is not spelled out in relation to the context of Revelation 1—3 or in terms of the relative form under consideration.

The structural elements proposed by Müller are somewhat arbitrary and often too fluid for precise traditional form classification. Perhaps the most that can be said with certainty is that Rev 3:1–6; 2:1–7 display similarities to the general structure of prophetic speech. Evidence of a pre-Apocalypse form and structural scheme may be linked to Matt 3:7–10; 1 *Enoch* 91:3–19, as Müller suggests, but the structural components, including accusation, warning and proclamation of judgment, are analyzed more in terms of their contents rather than their literary form.

Matt 3:7–10 is an obvious judgment pronouncement passage that contains components of the judgment speech and judgment imagery:

He [Jesus] said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already laid at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and cast into the fire."

The figurative language of v 7 ("the coming wrath"), v 10 ("the ax is already laid at the root of the trees"), and, again, v 10 ("every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and cast into the fire"), describes rather loose units of judgment thought. But the precise literary formulae that characterize each component of the judgment speech in Matt 3:7–10 are not easily identified due to the figurative nature of the passage. Furthermore, Müller fails to demonstrate the literary form relationship between the judgment speech in Matthew 3 and the judgment sermon in Rev 3:1–6 or 2:1–7. The messenger-speech formula, the knowledge formula and the specific accusation components that are present in the messages of Revelation 2–3 are absent from the Matthean judgment speech.

Finally, the salvation sermon (*Heilspredigt*) is analyzed by Müller and judged to be generally an artistic creation of the NT prophet John.³¹ Within the body of the general salvation sermon there may be found, however, a prophetic "praise-promise of salvation" form that existed independently and at a time prior to John's Apocalypse. We note Rev 3:10:

³⁰Ibid., p. 64. Cf. also W. Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1906) 205; T. Holtz, *Die Christologie der Apokalypse des Johannes* (Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zur Berlin 85; Berlin: Akademie, 1962) 207; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 75, 96–97.

³¹Müller, *Prophetie* 59–60.

- (1) Praise: "Because you have kept my word of patient endurance" (3:10a)
- (2) Promise of salvation: "I will keep you from the hour of trial" (3:10b)

This we compare with Jer 35:18–19:

- (1) Praise: "Because you have obeyed the command of Jonadab your father and kept all his precepts" (35:18)
- (2) Promise of salvation: "Jonadab the son of Rechab shall never lack a man to stand before me" (35:19)

1 Kgs 21:29 also exhibits a similar literary form:

- (1) Praise: "Because he [Ahab] has humbled himself before me" (21:29b)
- (2) Promise of salvation: "I will not bring the evil in his days" (21:29c)

Müller is essentially correct in his assessment of the *Heilspredigt* to the church of Philadelphia (Rev 3:7–13). The messenger formula (v 7) and praise-promise form in the body of the message identify certain key components within the larger message context and connect the message loosely to the OT prophetic tradition. Beyond those component features, however, there do not appear to be any formal literary connections to be made.

Müller's form-critical analysis of the other so-called "warning sermons" is problematical. As stated above the component units are somewhat arbitrary and generally disconnected from any particular literary prehistory forms. Because of the rigid structural framework and the varied message body content of each of the seven messages it is necessary to argue for a form of prophetic message in Revelation 2—3 that is somewhat different from Müller's model.

The general and formal structure of the seven messages of Revelation 2—3 is unique among NT writings. One hesitates to call such writings "sermons" since we know sermon forms from Acts, and those are quite different from Revelation 2—3.³² These two chapters display, clearly and simply, a formal "literary message" but little more. There is a formal introduction, a body and a conclusion. Basically we have here a message from a sender to a recipient.³³ The *tade legei* introductory formula for the messenger speech identifies each message as (1) a word from another authority through the mouth (here, "words") of the messenger (2:1, etc.), and (2) a prophetic word.³⁴

The seven messages may be classified further into two formal constructions: (1) warning of judgment message, and (2) promise of salvation message. Both of these messages are, broadly speaking, creative but formal constructions understood similarly in terms of identical introductory and concluding formulae (see above): (1) addressee greeting; (2) *graphon* imperative; (3) message formula; (4) identification of sender; (5) body of the message; (6) conclusion (including exhortation to "listen" to the message and the promise of salvation to the conqueror). Section (5) is the variable whose elements determine the ultimate form classification of the messages.

³²Cf. Acts 2:14–26; 3:12–26; etc.

