

Recapitulation and Chronological Progression in John's Apocalypse: Towards a New Perspective*

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Most critical scholars have adopted some form of recapitulation theory to explain the chronological relationship between the seven seals, trumpets and bowls, but John was more interested in the chronological progression within the last days than is usually acknowledged. The seventh (or sixth) seal does not describe the 'end', but ushers in the Day of the Lord, which culminates in the seven bowls. While John does use the technique of recapitulation, he does not do so in the key texts usually adduced in support of the theory.

One of the most intriguing questions in the study of the book of Revelation concerns chronology: do John's visions more or less represent the chronological order of the end-time events, or is there some other type of relationship between the events he sees? While the so-called futurist approach to Revelation, popularized by books such as *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series,¹ affirms a clear chronological sequence of events, most critical scholars have adopted instead what is known as the recapitulation theory, especially when it comes to the interpretation of the seven seals, trumpets and bowls.² The purpose of this study is to offer an alternative reading of what is normally seen as the primary evidence for recapitulation and thus challenge the critical consensus.

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1 H. Lindsey, with C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970); T. LaHaye and J. Jenkins, *Left Behind* 1–10 (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995–2002).

2 Proponents of some form of recapitulation theory include D. Barr (*Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* [Santa Rosa: Poleridge, 1998]), R. Bauckham (*The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993]), G. Beale (*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999]), E. Boring (*Revelation* [Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1989]), G. Caird (*A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* [London: Adam & Charles Black, 1966]), C. Giblin (*The Book of Revelation: The Open Book of Prophecy* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991]),

1. Recapitulation vs. chronological progression

As early as the end of the third century, Victorinus of Pettau proposed that the seven bowls do not chronologically follow the seven trumpets, but rather the former merely speak more forcefully about the same events than the latter.³ Later interpreters have expanded on this view by including also the seven seals, which the trumpets and bowls are understood to retell or recapitulate, albeit from a different angle and with intensification or development. This view of the three septets still forms the core of the recapitulation theory,⁴ although it is often extended to other elements as well. In particular, the so-called 'theophany formula' (4.5; 8.5; 11.19; 16.18, 21) and the 'last battle' motif (19.17–21; 20.7–9) are frequently adduced in support of the theory.

At the other end of the spectrum is the chronological progression view. This perspective is frequently associated with the futurist interpretative approach to Revelation, though other approaches can accommodate chronological progression as well. The fundamental difference between the two approaches revolves around the way they map the three septets onto the timeline extending from the event portrayed in Rev 5.5 to the 'end'. The simplest version of the chronological progression theory would map the septets as shown in Figure 1.

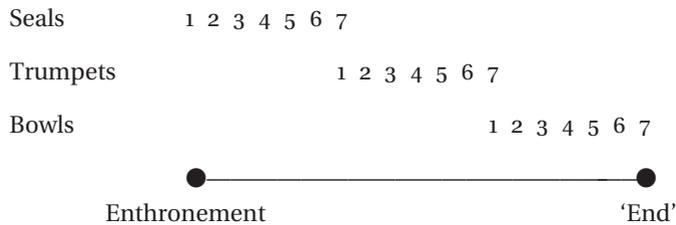


Figure 1

J. Lambrecht ('A Structuration of Revelation 4,1–22,5', *L'Apocalypse johannique et l'Apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament* [ed. J. Lambrecht; Leuven: Leuven University, 1980] 77–104), R. Mounce (*The Book of Revelation* [NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, rev. edn 1998]), P. Prigent (*L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean* [Geneva: Labor et Fides, édition revue et augmentée 2000]), J. Roloff (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes* [Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1987]), J. Sweet (*Revelation* [Philadelphia: Trinity Press International/London: SCM, rev. edn 1990]), and A. Yarbro Collins (*The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* [Missoula: Scholars, 1976]). Not surprisingly, source critics such as R. Charles and D. Aune have not adopted the recapitulation theory. Other dissidents include J. Court (*Myth and History in the Book of Revelation* [London: SPCK, 1979]), A. Farrer (*The Revelation of St. John the Divine* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1964]) and J. Resseguie (*Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse* [Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 1998]).

³ C. H. Giblin, 'Recapitulation and the Literary Coherence of John's Apocalypse', *CBQ* 56 (1994) 81–95.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

By comparison, the most basic version of the recapitulation theory would map the septets as shown in Figure 2.

