

THE STRUCTURE OF THE APOCALYPSE: RECAPITULATION OR PROGRESSION?

Robert L. Thomas
Professor of New Testament

The number of divisions of the Apocalypse, a longstanding problematic issue, finds its best resolution in allowing for the structural dominance of the numbered series in the book. Though a theory of recapitulation in dealing with those series has its merits, stronger evidence militates against such a system. A telescopic form of progression is not without its difficulties, but stronger evidence in its favor leads to the conclusion that it is the best solution. Attempts to combine recapitulation and progression fail because of the procedure's hermeneutical shortsightedness. A number of chronological considerations bolster the conclusion that the telescopic explanation is correct. Recapitulation does play a supporting role in some of the book's sections of intercalation, but the overall scheme of the book is that of progression, not repetition.

* * * * *

Theories about the structure of the Apocalypse abound. Some propose that the organization of the book revolves around seven sections,¹ but another recommends a structure composed of six series of six.² Other proposals advance theories of eight basic visions in the book³ or of five septenary patterns.⁴ Still another method of division

¹R. J. Loenertz, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (H. J. Carpenter, tr.; London: Sheed & Ward, 1947) xiii-xiv; John Wick Bowman, "The Revelation to John: Its Dramatic Structure and Message," *Int* 9/4 (October 1955):436-53; Leroy C. Spinks, "A Critical Examination of J. W. Bowman's Proposed Structure of the Revelation," *EvQ* 50/3 (July-September 1978):215-22; William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967) 22-25.

²J. Massyngberde Ford, *The Book of Revelation* (vol. 38 of *AB*; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975) 48-50.

³Kenneth A. Strand, "The Eight Basic Visions in the Book of Revelation," *AUSS* 25/1 (Spring 1987):107-21; John G. Gager, "The Attainment of Millennial Bliss through Myth: The Book of Revelation," in *Visionaries and Their Apocalypses* (Paul D. Hanson, ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 149-50.

⁴Jean-Pierre Charlier, "The Apocalypse of John: Last Times Scripture or Last Scripture?"

sees two divisions in the prophetic section, part one covering the first eleven chapters and part two the rest of the book.⁵ A further plan is to divide the book into four septets, one consisting of the seven messages of chaps. 2`3 and three consisting of one each of the seal, trumpet, and bowl series.⁶ A further suggestion also sees another division into four parts but not four divisions of seven.⁷ The division of the apocalyptic portion into three parts⁸ varies from the four-septet scheme by omitting the seven messages of chaps. 2`3.

*LV*40 (1985):184-90.

⁵W. J. Harrington, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (n.p.: Chapman, 1969) 31-40; Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* 29-31; Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976) 20; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1959) 187-88.

⁶J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, Pelican, 1979) 44, 47; Eugenio Corsini, *The Apocalypse: The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ* (vol. 5 of *Good News Studies*; Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1983) 61-63.

⁷Elisabeth Schssler Fiorenza, "Composition and Structure of the Revelation of John," *CBQ* 39/3 (July 1977):363.

⁸Jan Lambrecht, "A Structuration of Revelation 4,1`22,5," in *L'Apocalypse johannique et l'Apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament (BETL 53*; Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1980) 84-86.

Another issue of structural interest is the question of whether the author intended the sections of the book, however one may choose to divide it, to be parallel or consecutive. Some venture the opinion that they are parallel, each describing the same period from several different perspectives.⁹ Most often, this scheme has been named "recapitulation."¹⁰ The other option is to see chronological progression as entailed in the movement of chaps. 4-22. Though not always the case,¹¹ this latter theory usually accompanies the telescopic or "dove-tailing"¹² perspective regarding the expanded contents of seventh seal and the seventh trumpet. A combining of these two options has proposed the possibility that both progression and recapitulation characterize the structure of the book.

The goal of the present study is to accumulate and evaluate whatever evidence the text will yield in deciding between those possibilities. Two phases of discussion are necessary: the former investigating the relationships between the seals and trumpets and between the trumpets and bowls and the latter isolating indications of chronological repetition or succession. The scope of this essay will not permit an evaluation of the many proposals according to which the intercalations interspersed among the three numbered series are given

⁹William Lee, "The Revelation of St. John," in *The Holy Bible* (F. C. Cook, ed; London: John Murray, 1881) 595; Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* 25, 28; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 30-31.

¹⁰J. Ramsey Michaels prefers the term "reiteration" to "recapitulation," because Irenaeus uses "recapitulation" differently, to refer to going over the same grounds with different results`e.g., with reference to Christ's reparation of Adam's wrong (*Interpreting the Book of Revelation* [*Guides to New Testament Exegesis* 7, Scot McKnight, gen. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992] 53-54). "Recapitulation" has become so thoroughly established in speaking of the structure of Revelation, however, that a change in nomenclature at this point is inadvisable.

¹¹Lambrecht, "Structuration" 88-90, in his theory of "encompassing technique" exemplifies a combining of recapitulation with linear sequence. He reconciles the contradictoriness of the two schemes by theorizing that John incorporated the contradiction as a signal to his readers not to expect a future historical realization of the events prophesied in the book (104). This theory approximates the unusual hermeneutical assumptions characteristic of other theories that combine telescoping and recapitulation as discussed in a later section of this study (see pp. 56-58). See also J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1961) 136, for an apparent example of combining telescoping with recapitulation.

