

## **Introduction to Revelation – part 3**

### **The structure of Revelation: How does it fit together?**

#### **1. Introduction & outline**

With *any* Bible book it is helpful and important to observe the structure and to ask: (1) what are the different sections into which it has been arranged? (2) how do those sections fit together?

With the book of Revelation this is even more important.

When you observe the occurrence of important and repeated words in Revelation it becomes relatively easy to work out what are the big sections within the book (though sometimes it is tricky to work out precisely where a section begins or ends).

Here's a very simple outline of the whole book (skim through Revelation in your Bible while you read this outline – and see how it relates to the text on the page):

1:1-20	Prologue
2:1–3:22	The 7 letters to the churches
4:1-11	A vision of heaven
5:1–8:5	The 7 seals
8:6–11:19	The 7 trumpets
12:1–15:4	The 7 signs: serpent/beast 1/beast 2/Lamb & 144k/three angels/harvest/saints victory & song
15:5–16:21	The 7 bowls / plagues
17:1–19:10	The judgement of Babylon the whore
19:11-20:15	The victory of the Word of God, defeat of Satan, and final judgement
21:1–22:5	The new creation: the church perfect in glory
22:6-21	Epilogue

Clearly, there are different “sections” within Revelation. However, a key question is: how do those sections relate to each other? Different interpretations of the book stem – in part – from different answers to that question.

There are two opposing ways of relating the various sections together. You can sum them up in two words: linear and recapitulation. (Note: the material below is drawn – often verbatim – from Beale’s *Shorter* commentary on Revelation and from the ESV Study Bible. Both are highly recommended).

#### **2. Linear: Revelation unfolds history in chronological order**

This view holds that chapters 4-22 tell one single account of history. Revelation should be read in linear fashion, it is claimed. The seals are followed by the trumpets, then the signs, then the bowls, and so on. There are two groups of interpreters who have (largely) argued for reading Revelation in this way: historicists and futurists (we’ll discuss these below, together – briefly – with preterist interpretation).

##### **a) Historicist**

Historicist interpreters have generally seen Revelation as predicting the major movements of Christian history, most of which have been fulfilled up to the time that the particular commentator is writing. And this school has *generally* viewed the seals, trumpets, bowls etc as unfolding successive events of history in general chronological order.

They’ve argued that Revelation prophecies the invasion of Christian lands by the Goths and then the Muslims, the corruptions of the Medieval Catholic church, the reign of Charlemagne, the Protestant Reformation, and the destruction wrought by Napoleon and Hitler.



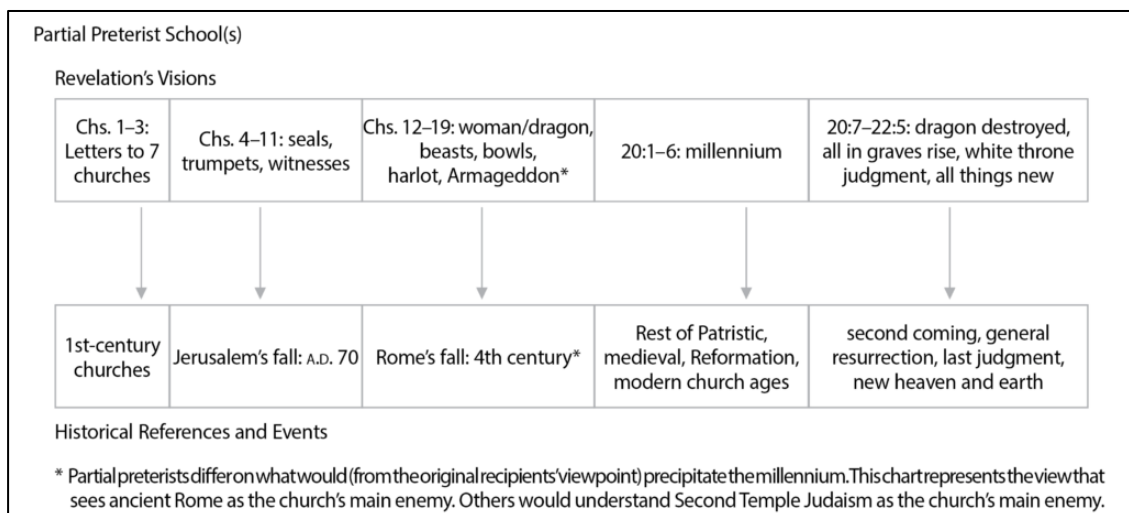
At this point we'll not consider those other contentious distinctives of premillennialism. For now simply notice that the whole era from the early church through to the present day is located *before* the events described in Revelation chapters 4-22.