Seals	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Trumpets	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Bowls	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Figure 2

This rather simplified presentation hides the fact that there are a number of different versions within these two approaches,⁵ but it portrays well the essential difference between the two groups. The advocates of chronological progression see the seals, trumpets and bowls as portraying different events – the ‘end’ coming after, or with, the seventh bowl. In contrast, those adopting the recapitulation theory argue that the three septets all more or less cover the same time period, and that the seventh in each series describes the ‘end’.⁶

But what exactly is there in the septets that necessitates the recapitulation theory? It has been correctly observed that they exhibit structural similarity, and that there are patterns which are repeated in the septets as well as elsewhere in Revelation. For example, the first four elements in each septet seem to form a tighter unit than the remaining three, and the first two septets have an interlude or intercalation between the sixth and seventh elements.⁷ These observations regarding the *forms* John used, however, do not require their *content* to describe the same events or to cover the same time period. In fact, regarding the septets, the recapitulation theory seems to be logically necessary only if one sees the ‘end’ narrated or described before the seventh bowl. That is, if the ‘end’ has indeed been reached already with the seals or trumpets but another ‘end’ is still to come

5 An interesting variation is the so-called ‘telescopic theory’, which represents an attempt to combine chronological progression with recapitulation (see R. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1995] 531–4). According to this view, seals 1–6, trumpets 1–6 and bowls 1–7 follow one another in chronological order. However, because the seventh seal and the seventh trumpet are understood to be proleptic glimpses of ‘the end’, the telescopic theory in the context of the septets is essentially a minimalist version of the recapitulation theory, subscribing to it at these two crucial points.

6 Although R. J. McKelvey (‘The Millennium and the Second Coming’, *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, 85–100) takes the sixth seal as the ‘end’, his comment is nevertheless representative: ‘Each of the septets is marked by an *incontestable completeness and finality*’ (89, emphasis mine).

7 E.g. Bauckham, *Climax*, 7–29; Beale, *Revelation*, 121–2; and Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, xci–xcii.

with the seventh bowl, then some sort of recapitulation theory appears to be necessary. Thus, it is the ‘end’ that is being described before the seventh bowl, which both requires recapitulation and constitutes the primary evidence for it.

This evidence for the ‘end’ will be examined in more detail below, but let us briefly comment on the use of expressions such as ‘the end’ at this point. In general, ‘end’ in the context of Revelation seems somewhat ambiguous.⁸ Does it refer to the pouring out of the bowls, to the last bowl, to the destruction of Babylon in chapter 18, to the battle in chapter 19, or to the great white throne judgment in chapter 20? Are all these perhaps somehow to be collapsed into one event, or are there multiple stages or phases within the ‘end’? Moreover, how are we to view the ongoing worship of God and the Lamb in the New Jerusalem after the ‘end’?⁹ It would seem that the meaning of expressions such as ‘the end’ is by no means self-evident in the context of Revelation.¹⁰

Instead of speaking about ‘the end’, I have chosen to use the term ‘the Day of the Lord’, which in the OT is ‘a highly useful, but complex, motif’.¹¹ Though John himself does not use this exact phrase, his composition nevertheless clearly exhibits familiarity with the language and ideas associated with the Day of the Lord in the OT.¹² ‘The day of Yahweh’ and related phrases such as ‘the day of the anger of Yahweh’, or ‘that day’,¹³ in the OT do not refer to a literal 24-hour day, but rather to an ‘era in which the Lord judges, purifies a remnant for himself, avenges

8 Court’s discussion (*Myth*, 46–8) is among the helpful exceptions.

9 This suggests there is no ‘end of the world’ in the sense of ‘the end of the space–time universe’ in Revelation, and that even the great white throne judgment in chapter 20 is merely a transition between two ages.

10 The reference to ‘the end’ in 2.26 hardly helps in defining the term.

11 Willem A. VanGemeren (*Interpreting the Prophetic Word* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990]) 214. The importance of ‘the Day of the Lord’ for Revelation has been noted before (e.g. E. W. Bullinger, *The Apocalypse or ‘The Day of the Lord’* [London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 2nd edn 1909]), though not in the form suggested in this essay.

12 John does, however, refer to the arrival of the ‘great day of the wrath of the one who is seated on the throne and of the Lamb’ (6.16–17), and to the ‘battle of the great day of God the Almighty’ (16.14); cf. D. Aune, *Revelation 6–16* (WBC 52B; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 421.

Some have seen κυριακή ἡμέρα in 1.10 as a reference to this eschatological day (Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* [Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1977]), though both the LXX and the NT use ἡμέρα (τοῦ) κυρίου. The phrase in 1.10 is problematic, but the general consensus is that it is a temporal reference to the day when John received his visions, whether Easter or the weekly day of worship (see R. Bauckham, ‘The Lord’s Day’, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day* [ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982] 221–50, and Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 82–4). The use of ‘the Day of the Lord’ in this essay is not meant to correspond to John’s κυριακή ἡμέρα, nor is the thesis of this study dependent on a specific interpretation of 1.10.