¹²"Dovetailing" is a term used by R. J. Loenertz, *Apocalypse* xiv-xvi.

consideration equal to the numbered series in the book's structure.¹³ Yet relationships of some of these to the seals, trumpets, and bowls will be considered.¹⁴ The assumption is that a *prima facie* understanding of the book dictates the structural dominance of the numbered series over visionary portions that are unnumbered.¹⁵

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE NUMBERED SERIES

The Theory of Recapitulation

Strengths of recapitulation. A discussion of the relationships between the seals, trumpets, and bowls revolves mostly around the significance, content, or makeup of the seventh seal and also that of the seventh trumpet. (1) A recapitulatory interpretation rests on the assignment of the last seal and the last trumpet to the same time as the seventh bowl—i.e., the time of the end.¹⁶ The most frequently cited

¹³Revelation 1:19 divides the book into three major parts: 1:9-20, 2:1-3:22, and 4:1-22:5 (Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7, An Exegetical Commentary* [vol. 1 of 2 vols.; Chicago: Moody, 1992] 113-16). Revelation 4:1-22:5 is the focus of this investigation, the assumption being that the structures of 1:1-3:22 and 22:6-21 are distinct from the central apocalyptic section. G. K. Beale ("The Interpretive Problem of Rev. 1:19," *NovT* 34/4 [1992] 367-375) reaches essentially the same conclusion regarding the book's broad structure by interpreting Rev 1:19 as an allusion to Dan 2:28-29, 45.

¹⁴See John A. McLean, "The Structure of the Book of Revelation and Its Implication for the Pre-wrath Rapture (Part One)," *Michigan Theological Journal* 2/2 (Fall 1991) 138-67, for a helpful survey and evaluation of nine recent proposals analyzing the structure of Revelation.

¹⁵G. V. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 106; Donald Guthrie, *The Relevance of John's Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 25; Leland Ryken, *Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 147-49. David L. Barr's comment is relevant here: "Many commentators cannot resist numbering one or two other sequences of seven which John apparently overlooked. Before one proceeds to help John in this way, the critic ought to ask why John chose not to number them. Then the critic ought to try to come to terms with John's own organization. We must read *his* work . . ." ("The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis," *Int* 38/1 [January 1984]:43).

¹⁶Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 30-31; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1935) 267-68, 271; Alan F. Johnson, "Revelation," in *EBC* (Frank E. Gaebelin, gen. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 12:490; Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (4 vols.; London: Longmans, Green, 1903) 4:631-32; Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 105.

proof of recapitulation notes the parallelism between the seventh trumpet and the seventh bowl, that both bring the reader to the time of Christ's second coming (cp. 11:16-18 with 16:17).¹⁷ The key consideration in regard to the finality of the seventh seal is the impact of the sixth seal that allegedly ". . . permits one interpretation alone: the last day has come."¹⁸

(2) Another line of reasoning to support recapitulation is the occurrence of the storm theophany in conjunction with each seventh member (8:5; 11:19; 16:18).¹⁹ The conclusion drawn from this phenomenon is that it is necessary to assign each seventh member to the climaxing of God's wrath. In 4:5 the writer previews that theophany as originating with the throne of God. The coincidence of the end of the first and second series shown by the theophany requires the first member of the next series to return to the beginning.

(3) A further proof of recapitulation compares the fourth trumpet (8:12) with the sixth seal (6:12-17) and states that the fourth trumpet cannot be subsequent to the sixth seal as the telescopic arrangement necessitates, because the darkening of the heavenly bodies under the former is impossible after the whole sun has become black as sackcloth under the latter.²⁰ The sequence demanded by this comparison requires placing the fourth trumpet *before* the sixth seal and permits only a recapitulatory relationship.

(4) A recent study has added a further argument to the recapitulation theory. It meticulously points out the tripartite unity of the sixth seal, sixth trumpet, and sixth bowl.²¹ This observable unity requires that these parallel members of the three series cover the same ground rather than follow some sort of sequence.

Weaknesses of recapitulation. The theory that the seals, trumpets, and bowls are parallel does not lack for support, but it also faces difficulties. (1) If the three series are independent of each other as this hypothesis usually holds, the organic unity of the whole apocalyptic

¹⁷Lenski, *Revelation* 271; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 30.

¹⁸Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 30-31; cf. Lenski, *Revelation* 267-68.

¹⁹Alford, *Greek Testament* 4:664-65.

²⁰Lee, "Revelation" 603.

²¹Andrew E. Steinmann, "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)," *JETS* 35/1 (March 1992):76.

section of the book is impaired.²² Ostensibly the vision of the seven-sealed scroll in chap. 5 introduces the remainder of the Apocalypse. A detachment of the trumpets and bowls from the seals leaves the last two cycles of judgment unrelated to the throne of God from which the seal judgments have proceeded. These unattached sequences of wrathful visitations leave unanswered basic questions about their source and how they fit with the rest of the book. This disconnection brings the book to the brink of absurdity`i.e., to a state that is unworthy of a literary work. On the other hand, if the seventh seal consists of the trumpets and bowls, the whole is bound together into a cohesive literary unit.

(2) Another weakness of recapitulation is its inconsistent analysis of the nature and purpose of the seven seals. All seven are manifestations of wrath against "those who dwell on the earth," i.e., "the earth-dwellers" (3:10; cf. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10 [twice]; 13:8; 12, 14 [twice]; 17:2, 8). The theory is hard-pressed to explain the seventh seal as being of this sort and usually resorts to seeing it as a reference to the beginning of sabbatical rest²³ or a temporary suspension in the sequence of revelations given to John.²⁴ Either of these explanations relates the seventh seal to the faithful rather than the earth-dwellers. A further suggestion that the seventh seal is both introductory to the trumpets and simultaneous with the parousia²⁵ is not just weak hermeneutically. It also fails to specify any particular temporal onslaught against the earth-dwellers. None of these proposals explains the seventh seal as a temporal judgment against rebellious mankind.