Just two comments for now: firstly, there is a future aspect to Revelation – a prophetic dimension which needs to be taken seriously. For a start, 1:19 tells us that Revelation concerns things that “are” and things that “are to take place after this.” However, futurists who have tried to use 1:19 as a grid onto which to map the past, present and distant future are making a misstep. (See Beale’s *Shorter* commentary, pp28-32).

Secondly, if you take a “literal” view of Revelation you will probably end up being a futurist. That is, John’s bizarre, if taken in a physically literal way, have never happened before in history (for example, according to 16:21, the last bowl says that at the end of time there will be hail that weighs one hundred pounds). Therefore, if literally understood, these things must take place at a future time. But I tried to show us in our previous session that Revelation is better understood as largely symbolic.

**c) Preterist**

For the sake of completion, let me mention the Preterist view of Revelation. The name comes from the Latin word “praeter” meaning “past.” It views Revelation chiefly prophesying the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD or the fall of the Roman empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD – or both. Thus, the fulfilment of Revelation’s prophesies mainly lies in the “past.”



We won't consider the case for or against preterism at this point. We will simply note that *some* preterists view Revelation as linear chronological history. Others recognise the presence of “recapitulation.”

**3. Recapitulation: the same time period... repeated**

This position holds that the various series of judgments are parallel descriptions of the same events. Hence we use the word “recapitulation”: the same events are described again and again... albeit with different emphases and perspectives.

Recapitulation is most associated with idealism (though you do also find it in some preterist commentaries on the book).

**a) Idealism**

Idealism agrees with historicism that Revelation’s visions describe the conflict between Christ and his church on the one hand, and Satan and his evil conspirators on the other, from the apostolic age to Christ’s second coming. Yet idealist interpreters believe that the presence of recapitulation means that the visions’ literary order need not reflect the actual chronological order of particular historical events. Idealists also believe that Revelation is mainly symbolic in nature.

It's helpful to understand these different interpretative schools (and I'm largely an idealist). But for our present purposes I want us to see some evidence within the text of Revelation that points us clearly towards a "recapitulation" view of Revelation.

#### **4. Evidence for recapitulation**

Within each "series", a number of "repetitions" can be observed:

##### **a) Final judgement / final salvation occurs repeatedly**

Towards the end of each series there's a description of judgement followed by a depiction of salvation. They are listed in this table. If you study each you'll see that the "judgement" verses essentially describe the same *final* judgement (albeit in different ways). So too with the depiction of salvation.

		<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Salvation</b>
1:1-20	Prologue		
2:1-3:22	The 7 letters to the churches		
4:1-11	A vision of heaven		
5:1-8:5	The 7 seals	6:12-17	7:9-17
8:6-11:19	The 7 trumpets	11:18a	11:18b
12:1-15:4	The 7 signs	14:14-20	15:2-4
15:5-16:21	The 7 bowls / plagues	16:17-21	
17:1-19:10	The judgement of Babylon the whore	17:1-18:24	19:1-10
19:11-20:15	The victory of the Word of God, defeat of Satan, and final judgement	20:7-15	
21:1-22:5	The new creation: the church perfect in glory		21:1-22:5
22:6-21	Epilogue		

##### **b) Specific example: compare these "judgement" passages**

Futurist commentators tend to claim that only chapter 20 speaks of the final judgement. We're going to read through the following five "judgement" passages – each drawn from the end of a section. We're going to start with some verses from Revelation 20:11-15. And we're going to see that, when you lay these passages next to each other, it's clear that each is speaking of the same, final judgement.

*Revelation 20:11-15* Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. <sup>12</sup> And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. <sup>13</sup> And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. <sup>14</sup> Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. <sup>15</sup> And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

*Revelation 6:12-17*, When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, <sup>13</sup> and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. <sup>14</sup> The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. <sup>15</sup> Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, <sup>16</sup> calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, <sup>17</sup> for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

(Note: Here's what happens after the breaking of the 6<sup>th</sup> seal. It is hard to imagine how this could refer to anything other than the final judgment, or how any other judgment could possibly come

after it. This means that the events of tribulation portrayed in the trumpets (beginning at 8:2) must go back in time.)

*Revelation 11:15,18* The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever... The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great [same phrase as in 20:12], and for destroying the destroyers of the earth."