13 Other similar expressions include ‘day of punishment’ (Isa 10.3), ‘day of vengeance’ (Isa 63.4), ‘day of doom’ (Jer 51.2), ‘day of rebuke’ (Hos 1.9) and ‘day of darkness’ (Joel 2.2).

his name, vindicates his people, renews his creation, brings in the full deliverance, and establishes his rule on earth'.¹⁴ The prophets describe not only the day itself, but also its approaching, in strong metaphorical language. Joel, for example, informs us that there will be wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and smoke. The earth will quake and the heavens tremble. The sun will be darkened, the moon turned to blood, the stars will withdraw their shining, and so forth.¹⁵ Not only is John's language equally metaphorical, but he also uses it for similar purposes, as we will see.

2. Recapitulation and chronological progression in Rev 6–21

Before one can analyse how the different units or sections of a book interrelate, one must delimit the units. Rather than proposing yet another outline for Revelation – and thus adding to the 'maze of interpretive confusion'¹⁶ – for the present purposes I have chosen the one suggested by Richard Bauckham in his *Climax of Prophecy*.¹⁷

1.	1.1–8	Prologue
2.	1.9–3.22	The Son of Man ¹⁸
3.	4.1–5.14	The enthronement of the Lamb
4.	6.1–8.1; 8.3–5	Seven seals
5.	8.2; 8.6–11.19	Seven trumpets
6.	12.1–14.20; 15.2–4	The conflict
7.	15.1; 15.5–16.21	Seven bowls
8.	17.1–19.10	The prostitute
9.	19.11–21.8	Transition from the prostitute to the bride
10.	21.9–22.9	The bride
11.	22.6–21	Epilogue

The real debate rages not in discerning the precise boundaries of different units but in explaining how these sections fit together and form a coherent whole. In what follows, I will briefly explain how sections 4–9 relate, especially from the chronological point of view. The emphasis will be on the septets, which form the core of the recapitulation theory, but we will also look at the two battles in the

14 VanGemeren (*The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988]) 450.

15 Joel 2.10; 2.30–1 [MT 3.3–4].

16 Beale, *Revelation*, 108; cf. Yarbro Collins, *Combat*, 8.

17 Bauckham, *Climax*, 21–2 (headings mine). According to Beale (*Revelation*, 108), while there is a general consensus about the divisions in chapters 1–16, literary outlines abound for chapters 17–22 (for a representative list of ten outlines, see Beale, *Revelation*, 109).

18 Including the seven messages to the seven churches, 2.1–3.22.

transition section, as they are often mentioned in connection with the recapitulation theory.

The seven seals

The enthronement of Christ has prepared the reader for the narration of the effects following the Lamb's victory. However, though the narrative in chapter 6 presents the releasing of the four horsemen as a result of the reception of the scroll and the breaking of its seals by the Lamb, they are not meant to symbolize the final judgment, or aspects of it. Unlike the angels who go forth from the presence of God and are responsible for the first four trumpets and bowls, these horsemen are not God's servants. The fact that Death and Hades are among them suggests that they are destructive forces that God, whom John presents as being in ultimate control of everything, nevertheless allows to wreak havoc on earth.¹⁹ Moreover, in contrast to the trumpets and bowls, nothing is said as to who are the targets of the horsemen or why they are allowed to go forth.²⁰ Thus, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza may well be right that the first four seals highlight the true nature of Roman power and rule, and portray some of the effects of the expansionist military policies of the Empire.²¹ The role of the horsemen also fits well Jesus' prediction in the Synoptic apocalypse (Mark 13 par.) that unrest, wars, famines and earthquakes must come, but that they are merely the beginning of the birth pains. The Day of the Lord is approaching, but it lies still ahead at this point in John's narrative.²²

This is also suggested by the fifth seal. The souls under the altar cry for justice and judgment, but they are told to wait; for before the wrath of the Lord God Almighty is poured on those who have shed the blood of his saints, there will be even more martyrs. Things will get worse before they get better.

The powerful imagery of the sixth seal is often held by commentators to

19 Similarly E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 63; cf. Hab 3.5, where רִבְּרָא and יְשֻׁרָא are associated with the Divine Warrior.

20 Thus, Beale can first suggest that the purpose of the horsemen is 'to judge unbelievers who persecute Christians and in order to vindicate his people' (*Revelation*, 372), but is then able to assert that 'the church community is the focus of the judgments' (372–3).

21 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 63; cf. Court, *Myth*, 57–66. Giblin ('Recapitulation', 85) goes even further: the horsemen do not symbolize 'specifically eschatological events but rather ongoing aspects of human history from the beginning'. While he is of course correct in observing that the evil effects of the first four seals do not exclusively belong to the time following Jesus' ascension to heaven, that is nevertheless the connection that John has chosen to make, probably on the basis of the tradition reflected in the Synoptic apocalypse.