(3) A third deficiency in recapitulation is its lack of an adequate explanation for the widely acknowledged increase in intensity from the seals to the trumpets and from the trumpets to the bowls.²⁶ For

²²Friedrich Dsterdieck (*Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Revelation of John* [Meyer's Commentary, tr. and ed. by Henry E. Jacobs; New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1887] 261-62) sees recapitulation as causing "the organic connection of the visions as a whole [to be] rent."

²³Alford, *The Greek Testament* 4:630.

²⁴Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: Macmillan, 1906) 107.

²⁵Dale Ralph Davis, "The Relationship between the Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls in the Book of Revelation," *JETS* 16 (1973):154-55.

²⁶E.g., Walter Scott, *Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth Depot, n.d.) 176; J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse* (3 vols.; New York: Charles C. Cook, 1909) 2:17; Lenski, *Revelation* 267; John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 231; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT, F. F.

example, the fourth seal affects one-quarter of the earth's population, and the sixth trumpet afflicts one-third (6:8; 9:18). In contrast to these fractional and non-final punishments, the bowl judgments affect the totality of the earth and are ultimate in their consequences (e.g., cp. 8:8 with 16:3).²⁷ No theory of recapitulation has an adequate explanation for these increases.

(4) Each support for recapitulation cited above has an inherent weakness. (a) The observation that all three series *end* the same way does not necessitate that they *begin* at the same time. A coinciding termination-point is possible even if the three sequences begin at different times. They may still end together even though they are not parallel. (b) The same comment applies to the occurrence of the storm theophany (8:5; 11:19; 16:18; cf. 4:5) in conjunction with each seventh member. The seventh seal, seventh trumpet, and seventh bowl could end simultaneously without necessitating a parallelism of the three series *en toto*. (c) The fourth trumpet *could* follow the sixth seal if the darkening of the heavenly bodies under the sixth seal were only temporary. This optional interpretation that the sixth seal is *not* the immediate precursor of Christ's second coming is quite viable.²⁸ That would leave the heavenly bodies intact for a further manifestation of divine wrath *after* the cosmic upheavals of the sixth seal. (d) The alleged tripartite unity of the sixth seal, sixth trumpet, and sixth bowl rests on a merging of the intercalations following each sixth member with the relevant visitation in each case.²⁹ These mergers are of doubtful validity because the material in the intercalations diverges widely from the judgments of the related seal, trumpet, and bowl. The announcement of the end of the second woe at 11:14, for instance, does not dictate the necessity of including 10:1-11:14 under the sixth trumpet (9:13-21). That announcement occurs at 11:14 so as to join it with the announcement of the third woe and seventh trumpet.³⁰

Bruce, gen. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 179; Davis, "Relationship" 149.

²⁷See John A. McLean, "The Structure of the Book of Revelation and Its Implication for the Pre-Wrath Rapture (Part Two)," *Michigan Theological Journal* 3/1 (Spring 1992) 7-8, for other indications of intensification from one series to the next.

²⁸Thomas, *Revelation I* 7451-52.

²⁹Steinmann, "Tripartite Structure" 70.

³⁰Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1919) 607-8. Revelation 9:20-21 clearly marks the end of the sixth trumpet, making impossible the inclusion of 10:1-11:13 as part of that trumpet (Homer Hailey, *Revelation, an Introduction and Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979] 241). Inclusion of the intercalation within the

The accumulation of evidence against the recapitulation theory is considerable and outweighs its favorable points. That leads to a further search for the structural backbone of the Apocalypse.

The Telescopic Theory

Strengths of telescoping. The telescopic or "dove-tailing" view sees the seventh seal as containing the seven trumpets and the seventh trumpet as consisting of the seven bowls. (1) It turns for support principally to the absence of any immediate outpouring of wrath against the earth after the opening of the seventh seal (8:1) and after the sounding of the seventh trumpet (11:15). After the breaking of the seventh seal, no visitation against the earth-dwellers comes until the trumpet series begins.³¹ This lull in judgment along with the preparation of the seven trumpet-angels that results from the seventh seal's opening provides a strong indication from the text that the content of the seventh seal is the seven trumpet-visitations (cf. 8:1-2).³²

(2) The seventh trumpet provides the same general situation. Though some have identified the contents of the seventh trumpet with 11:16-18,³³ and others equate this trumpet with the woe pronounced in 12:12,³⁴ neither possibility can match the criteria required for the last trumpet judgment. The visitation of the seventh trumpet is not in view until 16:1 ff., in the form of the seven bowl judgments.³⁵ The heavenly anthem of 11:16-18 cannot be the seventh trumpet because it is a proleptic celebration of what *will* have happened after the seventh trumpet.³⁶ The "woe" of 12:12 cannot be the last of the trumpet series

trumpet fails to meet the criterion for each of the woes: the objects must be "those who dwell on the earth" (8:13). Nothing in 10:1-11:13 directly impacts all earth-dwellers the way 9:13-21 does.

³¹Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* 71-72; George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 121-23; Davis, "Relationship" 151; McLean, "Structure (Part Two)" 8-9.

³²Dsterdieck, *Revelation* 260-61; Ladd, *Revelation* 123; M. Robert Mulholland, *Revelation, Holy Living in an Unholy World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 185.

³³E.g., Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 30.