³³Swete, *Apocalypse* xi; Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 446–447; Kraft, *Offenbarung* 52–54.

³⁴Kraft, *Offenbarung* 52. This *tade legei* formula is clearly prophetic, as Wolff has argued; cf. *Amos* 136.

II. LITERARY STRUCTURE

1. *The warning of judgment message.* The structure of this message develops the following formal outline:

- (1) Addressee greeting
- (2) *Graphon* imperative
- (3) Messenger-speech formula
- (4) Identification of sender
- (5) Body of the message
 1. knowledge formula
 2. specific indictment charging guilt
 3. exhortation to change (imperative)
 4. specific articulation of the announcement of punishment
 5. options for praise (contingent upon local circumstances)
- (6) Conclusion
 1. exhortation to "listen"
 2. conditional promise of salvation

The messages to Ephesus (2:1-7), Pergamum (2:12-17), Thyatira (2:18-29), Sardis (3:1-6) and Laodicea (3:14-22) are essentially classified under this warning of judgment rubric. Only in general terms of thematic outline can the formal literary structure of this message be recognized as a warning of judgment. Amos 1-2 presents the OT model. Each oracle there suggests a uniform structure containing five basic elements:³⁵ (1) messenger-speech formula; (2) general proclamation of judgments; (3) specific indictments; (4) specific articulation of the announcement of punishment; (5) concluding formula. Amos 1 displays this structure as follows:

- (1) Thus says the Lord (1:3a)
- (2) For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke punishment (1:3b)
- (3) Because she threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth (1:3c)
- (4) I will send fire upon the house of Hazeal that will consume the fortresses of Ben-Hadad (1:4-5)
- (5) says the Lord (1:5e)

The five messages of Revelation treating a warning of judgment include all of the above prophetic elements in its structure* (with the exception of [2]):

- (1) Addressee greeting: To the angel of the church in Ephesus (2:1)
- (2) *Graphon* imperative: write
- * (3) Messenger-speech formula: Thus says
- (4) Identification of sender: him who holds the seven stars
- (5) Body of the message:
 1. knowledge formula: I know your works (2:2)
 - *2. specific indictment charging guilt (in the first person): But I have this against you (2:4)
 3. exhortation to repentance (in the imperative): Remember then from what you have fallen, repent (2:5a)
 - *4. specific articulation of the announcement of punishment (in the first

³⁵Wolff, *Amos* 135-137; Westermann, *Forms* 99-115.

person): I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place (2:5b)

5. option for praise: Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans (2:6)³⁶

*(6) Conclusion:

1. exhortation to "listen": He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (2:7a)
2. conditional promise of salvation: To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God (2:7b)

The particular components of this message (and the other four) that set it off as a "warning of judgment" in the prophetic tradition are the messenger-speech formula, the specific indictment charging guilt (in the first person), and the specific articulation of the announcement of punishment. This emphasizes the divine threat that "I will" do something soon (or quickly). The focus in the body of the message is on the condition of the congregation that causes the speaker to react negatively against their sin (cf. Rev 2:4).

Combined with the general thematic outline of the judgment warning from the prophetic tradition is the exhortation to repentance stated in the imperative. This exhortation usually follows the specific indictment charging guilt: "Remember then from what you have fallen, and repent and do the things you did at first" (2:5). This statement follows the indictment of 2:4 and immediately precedes the announcement of specific punishment in traditional prophetic judgment structure.

The same structural components appear in the body message to the community in Pergamum: "Repent (*metanoëson*), therefore, or else I will come to you quickly" (2:16). This exhortation immediately follows the indictment (2:14–15) and precedes the announcement of judgment in 2:16b. To the community in Sardis in the body of his prophetic message John writes: "Remember therefore what you have received and heard; obey it and repent (*metanoëson*)" (3:3). And to Laodicea he writes: "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent (*metanoëson*)" (3:19). This command to repent follows the knowledge formula and specific indictment charging guilt. But the message extends the indictment through vv 15–17 and inserts an "advice" section ("I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich") just prior to the statement about discipline and the command to repent. There follows then no specific articulation of the announcement of punishment but rather an "invitation" to salvation: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (3:20).³⁷ This, again, supports the previous observation that it is the body of the prophetic messages that is the variable element in determining the particular classification of the messages (warning of judgment/promise of salvation). Only in general thematic rubrics can the formal literary structure of each message be categorized.