22 Cf. Isa 13, which announces Babylon's temporal judgment at the hands of the Medes: the day of Yahweh is near (v. 6), birth pains (LXX $\acute{\omega}\delta\acute{\iota}\nu\epsilon\varsigma$) will seize the people (v. 8), and even the heavens will tremble and the earth will be shaken out of its place at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger (v. 13).

describe 'the end'.²³ As already mentioned, this expression is somewhat problematic, not least if it is understood in terms of a single, climactic event and equated with the dissolution of the cosmos, or with the end of the space-time universe. Yet, as most critical commentators acknowledge, the language is strongly metaphorical, drawn primarily from OT passages that refer to contemporary disasters rather than to the 'end of the world'.²⁴ The question therefore is, what is the import of such language here? I suggest John is not describing the ultimate 'end', but has created his collage in order to do what his predecessors did with similar language: to signal the Day of the Lord. Verses 16–17 make this explicit: the day of the wrath of God and of the Lamb has come, and it will be disastrous indeed for those opposed to them. Thus, the sixth seal does not narrate the 'end', but marks the arrival of the 'day', more traditionally called the 'Day of the Lord'.²⁵

But if unrepentant humanity would rather die than experience the wrath of God, what will happen to God's people? Before the seventh seal is opened and the judgments begin, there is a delay during which John tells his audience two things

23 The recapitulation theory would be more convincing if the sixth seal were silence and the seventh the 'end', and not vice versa, as John has them. Beale (*Revelation*, 125, 446–54) attempts to address this problem by claiming that it is 'clear from repeated references to silence in the OT and Jewish apocalyptic writings' that silence is 'a figurative expression of judgment' (125). He is correct in seeing a link between silence and judgment in the primary OT background texts he adduces, Hab 2.20, Zeph 1.7 and Zech 2.13. However, the contexts of these references to silence suggest that silence is not 'an expression of judgment' but rather something that *precedes* judgments and/or the Day of the Lord. Thus, in Zephaniah the reason for silence is given in the same verse: 'for the day of the Lord is near'. In Zechariah the judgment is normally understood to come in chapter 6 or later, and even in Habakkuk the silence appears to be a required response to the promise of impending (as opposed to already executed) judgment. If the sixth seal signals the arrival of the Day of the Lord, symbolized by the trumpets and the bowls, then these OT texts would provide at least one reason for the silence before judgments begin.

24 E.g. Joel 2; Hos 10; Isa 2; 34. See the pertinent discussion on apocalyptic language by N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 281–99; cf. B. Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL/Leicester: InterVarsity, 2002). Of course, the use of metaphorical language does not mean that the 'end' cannot be described. Thus, while the language describing the great white throne judgment in chapter 20 is probably as metaphorical as the description of the sixth seal, for example, the former does not seem to be a collage of stock references to contemporary disasters but rather connotes an 'end' of a different kind.

25 Cf. Aune's comment (*Revelation 6–16*, 414) on 6.12bc and the sixth seal: '[I]t is obvious that the author of Revelation intends the readers to think that the Day of the Lord is ushered in with the sixth trumpet [*sic*].'

Resseguie (*Revelation*, 177) makes a distinction between the day of the wrath of God (and of the Lamb) and the Day of the Lord, though he fails to indicate where the latter is located in Revelation. This distinction appears to be motivated by his understanding of the Day of the Lord as 'the end', which he does not see the sixth seal as describing.

regarding their lot in the coming final tribulation.²⁶ First, the sealing of the 144,000 makes the important theological point that God's faithful servants are not objects of his wrath even though they may have to undergo suffering (cf. 1 Thess 5.9). Second, the vision of the great multitude portrays the destiny of those who are faithful unto death: they will serve God day and night in his temple and will never again experience pain or affliction.

The seven trumpets

At the seventh seal, there is silence in heaven, probably indicating either that God is listening to the prayers of his people or that he is about to act.²⁷ Next, John sees seven angels who are given seven trumpets to blow.²⁸ The first six trumpets present various judgments and disasters in terms that would have been comprehensible enough to John's original audience. Yet even the trumpets are not the final judgment on unrepentant humankind, but function more as warning judgments: there is still time to repent.²⁹ Despite these terrible plagues, however, the surviving earth-dwellers³⁰ choose not to repent.

Before the last trumpet and the third woe, John sees a mighty angel descending from heaven (10.1–4). The angel informs him that there will be no more delay,³¹ but that in the days of the last trumpet (cf. 1 Cor 15.52) the mystery of God will be fulfilled, just as he had announced to his prophets (vv. 5–8).³² John then receives an open scroll from the mighty angel, eats it, and is told to again prophesy about

²⁶ So also Bauckham, *Climax*, 13.