³⁴Mounce, *Revelation* 190; Sweet, *Revelation* 202.

³⁵E. W. Bullinger, *The Apocalypse or "The Day of the Lord"* (London: Eyre and Spottiswodde, n.d.) 368-69; McLean, "Structure (Part Two)" 9.

³⁶Davis ("Relationship" 155) finds the content of the third woe in 11:18, but fails to recognize that this verse is part of a heavenly celebration and not an inflicting of misery on the earth-dwellers.

because it alludes to the wrath of Satan, not of God. The third-woe judgment(s) (9:12; 11:14) remains unnoticed unless the content of the seventh trumpet is the seven bowls.³⁷

(3) The three woes pronounced are against the earth-dwellers and are the same as the last three trumpets (8:12; cf. 9:12; 11:14). Since these people are the objects of God's wrath under the seven seals also (6:10; cf. 3:10), the identification of the seventh seal as the seven trumpets has further corroboration. Furthermore, the third woe must be the seven bowl judgments because those are referred to as "the seven *last* plagues" that complete the wrath of God (15:1).³⁸ The finality of the bowl judgments compared with the non-final characteristics of the seal and trumpet judgments brings further substantiation of the telescopic makeup of the seventh trumpet as the container of the seven bowls.

Other considerations coincide with a telescopic or progressive understanding of the seals, trumpets, and bowls. (4) If one accepts an identification of the first six seals with the "Little Apocalypse" of Christ (Matt 24:1 ff.; Mark 13:1 ff.; Luke 21:5 ff.),³⁹ he must acknowledge that the first six seals are the beginning of birth pains that Christ spoke about (cf. Matt 24:8).⁴⁰ Compared with the seven *last* plagues (Rev 15:1), the seals are earlier in "the hour of trial." Under this interpretation of progression, the first six seals come early and the bowls of wrath late in the future period of world tribulation.

(5) Telescopic progression also well accounts for the mounting intensity of wrathful manifestations from seals to trumpets and from trumpets to bowls. God's judgments against the earth become increasingly severe until they climax in temporal-become-eternal punishment at the personal return of the Warrior-King in chaps. 19-21.

(6) The telescopic view also explains the occurrence of the storm theophany in conjunction with each seventh member (8:5; 11:19; 16:18; cf. 4:5). Since the seventh seal and seventh trumpet encompass a following series of judgments, all three series end together and are marked by bolts of lightning, noises, and peals of thunder, and

³⁷Ladd, *Revelation* 121-22; Johnson, "Revelation" 12:490-91.

³⁸Johnson, "Revelation" 490-91; McLean, "Structure (Part Two) 8.

³⁹Thomas, *Revelation I* 7416.

⁴⁰John Andrew McLean, "The Seventieth Week of Daniel 9:27 as a Literary Key for Understanding the Structure of the Apocalypse of John" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1990) 191-213.

sometimes an earthquake and large hailstones.⁴¹ The initial scene in the throne room anticipates this climax to the visitations (4:5) when setting the tone for the seven-sealed scroll and the appearance of the Lamb (chap. 5). The other three references to the storm theophany (8:5; 11:19; 16:18) each of which is also associated with the heavenly throne room are reminders issued in conjunction with each of the seventh visitations that the particular visitation, when it has run its course, will mark the conclusion of God's punishments against the earth-dwellers. Only the telescopic arrangement can extend the purview of the initial throne-room scene with its storm theophany to include the trumpet and bowl series.

(7) The telescopic theory also accounts for the differences between the seventh bowl on the one hand and the seventh seal and seventh trumpet on the other. The seventh bowl is the absolute end. It is the final stroke, but this is not true of the other two seventh members.⁴² With the seventh seal, only silence in heaven is the immediate outcome. With the seventh trumpet, heavenly voices celebrating the victory of God's kingdom resound. But with the seventh bowl comes the dramatic announcement, *ggonen* (*gegonen*, "it has happened" or "it is done," 16:17). Recapitulation is at a loss to explain these differences among the seventh members of the three series. For recapitulation to be correct, the three final members should be at least approximately the same, but instead, they differ radically from one another.

Weaknesses of telescoping. Problems with the telescopic type of progression are at least three in number. (1) The end signaled by the seventh seal cannot be a period including the whole content of chaps. 8-19, because events of chaps. 12-14, part of the seventh trumpet, occur earlier than the first seal.⁴³ At least two happenings, the birth of the male child and His snatching away to God and His throne (12:5), have already passed and cannot belong to the future period of the seal judgments. Unless special allowance is made for the exceptional

⁴¹A further indication of a simultaneous ending of the three series is the announcement of the end of delay and the culmination of the mystery of God in conjunction with the seventh trumpet (10:6-7) when compared with the finality of the seven bowls. Not only are the bowl judgments the seven *last* plagues (15:1), but when the final bowl is poured out, a loud voice from the temple and the throne proclaims, "It is done (*ggonen* [*gegonen*])" (16:17).

⁴²Lambrecht, "Structuration" 91-92.

⁴³Caird, *Revelation* 104-5.

nature of Revelation's intercalations, progression in the strict sense is an unacceptable explanation of the book's structure.