³⁶Note that praise is also offered after the knowledge formula (e.g. in 2:13).

³⁷The theme of change (repentance) also occurs in the message to Thyatira (2:21–22). However, the emphasis on exhortation and command is missing in the terms *metanoëse*, *metanoëσαι* and *metanoësin*.

The repentance exhortation in the imperative is found in the Deuteronomic tradition (Deut 30:1–10) as well as the prophets Joel (1:8–14), Zechariah (1:1–6), Isaiah (3:1—4:4) and Ezekiel (14:6; 18:30). But a specific literary formulation of the imperative is lacking in the tradition. Joel identifies the lament (“weeping” and “mourning”) in the time of judgment for Israel in the tradition of Deuteronomistic history and announces “Return to me with all your heart” as the word of God (2:12).³⁸ Repentance was considered to be the saving effect of God’s punitive judgments (Deut 4:29–31) in the day of Yahweh.³⁹ The theological catchword sets up the meaning of repentance as the total reorientation toward Yahweh in the time of judgment that will result in deliverance.

Zechariah, Isaiah and Ezekiel announce the same message in the face of judgment. Ezekiel in particular sets out the same thematic outline with the keyword “repent” in chap. 14:

- (1) The specific indictment charging guilt: Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts, and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces (14:3)
- (2) The command to deliver message: Therefore speak to them and tell them (14:4a)
- (3) The messenger-speech formula: Thus says the Lord God (14:4b)
- (4) The body of the message:
 1. Promise of Yahweh’s response to the one who comes to the prophet: When any Israelite . . . comes to a prophet, I the Lord will answer (14:4b–5)
 2. Repeated command to deliver message: Therefore say to the house of Israel (14:6a)
 3. The messenger-speech formula: Thus says the Lord God (14:6b)
 4. The exhortation to repentance (in the imperative): Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices (14:6c)
 5. The restatement of the indictment: When any Israelite or any alien living in Israel separates himself from me and sets up idols in his heart and puts a wicked stumbling block before his face (14:7)
 6. The specific articulation of the announcement of punishment (in the first person): I will set my face against that man and make him an example and a byword. I will cut him off from my people (14:8)

John uses this prophetic form freely, adapting (1) and (2) to his writing situation, echoing (3) early in the message (but omitting the second formula) and then following 4., 5., and 6. precisely from the structural outline.

The warning of judgment message, although critical for the church, is not the final word from God even at the time of John’s writing. The conclusion of each message carries a theme that runs through Revelation—viz., God’s mercy and loving-kindness toward his own (cf. 7:15, 17; 19:7–9; 21:3–7). A conditional promise of salvation then follows after an exhortation to “listen” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

³⁸See Deut 30:10; 1 Sam 7:3; 1 Kgs 8:48; 2 Kgs 23:25; and cf. H. W. Wolff, “The Kerygma of the Deuteronomic Historical Work,” in *The Vitality of the Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 83–85.

³⁹Wolff, *Amos* 48.

2. *The promise of salvation message.* The other basic literary form behind the prophetic messages in Revelation 2—3 is the salvation message. This form, contained in the messages to Smyrna and Philadelphia, is to be credited more immediately to the creative activity of the author's prophetic proclamation of salvation to the two churches on the condition that they remain faithful to Christ in the midst of their persecution.

The introductory and concluding elements in the message to Smyrna (Rev 2:8–11) are identical to the warning of judgment message (see above). The body of the message has the following elements:

- (1) Knowledge formula: I know your tribulation and your poverty (2:9a)
- (2) Situation of the congregation
 1. praise: yet you are rich (2:9b)
 2. description of their trouble: I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan (2:9c)
- (3) Comfort for their distress: Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. . . . The devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days (2:10a, b)
- (4) Exhortation and promise: Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life (2:10c)

At once the reader is impressed by the noticeable absence of any accusation, warning, call to repentance or judgment threat. This is also characteristic of the message directed to Philadelphia.