²⁷ For the Jewish tradition of silence enabling the prayers of Israel to be heard, see the discussion in *ibid.*, 70–83, and Beale, *Revelation*, 448–51. On the 'silence before God is about to act' motif, see 8 n. 23 above.

²⁸ Cf. Amos 2.1, where the blowing of a trumpet signals the Day of Yahweh. On the use of the trumpet motif in the Bible and early Judaism, see Jon Paulien, *Decoding Revelation's Trumpets: Literary Allusions and the Interpretation of Revelation 8:7–12* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University, 1992) 203–21; Caird, *Commentary*, 108–11; and *DBI*, s.v. 'Trumpet'.

²⁹ Sweet, *Revelation*, 161; Bauckham, *Climax*, 12, 204, 278; cf. Paulien, *Decoding*, 208–9. Farrer (*Revelation*, 19) considers the first six trumpets 'like the spaced warning-shots before the starting-gun'; similarly Court, *Myth*, 71.

³⁰ For a discussion on John's use of the term 'those dwelling on the earth', see Bauckham, *Climax*, 239–41.

³¹ That is, the 'little wait' of the martyred souls under the altar will be over (ἔτι χρόνον μικρόν, 6.11; cf. χρόνος οὐκέτι ἔσται, 10.6). Moreover, the response of the altar in 16.7 as the bowls are poured out seems to echo the plea of the martyrs in 6.10 (Beale, *Revelation*, 820). This development speaks of chronological progression: the cry for judgment and vengeance comes at the fifth seal, it lies still ahead at the sixth trumpet, and it is being executed as the bowls are being poured out.

³² Commentators agree that v. 7b is a deliberate allusion to Amos 3.7 (Sweet, *Revelation*, 179; Bauckham, *Climax*, 258–62), who prophesies the destruction of the northern kingdom on the Day of Yahweh. Is John saying that 'in the days of the seventh trumpet' (i.e. during the bowls when the trumpet has blown), the Day of the Lord will be brought to an end?

many peoples, nations, languages and kings (vv. 9–11). Next, the heavenly voice asks John to measure the temple of God and then introduces two witnesses, who are given 1,260 days to prophesy and witness to the earth-dwellers (11.1–6). When they have finished their testimony, the beast coming from the bottomless pit kills them (vv. 7–8), but three and a half days later God raises them up and they ascend to heaven in a cloud (vv. 9–12; cf. 1 Thess 4.15–17). At the same time there is a great earthquake and a tenth of the inhabitants of the city die, the rest giving glory to the God of heaven (v. 13). John then reminds his audience that the second woe has now passed and the third is soon to come, i.e., the last trumpet is about to be blown (v. 14).

The blowing of the trumpet by the seventh angel signals a transition from one stage in history to another as we learn that the kingdom of the world has now become the kingdom of the Lord and his Christ. The Lord God Almighty is no longer 'the one who is to come': he has now come and begun to reign. One of the consequences of this is that the time has come 'to destroy the destroyers of the earth' (11.18), as the Day of the Lord is rapidly moving to the climax for which the martyred souls have been waiting.

Before proceeding to the next section in the text, let us briefly comment on John's use of OT judgment and salvation traditions. It is obvious that John is drawing on various motifs, but it is equally obvious that he has not simply adopted an already existing scheme and faithfully incorporated it into his own prophecy. For instance, while his presentation of the period that I am calling 'the Day of the Lord' is clearly indebted to OT 'Day of Yahweh' traditions, it is not a replica of any existing passage but rather a creative expansion of the theme in general, into which other motifs have been interwoven. More than one reason could account for this longer and more complex presentation of the Day of the Lord. First, in apocalyptic literature the description of the course of history from the hearers' present until the 'end' is often an important feature. If the 'Day of Yahweh' in the OT is portrayed as a time of the judgment of the oppressors and the deliverance of the oppressed, it would make perfect sense for John to follow suit by giving a blow-by-blow account of the events of that 'day'. Second, John has combined his presentation of the Day of the Lord with another important eschatological motif, namely, that of the final persecution of the saints at the hands of the beast for the period of 42 months, or three and a half years. This explains the twofold nature of the trumpets. On the one hand, God's wrath is not directed against his faithful followers: the judgments fall on those oppressing them. This corresponds to the OT expectations regarding the 'Day of Yahweh'. On the other hand, though the witnesses are able to complete their testimony, the beast is allowed to overcome them and they suffer at his hands before their final vindication. This in turn clearly draws on Dan 7.