(2) Matthew 24:29 clearly indicates that the events of the sixth seal (Rev 6:12-17) occur "after the tribulation of those days" and just before Christ's second advent to earth.⁴⁴ That makes it impossible for the seventh seal with its trumpets and bowls to represent events later than the sixth seal. This formidable objection to telescopic progression rests on the identification of the sixth seal with the cosmic upheavals Christ spoke of in His Olivet Discourse. This identification has been questioned, however.⁴⁵

(3) Telescopic progression necessitates a rearrangement of the text to fit a strictly chronological scheme.⁴⁶ Citation of this weakness has in view scholars like R. H. Charles who felt that a later editor had carelessly rearranged the sequence of the text.⁴⁷ After weeding out and correcting those relocations, Charles proposed a strictly chronological sequence for Revelation's structure.⁴⁸ The questioning of Revelation's accuracy in its present form and the liberties taken by Charles in arbitrarily shuffling verses and sections from one place to another are justifiably rejected. Yet this is hardly a ground for rejecting all structural proposals that may resemble his, but which do not rearrange the text.

The Theory Combining Recapitulation and Telescoping

A third theory combines the other two theories. This one sees Revelation's series as neither systematically recapitulating each other nor consistently following each other in strict chronological sequence. Instead it allows for some of both. The most characteristic feature of this theory is its insistence on the book's *literary* quality, which brings an emphasis to its artistry.⁴⁹ In its artistic arrangement, each new series both recapitulates previous visions and develops themes already

⁴⁴Lenski, *Revelation* 266-68. Davis ("Relationship" 153-54) notes the necessity of putting the sixth seal at the very end of the tribulation as the immediate precursor of Christ's return, but strangely, he advocates progression in conjunction with the first five seals, the first six trumpets, and the first six bowls (ibid., 157-58).

⁴⁵Thomas, *Revelation* 1:7451-52; McLean, "Structure (Part Two)" 19-23.

⁴⁶Mounce, *Revelation* 177.

⁴⁷R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John* (2 vols., ICC; New York: Scribner's Sons, 1920) 1:lv.

⁴⁸Ibid., 1:xxiii.

⁴⁹Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (HNTC; New York: Harper, 1940) xxvii-xxx.

introduced.⁵⁰ That allows for obvious progression and considerable restatement and detailed development of earlier material.⁵¹

The unique strength of this theory is its combining of valid elements in the two earlier theories and its nullifying of their weaknesses. When faced with a difficulty of chronological sequence in the text, it allows for a shift to a recapitulation mode. Conversely, when faced with a situation that recapitulation cannot account for, it explains the problem according to a progressive sequence.

Such vacillation, however, introduces a debilitating weakness for the view, because it presupposes the existence of conflicting criteria. It advocates an allowance for logical contradictions in the text of Revelation and necessitates dispensing with rational congruity in interpreting the book. It concurs with the opinion that the expression "a perfectly logical apocalypse" is an oxymoron.⁵² It concludes that John's material cannot be forced into any system of chronological sequence or cycles⁵³ and that apocalyptic language and vision is generally surrealistic rather than rational and logically consistent.⁵⁴ An attempted justification for these unusual hermeneutical assumptions notes that to insist on a *systematic* presentation in Revelation would amount to implying that "John was more interested" in impressing his readers with "a work of literary subtlety than [in] sharing the awe-inspiring visions he experienced."⁵⁵

As persuasive as that tactic may be, its underlying premise is fallacious. Wherein lies the necessity that literary art be logically contradictory?⁵⁶ Do the terms "artistic" and "rational" mutually

⁵⁰Caird, *Revelation* 106.

⁵¹Mounce, *Revelation* 178.

⁵²*Ibid.*; E. F. Scott, *The Book of Revelation* (New York: Scribner, 1940) 26. Scott's exact statement is, "A logical apocalypse would be a contradiction in terms."

⁵³Caird, *Revelation* 105.

⁵⁴Ladd, *Revelation* 124.

⁵⁵Mounce, *Revelation* 178.

⁵⁶The hermeneutical mood-swing that tends at times to resort to artistic versus rational explanations in Revelation finds a parallel in the way many interpreters handle the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14. An example of that occurs in Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT, F. F. Bruce, gen ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 645 n. 23: "It is perhaps an indictment of Western Christianity that we should consider 'mature' our rather totally cerebral and domesticated—but bland—brand of faith, with the concomitant absence of the Spirit in terms of his supernatural gifts! The Spirit, not Western rationalism, marks the turning

exclude each other? Descriptions can be quite graphic and still conform to the strictures of human reason. Besides that, no adequate basis exists for relegating Revelation to an apocalyptic genre where normal hermeneutical principles do not apply.⁵⁷ The fact is that the book is more accurately characterized as prophetic rather than apocalyptic genre, so recourse to purported peculiarities of apocalyptic interpretation is baseless.

Interpretive presumption must lie on the side of rationality if the author's meaning is to emerge. Leaving the text's meaning in the hands of readers whose conclusions derive from non-rational impressions of an art form without controls imposed by logic can only bring multiplied interpretive conclusions, none of which coincides with the text's originally intended meaning. John composed the Apocalypse for reasonable people, and the book must be interpreted accordingly.

CHRONOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR PROGRESSION

A comparison of the three main theories regarding the seals, trumpets, and bowls leads to the conclusion that the form of progression known as telescoping or dove-tailing is superior to recapitulation and to a combination of recapitulation and progression. Chronological considerations add weight to this conclusion. As already noted, telescoping does not absolutely exclude recapitulation

of the ages, after all. . . ." Conversely, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (*Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979] 75-76), in commenting on 1 Cor 14:4 and 14-19, observes the contemporary tendency to set in contrast the cognitive and preconceptual sides of man as a reaction against a secularized use of reason. Yet he concludes that as bad as the dehumanizing use of reason is, it does not warrant an overreaction against reason in biblical interpretation. He acknowledges that characteristics of an infinite God are beyond human logic, but an allegedly deeper aspect of personality than the mind (with its language capacities) is not where man copes with them. He observes, "Man is more than his mind; he is not an intellectualistic machine. But this 'more' is not inevitably in tension with the mind, nor does language necessarily distort or obscure the wholeness of experience" (76). Gaffin's answer to the proposal that the gift of tongues consisted of some type of ecstatic utterances rather than foreign languages closely parallels an effective response to the proposal that logical consistency should not be required in the Apocalypse. Man's artistic appreciation is not innately opposed to his reasoning faculties any more than his allegedly "deeper aspect of personality" is in tension with his mind.