The word to the community in Philadelphia (3:7–13) also expresses the conditional salvation proclamation, but it presents a variation from the above basic form. This is the only message that does not begin (cf. v 7b) by echoing phrases that describe the character features of the Son of man as given in 1:13–16. It may be that the judgment motif related to the figure in 1:13–16 was no longer relevant to the author's purpose in this message. Therefore other motifs were more relevant. Thus the figure who speaks here is described in traditional terms reminiscent of Yahweh in the OT (e.g. "the holy one," "the true one"; cf. Isa 40:25). The figure, probably Jesus Christ, now has authority and power ("the key of David") to open the door to God's eternal kingdom, but also to open (and close) the door to Death and Hades (cf. 1:18). The structural elements of the body of this message are as follows:

- (1) Knowledge formula: I know your works (3:9a)
- (2) First salvation promise: Behold, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut (3:8b)
- (3) First verdict (praise) for the congregation: yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name (3:8c)
- (4) Second salvation promise: Behold, I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan . . . fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you (3:9)⁴⁰
- (5) Second verdict (praise) for the congregation: Since you have kept my command to endure patiently (3:10a)

⁴⁰The first and second salvation promises are introduced by the same term, *idou*, which indicates that the second restates the first. Thus the second verdict (5) serves to expand and emphasize the salvation promise.

- (6) Third salvation promise: I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth (3:10b)
- (7) Exhortation to constancy with a conditional promise of salvation: I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown (3:11)

The structure of this last message in Revelation is connected loosely with the other basic form by the knowledge formula and the statement of praise and promise of salvation. Furthermore, the call to "listen" ("hear") connects all seven messages with an ultimate and conditional promise of blessedness for those who, in their hearing, emerge victorious in the end. The singular grammatical construction ("he who overcomes") suggests the individualistic nature of this promise. All believers who are faithful in life and death—i.e., who overcome and are victorious—will receive the promise.⁴¹

W. Popkes⁴² argues that the seven messages of Revelation 2—3 are John's hermeneutical preparation and instruction for the Christian communities of Asia Minor regarding the future apocalypse of chaps. 4—22. The call (*Weckruf*) to "hear" (2:7, 11, etc.) seems to be rooted in an apocalyptic-wisdom tradition of Israel and appears to connect Revelation 2—3 to the synoptic parable tradition, especially the traditions of Matthew and Mark. This connection suggests two things to Popkes: (1) the historical-apocalyptic character of the later period in the parable tradition, and (2) the similar character of the apocalyptic tradition behind the Revelation of John.⁴³

The "*Funktion*" thesis of Popkes is well taken. It is lacking in breadth, however, in that it fails to take into consideration the prophetic character of the seven messages, which is clearly shown in their formal structure. His argument also omits any discussion of the connection between prophetic forms and content and the apocalyptic-wisdom tradition in Revelation 2—3. If that connection is analyzed carefully another element in John's hermeneutical method may be demonstrated—namely, the preparation for imminent judgment and/or salvation as indicated by the prophetic form and character of the messages.

That the basic character of the seven messages is prophetic can be demonstrated by the introductory form and warning of judgment content of the body messages.⁴⁴ Also the combined tone of criticism, comfort and consolation aimed at the churches themselves seems to tie the messages more closely to prophetic/pastoral functions than apocalyptic/wisdom/parable traditions.⁴⁵ Certainly the

⁴¹Cf. Swete, *Apocalypse* 29; Wikenhauser, *Offenbarung* 38.

⁴²W. Popkes, "Die Funktion der Sendschreiben in der Johannes-Apokalypse. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Spätgeschichte der neutestamentlichen Gleichnisse," *ZNW* 74 (1983) 90–107.

⁴³*Ibid.*, pp. 96–98.

⁴⁴Cf. the prophetic-judgment themes in 2:5, 16, 21–23; 3:3 and the apocalyptic-prophetic imagery in 2:10, 16; 3:14; etc. See Kraft, *Offenbarung* 52–53; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 72; Lohse, *Offenbarung* 21–22. See also the structural analysis by D. E. Aune in *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Medieval World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 274–279.

⁴⁵Cf. H. A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 191–193; G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 208.

emphatic demand for repentance and/or faithfulness sets the messages closer to the judgment tradition of the prophets. Any wisdom-parable tradition that may lie behind the so-called *Weckruf* to "hear" should be seen in a subordinate role in the messages serving only the more fundamental prophetic character of the word of the Lord that looks to the coming future and God's judgment, rule and kingdom.⁴⁶

In the context of the whole, chaps. 2—3 appear to function in two ways: (1) generally, in terms of hermeneutical preparation for God's later general revelation; (2) specifically, in terms of the peculiarities of each local church situation, as a warning of judgment and promise of salvation before the final coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of man.

⁴⁶This can be demonstrated further from the parables of the kingdom; see C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribners, 1961).