A third possible reason for John not wanting to pass over the Day of the Lord

too quickly is his understanding of the role of the Church. Not only are the blowing of the last trumpet and the subsequent pouring out of the bowls of wrath delayed explicitly, but the way John has shaped his narrative also creates a sense of delay that would be felt especially in an oral performance of the book.³³ As commentators have often pointed out, one purpose of this emphatic delay is so that the earth-dwellers would have time to repent. Of course, texts such as Joel 2.32 [MT 3.5] assert that all who call on the name of Yahweh on the Day of Yahweh will be delivered, but John's presentation is more elaborate than that. But the delay does not last forever. If the two martyrs of chapter 11 symbolize the witnessing Church, as is frequently maintained,³⁴ then John is presenting the task of the Church as an urgent one – a limited period of testimony just before the final trumpet.³⁵ Another reason for the delay before the consummation of temporal judgments is the fact that there are also some within the people of God who need to repent, as the messages to the seven churches indicate (cf. 2 Pet 3.9). In the OT, prophets were called to prosecute and persuade God's chosen people, and John is no exception.

The conflict

At this point John steps out of the chronological sequence. Instead of portraying the effects of the third woe on the earth-dwellers,³⁶ he narrates a series of unnumbered visions; and it is only in chapter 15 that he takes up the main story-

33 Cf. R. Bauckham, 'The Delay of the Parousia', *TynB* 31 (1980) 3–36, esp. 28–36.

34 Bauckham, *Climax*, 274.

35 Cf. Bauckham (*Climax*, 12): '[T]he period in which there is opportunity for repentance is rapidly coming to an end as the third and last woe, the final judgment, approaches "soon" '; and Caird, *Commentary*, 112.

Bauckham (*Climax*, 238–337) argues that the conversion of the nations is presented *in nuce* in chapter 11 and then elaborated on in the remaining chapters. If he is correct in his claim that the survivors of the great city are converted, then John is saying that judgments alone are incapable of producing repentance and that the role of the testimony is crucial (see *ibid.*, 277–83). He correctly notes that even judgments and testimony unto death were not enough, but that only after the vindication of the martyrs (and the attendant judgment on the city) do the inhabitants of the city repent (278).

36 John makes it clear that the three woes are connected to the last three trumpets and their effects on the earth-dwellers (8.13). The first woe is narrated in 9.1–11, the second woe ends with the great earthquake that causes a tenth of the great city to fall (11.13–14), and the third woe comes 'soon' (τὰχὺ, the same word used for the coming of Jesus 'soon' in Revelation). The last trumpet blows in 11.15, but John does not explicitly identify the last woe. Many commentators have concluded that chapters 12–14 therefore are the third woe, or at least constitute its beginning (cf. 12.12). However, there are some difficulties with this view. First, chapter 12 does not seem to be a continuation of the account of the last trumpet. It is rather the bowls that seem to follow the last trumpet in the main story line (Bauckham, *Climax*, 9, 15–18). Second, if the last trumpet describes the 'end', as the proponents of the recapitulation theory claim, then chapter 12 hardly reads like a narrative of the effects of the 'end' on the earth-

line and proceeds to describe the destruction of the destroyers of the earth, beginning in chapter 16.³⁷ These three intervening chapters give a panoramic view of the conflict between the dragon and God's people, and partly recapitulate events already narrated in chapter 11. There the beast was only briefly mentioned, but now a fuller description of his kingdom and activities is given.

In chapter 12 John sees a woman, representing Israel,³⁸ giving birth to the Messiah, whose life, death and resurrection are symbolized by his being snatched up, out of the dragon's reach, to God and to his throne. The dragon and his angels are thrown out of heaven, and knowing that his time is short, the dragon first tries to pursue the woman who gave birth to the Messiah; but as that fails, he goes off to make war on the followers of the Messiah.

Chapter 13 introduces both the beast, who is allowed to persecute and kill God's people, and the false prophet, who deceives the earth-dwellers and causes them to worship the beast. Chapter 14 begins with a vision of the 144,000, the first-fruits of the harvest of the earth, standing on Mount Zion with the Lamb.³⁹ The vision is followed by the three angels with three messages to the earth-dwellers. Chronologically, these still belong to the period of tribulation before the last trumpet. It is with the two harvests that John catches up with the story as he left it at the end of chapter 11. As for their interpretation, I agree with Bauckham, who sees the grain harvest as a positive image and the grape harvest as a negative one.⁴⁰ The former represents the final deliverance of God's people, and the latter symbolizes the judgment of those who ultimately remain unrepentant. This corresponds to 11.12–15, where the two witnesses ascend to heaven before the last trumpet is blown, and the last seven plagues are poured out on unrepentant humanity.

The seven bowls

Chapter 15 continues the storyline from chapters 12–14, but interweaves it with the chronological sequence of the septets.⁴¹ The saints who overcame the

dwellers. Third, if the 'woe' in 12.12 is taken as evidence for the view that sees chapters 12–14 as the third woe, the threefold repetition of the double woe in chapter 18 (vv. 10, 16, 19) would suggest instead that the third woe is the destruction of Babylon rather than the events narrated in chapters 12–14 (except for the grape harvest, which is expanded in chapter 16 and following).