⁵⁷Thomas, *Revelation 1* 723-29.

in the chronological fulfillment of the events predicted, though it does incline that way. The sequence of the visions revealed could differ from the sequence of the events fulfilling those visions, but that would contravene normal expectation. The Apocalypse has a number of chronological indicators that confirm what is here called "normal," i.e., that the fulfillment of things revealed coincides with the sequence of revelation insofar as the seals, trumpets, and bowls are concerned.

(1) It is important to establish the successive nature of the seal and trumpet visitations. [a] Chronological sequence provides the most natural explanation of the numbering of the visitations from one to seven in each series.⁵⁸ [b] The most conspicuous confirmation of this explanation lies in the last three trumpets, otherwise known as the three woes (cf. 8:13). The text explicitly announces the completion of the first woe's fulfillment before the second begins (cf. 8:12) and of the second before the third begins (cf. 11:14).⁵⁹ [c] It is also obvious that warfare under the outworking of the second seal by its very nature must follow the peaceful conditions that prevail under the first seal. [d] Another indicator of the sequential nature of the trumpets is the five-month duration of the fifth trumpet's impact. This judgment has a definite period in which to run its course, thus implying that the same is true of the rest of the series. So the seals and trumpets occur one after the other in numerical sequence and are non-cumulative, i.e., each one finishes before the next one begins. This succession is the sequence of visions and requires the same sequence of fulfillment.⁶⁰

The sequential nature of the bowl judgments is slightly different, however. The beginning of each visitation follows the same chronological sequence, but the bowl judgments are apparently cumulative rather than consecutive in the misery they create. Such a conclusion is necessary because by the time of the affliction of the fifth bowl, the earth-dwellers are still suffering from the effects of the first one (cf. 16:2, 10-11).⁶¹ That feature makes two points: the bowls in their fulfillment follow one another in numerical sequence, and the

⁵⁸McLean, "Structure (Part Two)" 8.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Davis derives the principle that "the order of the visions does not *necessarily* indicate the order of events" ("Relationship" 153), and cites the nonsequential nature of events in chaps. 12 ff. to prove his point. In doing so, however, he misses the point that chaps. 12 ff. are not a direct part of a numbered series and therefore present a different situation.

⁶¹Alford, *Greek Testament* 4:700; Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse* (Edinburgh: Maclachlan, Stewart, 1847) 668.

effect of each remains even after the beginning of the next. Presumably, the second, third, and fourth bowls are causes of the ongoing pain of the fifth bowl also.⁶² This cumulative relationship is the most natural explanation for the last three bowls too, and presents a contrast to the consecutive sequence of the last three trumpets.⁶³

(2) Several internal time relationships add to this framework of sequence. The intercalation between the sixth and seventh seals (Revelation 7) is unnumbered and represents a pause in chronological advance. As with a similar insert between the sixth and seventh trumpets, it furnishes added perspectives that bear an indirect relationship to the manifestation of wrath in the seal just before and in the one to follow. The sixth seal has just closed with all classes of humanity expressing their futile plight and inability to cope with the great day of the wrath of God and the Lamb (6:16-17). The interlude that follows immediately answers the question of a panic-stricken world, "Who will be able to stand?" (6:17). Revelation 7:1-8 answers in essence, "The 144,000 servants of God will be able to stand." It pulls back for a moment and visualizes a group of saints on earth who are on God's side and consequently have God's seal of protection from the wrath yet to come.⁶⁴

The connection of 7:1-8 with the sixth seal furnishes an important indication of chronological progression from the sixth seal to the first two trumpets. The four angels in 7:1 (cf. 7:3) are restraining the four winds lest they blow against the earth, the sea, and the trees. Those are the same parts of creation affected by the first and second trumpet visitations (8:6-9).⁶⁵ Evidently the restraint of the winds is a picturesque apocalyptic way of referring to the delay of the two plagues that are to come shortly.⁶⁶ The reason for no mention of the winds once the trumpet series begins is the fluidity of apocalyptic language that replaces the destructiveness of the four winds with the

⁶²Lenski, *Revelation* 476.

⁶³William Henry Simcox, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Cambridge: Cambridge U., 1893) 151.

⁶⁴Swete, *Apocalypse* 95. Mounce calls the intercalation a parenthesis (Mounce, *Revelation* 164), terminology to which Lenski objects because the intercalation is an integral part of the book's movement (Lenski, *Revelation* 244). Whatever the break in sequence of the seals is called, however, both agree that the function of chap. 7 is to reflect the status of the faithful as radically different from that of the world's rebels.

⁶⁵Alford, *Greek Testament* 4:637; Swete, *Apocalypse* 111.

⁶⁶Ladd, *Revelation* 111.

first two trumpet-angels and their judgments.⁶⁷

The prescribed delay in releasing the four winds at the time of the sixth seal shows that time must elapse between the action of that seal and the implementation of the first trumpet. That furnishes proof of chronological sequence in the movement of seals to trumpets and conforms to the structural conclusion already reached that the seventh seal consists of the seven trumpets.

