

**Looking Both Ways:  
A Study of the Duodirectionality  
of the Structural Seams in the Apocalypse**

A paper presented to the  
Hebrews, General and Pastoral Epistles, Apocalypse Section  
Robert Wall, Chair  
at the SBL Annual Meeting in Chicago, Nov 19-22, 1988

by Jon Paulien, Andrews University

Recent literature has noted that the structural seams or boundaries of the Apocalypse are not hard and fast. They allow for thematic and structural interaction between sections of the book. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, describes what she calls "intercalation of texts," a compositional technique in Revelation that divides elements that belong together. Such intercalation, of course, makes attempts at structuring the book quite difficult. Leonard Thompson, in his paper presented at the 1985 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Anaheim, implied that the structural seams of the Apocalypse provide "soft boundaries." In other words, the boundary sections of the Apocalypse function less to divide sections of the book than to allow significant movement between the concepts and images of its various parts. Although Schüssler Fiorenza and Thompson have advanced our understanding of how the structural seams of the Apocalypse function, sufficient attention has not yet been given to the boundary structures themselves.

Perhaps the most significant structural seam in the book of Revelation comes at the center of the book, Rev 11:18-19. While 11:18 describes the content of the seventh trumpet,

which climaxes the seven-trumpet structure, it also incorporates a cryptic summary of the rest of the book. This verse can be translated as follows:

The nations were angry  
and your wrath has come  
and the time to judge the dead  
    and to give the reward to your servants the prophets  
        and to the saints  
        and to those who fear your name  
            both small and great  
and to destroy those who are destroying the earth.

This passage contains five basic statements. The seventh trumpet is associated with the time when (1) the nations were angry, (2) God's wrath has come, (3) the time has come to judge the dead, (4) to reward the saints, and (5) to destroy the destroyers of the earth. The cosmic finality of these five assertions forms a fitting climax to the judgments of the seven trumpets as a whole. God's wrath on the "thirds" of the earth is now to be fully consummated. The seventh trumpet is intended to portray the time when God fully and finally deals with those who have been undoing his good creation.

What has gone unnoticed, to my knowledge, is the connection between these five statements and significant turning points in chapters 12-22. The phrase "The nations were angry" is paralleled by the anger of the dragon against the woman in 12:17. "The wrath of God" is elaborated on in 14:10 and 15:1. The "time to judge the dead" finds its counterpart in the judgment before the great white throne in 20:11-15. The time of rewards is mentioned again in 22:12, in the context of Jesus' promise to come quickly. The opposite of that reward, the destruction of the destroyers of the earth, is echoed in the language of 19:2.

What is particularly significant is that these are not just random references, but appear to be a programmatic outline for the remainder of the book. The dragon's anger against the woman in 12:17 is the substance of the material in chapter 13. On the other hand, the character of the woman's offspring mentioned in the same verse is at the heart of the material in chapter 14. Therefore, Rev 12:17 is a basic statement that summarizes the material in chapters 12-14. The dragon's war is carried out by the beast from the sea (13:1-10) and the beast from the earth (13:11-18) in chapter 13. The remnant is portrayed in chapter 14 as standing on Mount Zion and is associated with the messages of the three angels which challenge the unholy Trinity of chapter 13.

The reference to God's wrath in 15:1 introduces the bowl plagues as the means by which "the wrath of God is completed." Since the bowl plagues form the heart of the material in chapters 15-18, the simple statement in 11:18 "your wrath has come" suggests that chapters 15-18 form God's response to the anger of the nations, symbolized by the activity of the dragon and his allies in chapter 13 (cf. 16:13,14).

"The time to judge the dead" points the reader to the context of the 1000 years in chapter 20, "the time to reward the saints" calls to mind the entire context of the New Jerusalem section, and the destruction of "the destroyers of the earth" finds its completion in the fall of Babylon material in chapters 18 and 19.

I would conclude, then, that Rev 11:18, strategically placed at the geographical center of the book, provides a striking example of what could be called duodirectionality. This structural

seam functions in two ways at once. On the one hand, it provides the climax of the seven trumpet section, and on the other, it offers an introductory summary/outline of the direction that the rest of the book will take. The duodirectional character of 11:18 helps the interpreter to structure the book more effectively, and offers clues toward understanding the author's purpose in structuring the book as he did.

Similarly, Revelation 3:21 functions as both the climax of a preceding structure and the introduction to the next. It can be translated as follows:

To the one who overcomes  
I will give the right  
to sit with me on my throne,  
just as I also overcame  
and sat down with my Father on His throne.

This passage provides the climax of all the promises to the overcomer in Revelation 2 and 3. Certainly anyone granted to join Jesus on His heavenly throne will also inherit all the other promises offered to the one who overcomes. But the passage, like 11:18, also provides a summary overview of the seven seals of 4:1 through 8:1.

In 3:21 Christ promises to reward the overcomer (*ho nikôn*) with a share of His throne. An analogy to this action is the seating of Christ on His Father's throne as a consequence of His overcoming (*enikêsa*). The Father's throne (chap. 4), the overcoming of Christ (Rev 5:5--*enikêsen*), and His joining the Father on His throne (5:6ff.) are the central themes of Rev 4 and 5. In chapter 7 the redeemed are depicted as those permitted to join in the worship of the

heavenly throne-room (cf. especially 7:10-17).<sup>1</sup> Between the two scenes are the events of chap. 6. Evidently the Revelator understood the seven seals to span the time from the overcoming of the Lamb to the reward of the sealed.