37 As Bauckham (*Climax*, 9, 15–16) has pointed out, 11.19 forges a link to 15.1, 5–6 with its mention of the opening of God's temple/sanctuary in heaven.

38 For the identification of the woman with Mary or the Church, see the comments in Sweet, *Revelation*, 194–5, and the discussion in Beale, *Revelation*, 621–32.

39 Cf. Joel 2.32 [MT 3.5] and Obad 17: 'on Mount Zion . . . there shall be those who escape' on the Day of Yahweh.

40 Bauckham, *Climax*, 290–6.

41 *Ibid.*, 16.

beast, its image and the number of its name, as explained in chapters 13 and 14, are pictured as singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. This is sandwiched by a vision of seven angels who come out of the sanctuary, ready to pour out on earth seven bowls full of God's wrath. These seven last plagues complete the wrath of God that began with the first trumpet.

Chapter 16 describes the pouring out of the bowls and their effects, thus partially recapitulating the grape harvest. Two elements of chapter 16 require comment here. First, after the sixth bowl, the satanic triad gathers the kings of the whole world for battle at Armageddon, but no enemy is mentioned nor the battle narrated. The *angelus interpretes* first tells that the enemy is the Lamb (17.14), and then adds that the beast and the kings are also responsible for the fall of Babylon (17.16–17). The confrontation with the Lamb is portrayed in 19.11–21, preceded by the description of the fall of Babylon in chapter 18. Second, 16.18–21 contains the last use of what has been identified as the 'theophany formula', the other three occurrences being 4.5, 8.5 and 11.19.⁴² The first instance has only 'flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder', but the formula is expanded every time so that in chapter 16 we have 'flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder . . . a great earthquake . . . and great hailstones'. For Bauckham, 'the formula indicates that it is the same final judgment which is reached in the seventh of each of the three series'.⁴³

The problem with this statement is not that it appears at least slightly incompatible with the usual view that the end is reached with the sixth rather than the seventh seal. Rather, it is Bauckham's interpretation of the intensification within the formula that is questionable. Though there is obviously intensification with the last three instances of the formula, it is not clear why that would necessitate the conclusion that 'the End has been reached'⁴⁴ with the seventh of each septet. Granted that 8.5 and 11.19 anticipate 16.18–21, this intensification would seem to indicate that the consummation of temporal judgments is *approaching*, and not that it has already been reached in 8.1 and then recapitulated twice.⁴⁵ Thus, in 8.5 the formula heralds the coming of God in judgment, symbolized by the trumpets.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 202–4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 204. Bauckham also asserts that 8.5 'encompasses the whole course of the judgments of the seven trumpets' (*ibid.*, 8) and that 11.19 similarly encompasses the bowl judgments, climaxing in 16.18–21. It is unclear, however, how this assertion functions as an argument for the immediately following conclusion: 'Thus the formula indicates that it is the same final judgment which is reached in the seventh of each of the three series.'

⁴⁵ So also Resseguie, *Revelation*, 165. Bauckham (*Climax*, 8) does not use the term 'recapitulation', but talks about attaining 'a preliminary glimpse of the final judgment' with the first two seventhths. Others have, however, used the theophany formula/earthquake motif as evidence for recapitulation (e.g. McKelvey, 'Millennium', 89).

By the seventh trumpet, God has come, and 11.19 looks forward to the pouring out of the bowls. The last bowl in 16.18–21 completes the judgments, together with an emphasis on the uniqueness of the final earthquake and with the voice from the throne saying, 'It is done!'

The prostitute

The next two chapters zoom in on the great prostitute and her fate. While John's portrayal of her in chapter 17 reflects his present, chapter 18 is an elaboration of the summary statement in 16.19, 'God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath'. 19.1–5 is the response of heaven to the fall of Babylon, 6–9a are an invitation to the wedding supper of the Lamb, and 9b–10 describe John's reaction to the *angelus interpres* who showed him the vision of the great prostitute and her destruction.

The transition from the prostitute to the bride

Babylon has fallen, but the expected confrontation between the beast and the Lamb has not yet occurred. The battle is finally narrated in 19.11–20.3, appropriately sandwiched between the descriptions of the fates of the two cities. As for chapter 20 as a whole, regardless of how literally the language is to be understood, John presents a series of events with a clear chronological order.⁴⁶ What causes problems for interpreters is the fact that 20.8–9 draw on the same prophecy concerning Gog in Ezek 38–39 as does Rev 19.17–18, which is then interpreted to mean

46 In comparison with the rest of Revelation, this chapter has a more obvious chronological order and structure than most. This alone would seem to militate against seeing the battles before and after the thousand years as the same.