(3) Another temporal relationship hinges on factors in the intercalation of 7:1-8. That is the conferral of the seal in 7:3 before the release of the aforementioned winds (cf. 7:1). The sealing of the 144,000 must precede the trumpet plagues, especially the fifth one.⁶⁸ Otherwise, the plagues will hurt the faithful along with the earth-dwellers. Specifically, the fifth-trumpet description explains the protection of God's servants provided in the sealing connected with the sixth seal: "And it was said to them [i.e., the locusts] that they should not hurt the grass of the earth or any green thing or any tree, but [lit., 'except'] [they should hurt] the men who do not have the seal of God upon their foreheads" (9:4). That implicit reference to a sealed group can be none other than the 144,000 sealed earlier with a sealing that exempts them from the locust attack.⁶⁹

That connection shows, once again, a temporal sequence from the seals to the trumpets. In particular, it reflects that the sixth seal precedes the fifth trumpet,⁷⁰ and by extension, the rest of the trumpets too. It coincides with the chronological progression of happenings portrayed in the seals and trumpets. It furnishes the added detail that the time-span entailed is less than one generation i.e., the persons protected at the sixth seal are still alive at the time of the fifth trumpet.⁷¹ The predicted period cannot be expanded to hundreds of years.

(4) A comparison of the fifth seal with the days of the seventh

⁶⁷Johnson, "Revelation" 12:478.

⁶⁸Davis, "Relationship" 150.

⁶⁹Swete, *Apocalypse* 116; Smith, *Revelation* 144; Sweet, *Revelation* 168.

⁷⁰Johnson, "Revelation" 12:490.

⁷¹Lenski, *Revelation* 284. Basing his conclusion on a view that the 144,000 in 14:1-5 have been preserved alive through severe persecution, Seiss notes another indication that the period from the opening of the sixth seal when the group was sealed (Revelation 7) to the sounding of the seventh trumpet when they appear on earth once again (Revelation 14) is no more than the normal length of one human life (*Apocalypse* 3:20-21). That rests, however, on the questionable interpretation that the 144,000 do not die as martyrs.

trumpet's fulfillment also reflects chronological sequence in the progress of the book (cp. 6:11 with 10:6). The judgmental aspect of the fifth seal lies in the prayers of the martyrs under the altar for vengeance against the earth-dwellers. God's response to their prayer (6:11) includes His instruction that they rest a little longer. This response, *ti xrnōw mikrōn* (*eti chronon mikron*, "still a small delay" or "a little time yet"), points forward to a period whose conclusion is marked in 10:6 by *xrnōw okti stai* (*chronos ouketi estai*, "there will be delay no longer"). The latter expression marks the end of the delay spoken of under the fifth seal.⁷² The use of *xrnōw* (*chronos*) in the sense of "delay" or "interval of time" in both places confirms the connection of those two announcements.

The very next statement after the announcement of the end of delay connects that end with the days ushered in by the seventh trumpet blast (10:7).⁷³ The whole series of trumpets is the answer to the martyrs' prayer for vengeance and that series is about to wind up.⁷⁴ That development adds a further point to the case for chronological progression: a measurable period of time elapses between the fifth seal and the seventh trumpet.⁷⁵

⁷²Lee, "Revelation" 4:625. For other suggested identifications of the delay, see Thomas, *Revelation I* 7447-48.

⁷³Other proposed meanings of the angelic announcement of 10:6 include the suggestions that it proclaims the beginning of the reign of Antichrist (Charles, *Revelation* 1:263-64) and that it indicates the absolute cessation of time (Lenski, *Revelation* 317-18). The former suggestion falters in its failure to take into account 10:7: completion of "the mystery of God" cannot be limited to the revelation of Antichrist. Furthermore, the seventh trumpet has not yet sounded (cf. 11:15), so there yet remains a progression of time beyond this announcement (Mounce, *Revelation* 213). In regard to the latter suggestion, the **||1** (*all'*) that begins 10:7, along with the contents of 10:7, requires that the meaning "delay" be assigned to *xrnōw* (*chronos*) in 10:6 (Smith, *Revelation* 159). Also, it is pointless for the angel to make such a solemn announcement about the timeless nature of eternity (Mounce, *Revelation* 212).

⁷⁴Alford, *Greek Testament* 4:652; Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 582; Bullinger, *Apocalypse* 339; Swete, *Apocalypse* 126-27; M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (McLean, VA: McDonald, n.d.) 2:516; Hailey, *Revelation* 244.

⁷⁵Davis ("Relationship" 150) adds another indicator of chronological progress when he notes that men have already received the mark of the beast by the time of the first bowl (16:2). Since the marking occurs in 13:16-18 in an interlude between the conclusion of the trumpets and the beginning of the bowls, he takes that as another sign of progression. Yet he correctly notes that the interlude does not belong to a particular series of judgments and is, therefore, not

Leading chronological factors, including the sequential nature of the seals and trumpets, the priority of the sixth seal to the first two trumpets, the priority of the sixth seal to the fifth trumpet, and the priority of the fifth seal to the seventh trumpet, therefore, tend to bolster the case favoring structural and chronological progression rather than recapitulation in Revelation.