(Note: futurism often claims that the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet has no specific content and is explained by everything else following in the book. However, these parallels show that the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet (11:14-18) does indeed tell of the last judgement. This is a clear indicator that futurism is incorrect).

*Revelation 14:14-20* Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. <sup>15</sup> And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." <sup>16</sup> So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped. <sup>17</sup> Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. <sup>18</sup> And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." <sup>19</sup> So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. <sup>20</sup> And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia.

*Revelation 16:17-21* The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" <sup>18</sup> And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake. <sup>19</sup> The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath. <sup>20</sup> And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. <sup>21</sup> And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people; and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.

There are many clear verbal and thematic parallels between these passages (e.g. earthquakes, mountains, islands, sky, earth and heaven – all impacted by the presence of the one who sits on the throne). Each is telling of the final judgement. So, the apostle John is indeed using "recapitulation": we're told the story up to and including the End *several times over*.

Or put it another way: \*\* The order in which John saw things is not necessarily the historical chronological order in which those things will happen. \*\* John's phrase "after these things" or "after this" is almost always talking about the order in which he saw the visions, not the chronological order of historical events.

This means that the scope of John's sets of parallel visions deals with the course of history from the birth of the church at Pentecost until the return of the Lord. Understanding this gives us an absolutely critical key to understanding the meaning of Revelation as a whole.

### **c) Specific example: Repeated judgement in the 7<sup>th</sup> item (see Exodus 19)**

Here's another example. When in chapter 4 John is given a vision of the heavenly rule of God, one feature of God's throne is the lightening, voices and thunder that issue from it. They are all features that Moses experienced at Mount Sinai and recorded in Exodus 19. This is a clue that God's holy presence will express itself in holy judgement just like he did in the Exodus.

And, so, at three points later on in Revelation when John wants to describe the coming judgement he does so using exactly the same terms. It's recapitulation again. However, with each description he adds in one new feature – as if to emphasise the intensity and fearfulness of the realities to come:

4:5, “flashes of lightning, and rumblings/voices, and peals of thunder...”

8:5, “peals of thunder, rumblings/voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.”

11:19, “flashes of lightning, rumblings/voices, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.”

16:18-21, “flashes of lightning, rumblings/voices, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake...and great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each...”

#### **d) Other parallels:**

Other parallels can be cited: (1) “It is done” in 16:17 and 21:6 appears in both instances to refer to the completion of the same final judgment. On both occasions the words come from the throne of heaven. (2) The repetition of the phrase “gather together for war” in 16:14; 19:19; and 20:8 indicates that the same (final consummative) battle is being described three times. (3) The declarations concerning the fall of Babylon occurring in 14:8 and 16:19 and in various places in chs. 17-19 must also be describing the same thing, thus revealing again recapitulated description of judgment. (4) The trumpets and bowls are both modeled on the Exodus plagues, alluding to the same plagues and presenting them in roughly the same order.

#### **e) The Relation of the Letters to the Visions**

It's not the case that the letters to the churches are disconnected from the visions that follow, which is what you might expect if the letters addressed the church-age and the visions concerned the far distant future. There are many links, which help us better apply the letters and indicate that the whole book concerns the whole period from Pentecost to Christ's return. We note:

- The theme of true/false Israel (2:9, 3:9, 7:4-8).
- The enduring of persecution (2:10, 6:11)
- The protection of the name of God (3:10,3:12, 7:3, 14:1)
- The privilege of being God's temple (3:12, 7:15)
- The theme of witnessing for God (2:13, 6:9, 11:3-13)
- Demonic figures (2:13, 2:14, 12:9, 13:13-17, 16:13, 19:20)
- A harlot (2:20-23, ch.17)
- Promises of clean garments and eating with the Lord (3:18,20, 19:8-9)
- Christ is the faithful and the truth (3:14, 19:11)
- Overcoming (2:7, 11, 12:11; 15:2; 17:14)
- Jesus bringing judgment by the sword coming out of His mouth (2:16, 19:15).

Beale has also shown how the letters (which speak of the present imperfect state of the church) and the concluding section (speaking of the glorified church in heaven) are closely related by the theme of promise and fulfilment. For example:

- Now, Christians dwell where Satan's throne is (2:13)
- Then, Christians will dwell where God's throne is (22:1)

The content of the visions have real and present relevance to all believers reading the book – both the first readers in those 7 Asian churches, and all in every age.