When we add the insight gained from an examination of 3:21 to our consideration of 11:18 it would appear that a duodirectional language structure for the seams of the Apocalypse is intentional on the part of the author. This intentionality is confirmed when other structural seams of the book are examined.

Many scholars have noticed that, while the suffering of the souls under the altar in 6:9-11 provides a pointed climax to the war, famine, and pestilence sequence of the four

---

<sup>1</sup>The striking parallels between the songs of Rev 5:12-13 and 7:10, 12 indicate that, although they are separated in point of time, the two throne-scenes are intimately related.

Rev 5:12  
Worthy is the slain Lamb  
to receive power and  
riches and wisdom and  
strength and honor and  
glory and blessing.

Rev 7:12  
Amen. Blessing and  
glory and wisdom and  
thanks and honor and  
power and strength  
to our God forever and ever.

Rev 5:13  
To the One sitting on the throne  
and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honor  
and glory and might  
forever and ever.

Rev 7:10  
Salvation to our God  
to the One sitting on the throne  
And to the Lamb

horsemen, the cry "how long, O Lord" awaits the plagues of the seven trumpets (cf. 8:3-5,13). Likewise, the opening of the seventh seal in 8:1 blends in so closely with the appearance of the seven trumpet angels in 8:2 that many commentators feel that the seven trumpets are an elaboration of the seventh seal. The third angel's message of 14:9-12 climaxes God's response to the attack of the dragon and his allies. At the same time, however, the language points forward to 15:1 which introduces the bowl plagues.

The reference to John's entering into vision "by the Spirit" in 17:3 leads many scholars to suggest a clean break between the vision of chapters 4-16 and chapter 17 and following. However, according to 17:1, John's escort in this vision is none other than one of the seven bowl angels of chapter 16, suggesting that a clean structural break should not be made between chapters 16 and 17. 17:18 makes clear that the burning of the harlot in chapter 17 and the burning of the great city in chapter 18 are two ways of speaking about the same thing. 21:1-8 functions as both the climax of the vision of the 1000 years and as the introduction to the detailed description of the New Jerusalem.

Further research will probably provide many more examples of duodirectionality in the Apocalypse. The book literally exudes a throbbing excess of imagery that resists compartmentalization and calls for the reader to integrate the whole into the consideration of any part. To study the book by concordance is to segregate the parts in ignorance of the whole. The Apocalypse will probably yield many secrets only to the one who takes time to memorize it in the original language.

This report of research into the duodirectional nature of the structural seams of the Apocalypse has brought characteristics in Revelation into focus that other commentators have observed in the Gospel of John. R. E. Brown, for example (1:105-107), points out that a number of textual indicators suggest that the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11) provides the climax and completion of the call of the disciples found in chapter 1 of the Gospel. These indicators in no way deter him from seeing the wedding account as the introduction to chapters two through four which section he entitles "From Cana to Cana (1:95-96)." The double reminder of this first Cana miracle in the account of the healing of the official's son (4:46-54) suggests an *inclusio* marking off these three chapters as a literary unit.<sup>2</sup> (1:194-198). Nevertheless the theme of Jesus the life-giver in 4:46-54 is a striking introduction to the material in chapters five and following. It is not surprising that the duodirectionality of the account of the healing of the official's son has caused commentators to divide over whether the story belongs to what precedes or to what follows.

Charles H. Talbert makes a similar observation with regard to John chapter 12, which serves as a conclusion to what came before (John 12:37-50 concludes the core narrative of John 2:1 through 11:55-57), and an introduction to what follows (John 12:1-36 provides the essential introduction to the upper room and the passion narrative that follows. He argues that this

---

<sup>2</sup>Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 2 volumes, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 1:194-198.

“chain-link principle” is asserted in the writings of the ancient historian Lucian, and hence has extra-biblical parallels.<sup>3</sup>

This feature of the Gospel of John is similar to what we have noticed in our survey of the structural seams in the Apocalypse. Since scholars of Johannine literature have long debated the extent, if any, to which Revelation should be considered a product of the "Johannine School" it may be *apropos* to point out that since the structural seams of both books function in a similar way we may have detected a piece of evidence that they in some way partake of a common tradition.

In conclusion, it is the purpose of this paper to provide a deeper understanding of two areas of New Testament scholarship: 1) to clarify the nature of the boundary areas of Revelation, resulting in a better understanding of the author's intent in the structuring of the text, and 2) to demonstrate that the Apocalypse and the Gospel of John share a duodirectional pattern of structuring, which pattern increases somewhat the possibility that there is a literary relationship between the two books.

---

<sup>3</sup>Talbert quotes from Lucian's *How to Write History* as follows: "When [the historian] has finished the first topic he will introduce the second, fastened to it and linked with it like a chain . . . ; always the first and second topics must not merely be neighbors but have common matter and overlap." Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles* (NY: Crossroad, 1992), 179-180.