THE ROLE OF RECAPITULATION

The progressive sequence of the seals, trumpets, and bowls does not rule out some measure of recapitulation in sections of intercalation, however.⁷⁶ In particular, the interlude in 11:1-13 regarding the two witnesses, that in Revelation 12`14 between the sounding of the seventh trumpet (11:15) and the description of the seven bowls (chaps. 15`16), and that in Revelation 17`18 between the announcement of the seventh bowl (16:17) and the personal intervention of the Warrior-King (19:11-16) are partially recapitulatory.⁷⁷

The passage about the two witnesses (11:1-13) presumably gives another perspective on the same period covered by the first six trumpets that precede it in the sequence of visions. That observation presupposes that the six trumpets carry to the time of the end described in the seven *last* plagues that compose the seventh trumpet.

In order to provide background leading up to the seven bowls, the interlude in Revelation 12`14 returns chronologically at least to the birth of the male child and perhaps even to a point before that. That clearly breaks the chronological sequence of the trumpet series, into which it is woven, by recourse to events long before the trumpet series begins. It also returns to give a third perspective on the period of the trumpets, assuming that the three-and-a-half year period referred to

a decisive factor. If the interlude composed of chaps. 12`14 furnishes a second perspective on the period of the trumpets, as will be suggested below, the imposition of the mark of the beast very possibly comes near the beginning of the trumpet series, not too long after the sealing of the 144,000 (Rev 7:1-8) that is described in conjunction with the sixth seal. That would give every person one mark or the other to indicate his loyalty during the period of the trumpets.

⁷⁶McLean, "Structure (Part Two)" 9-10.

⁷⁷Some would include the interlude of 7:1-17 among the intercalations that are recapitulatory (Bullinger, *Apocalypse* 279; Caird, *Revelation* 94; Johnson, "Revelation" 12:477). Their reason for doing so, however, rests largely on a misunderstanding of Zech 6:5 (Thomas, *Revelation I* 7463).

three times in chaps. 12-13 (12:6, 14; 13:5) is the same one spoken of in 11:2-3.

Revelation 17-18 turns aside to furnish background data regarding Babylon whose final wrathful visitation has just been forecast with the pouring out of the seventh bowl (16:19).⁷⁸ To do so, the section returns to review, among other things, more characteristics of the beast from the sea who has enjoyed greatest prominence during the period of the trumpets (cf. 17:7-12), though in sequence, the trumpet series comes earlier in the book.

That Revelation contains recapitulation in that sense is undeniable. But recapitulation is limited to the intercalatory portions of the book, with the main structure of the book revolving about the progressive sequence of the seals, trumpets, and bowls. Ladd's qualification of the book's progressive mode differs from that. He reasons that because the seals, trumpets, and bowls all carry through to the end and because the seventh seal contains the seven trumpets and the seventh trumpet the seven bowls, some measure of recapitulation is necessary.⁷⁹ That is a misleading use of the term "recapitulation." The encompassing natures of the seventh seal and seventh trumpet do not dictate a return to review periods already covered. Rather they are another way of portraying progression. It may be granted that the three series are not strictly consecutive i.e., the seventh member of one concluding before the first member of the next begins. But progress is portrayed when the trumpets begin later than the sixth seal, and the bowls later than the sixth trumpet.

THE RESULTANT STRUCTURAL SCHEME

The results of this study lead to the conclusion that the overriding structural plan of the Apocalypse is that of progression. It is the form of progression that entails "telescoping," i.e., the seventh seal consists of a number of parts as does a telescope when it is compressed, making the inner parts of the unit invisible. The same is

⁷⁸Charles H. Giblin is helpful in comparing 17:1 and 21:9 as beginnings and 19:9-10 and 22:6-9 as endings of two parallel subordinated interpretation-scenes that elaborate on what immediately precedes each section. The former interpretive-scene (Revelation 17-18) explicates God's wrath against Babylon under the seventh bowl (16:17-21), and the latter the bride of the Lamb who appears first in 21:2 (cf. 19:7, 9) ("Structural and Thematic Correlations in the Theology of Revelation 16-22," *Bib* 55/4 [1974]:488-504).

⁷⁹Ladd, *Revelation* 121-22.

true of the seventh trumpet. The chronological movement in the seals, trumpets, and bowls is always forward, never backward or static. The predictions forecast future events that will follow one right after the other in the same order as the book unfolds them.

Within this progressive structure, pauses occur when elements of recapitulation intervene. These pauses cannot be given equal weight in analyzing the book's structure, however. They function in supporting roles to add understanding to the happenings of the numbered series that compose the main skeleton of the Apocalypse.

Aside from the intercalations, however, there is forward movement in the book from chap. 6 toward a climax in the return of Christ and the establishment of His kingdom in 19:11`22:5.⁸⁰ When allowance is made for the intercalations of chaps. 17`18 and 21:10`22:5, it is clear that the seventh bowl in its finality has three parts: (1) the fall of Babylon (16:17-19), (2) the final battles and judgments (19:11`20:15), and (3) the vision of the new creation and the new Jerusalem (21:1-8).⁸¹ Within the scope of the last in the series of last plagues, progressive development is also clear.⁸²

Figure 1 on the next page is a graphic representation of the relationships of the seals, trumpets, and bowls built on the conclusions reached above.

⁸⁰Cf. McLean, "The Structure of Revelation (Part One)" 158.

⁸¹One feature that shows the inclusion of all three parts in the seventh bowl is the use in 21:6 of *ggonan* (*gegonan*), a form almost identical with the *ggonen* (*gegonen*) of 16:17. Both words echo the theme of "lastness" that characterizes the bowl plagues as portrayed in 15:1 through the use of *sxtaw* (*eschatas*) and *telsuh* (*etelesth*).

⁸²Lambrecht, "Structuration" 92.