One interesting attempt at solving the 'problem' of John's chronological presentation has been made by Beale (*Revelation*, 972–1038), who takes 20.1–6 as a description of the 'church age' and 20.7–15 as a recapitulation of 19.11–21. In his view, the binding of Satan was 'inaugurated' during Christ's earthly ministry, and 'put in motion' after his resurrection (985). Satan is thus prevented from annihilating the Church during the church age, and the resurrection in 20.4 is a spiritual resurrection of the souls of the deceased saints, who now reign in heaven with Christ. Beale's solution raises more questions than it answers, but even if we grant that his interpretation of chapter 20 is correct, questions still remain. By the end of chapter 19, the narrative has reached its climax in describing the destruction of Babylon, the beasts and the armies who had gathered against the Lamb, and there does not seem to be anything to warn the reader that in 20.1 the narrative suddenly jumps to the 'inaugural binding' of Satan, 'put in motion' after Christ's resurrection. As it now stands, 20.1–3 reads as a natural continuation of the mopping-up operation begun in 19.20. Likewise, the reference to 'deceiving the nations any longer' (20.3) would seem to point to the deceiving of the earth-dwellers by the false prophet (who derives his authority and power from Satan: 13.2, 12; 16.13–14) in 19.20. In fact, it appears that there is nothing before 20.8 that would even suggest to the reader the possibility that 20.1 may not be a continuation of the story from 19.21.

that both descriptions must be of the same event.⁴⁷ If this is the case, then, despite all appearances, there can be no chronological sequence from the beast's defeat to the great white throne judgment. As a result, various strategies have been devised to explain away this perceived tension within John's account. Instead of surveying the various solutions that have been proposed, I will briefly sketch what I consider a viable alternative.

The key lies, I suggest, in the purpose of the Gog prophecy in Ezek 38–39. Israel is predicted as having been redeemed from the nations and restored to her land, living in peace and security with the ideal Davidic shepherd ruling over her. Yet, in order to demonstrate his holiness and the eternal physical security of his people, Yahweh summons Gog and his allies against Israel. However, just as they have reached the land, Yahweh pours out torrential rains, hailstones, fire and sulphur on them, utterly destroying them in a pre-emptive strike. If we compare this to the two passages in Revelation, it is evident that 20.7–9 plays a similar role in John's prophecy as chapters 38–39 do in Ezekiel's: the ideal Davidic shepherd is reigning and the people have peace from their enemies and dwell securely. Moreover, the mention of 'Gog and Magog' is an unmistakable reference to the Gog prophecy. In contrast, the context of the beast's attack on the Lamb in chapter 19 hardly corresponds to the context of Ezek 38–39. In fact, the only unmistakable use of the Gog prophecy in chapter 19 is the allusion to the victory banquet, i.e., the birds' devouring of the flesh of those slain by the Lamb.⁴⁸ Thus, it seems that in chapter 19 John has adopted only the sacrificial feast motif from Ezek 39 – probably as an ironic reference to the invitation to the wedding feast earlier in the same chapter – without necessarily intending to invoke the Gog prophecy as a whole.⁴⁹ This is not the case with Rev 20.7–9, however, where the clear reference

47 See e.g. McKelvey, 'Millennium', 86–7, and the extended discussion in Beale, *Revelation*, 976–83; cf. S. Bøe, *Gog and Magog: Ezekiel 38–39 as Pre-text for Revelation 19,17–21 and 20,7–10* (WUNT 2/135; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001) 364–82 and *passim*. Another line of interpretation sees the two passages in Revelation as a double fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy (see R. Alexander, 'A Fresh Look at Ezekiel 38 and 39', *JETS* 17 [1974] 157–69).

Ezek 38–39 itself is often adduced in support of recapitulation (e.g. Beale, *Revelation*, 979–80), but it is questionable whether that is a correct term for describing these two chapters. As D. Block (*The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998] 431–2 and *passim*) argues, chapters 38–39 form one oracle the parts of which create a sequence of events, rather than two separate oracles which both portray the same battle from two different perspectives (contra e.g. McKelvey, 'Millennium,' 87). This does not disprove recapitulation as a literary technique, but merely shows that John's alleged recapitulation of the final battle does not derive from a recapitulation of the same battle in his OT source.

48 So also Bøe, *Gog*, 274–300, and esp. the summary, 298–300.

49 Cf. Zeph 1.7–8, where Yahweh has prepared a sacrificial feast on the Day of the Lord – with the leadership of Judah as the sacrifice; cf. Jer 46.10; Isa 34.6.

to Gog and Magog, and the numerous correspondences to Ezek 38–39, 'leave no doubt about the strong relationship' between the two passages.⁵⁰

Summary

The reading of the septets proposed above can be represented by a simple chart as shown in Figure 3.

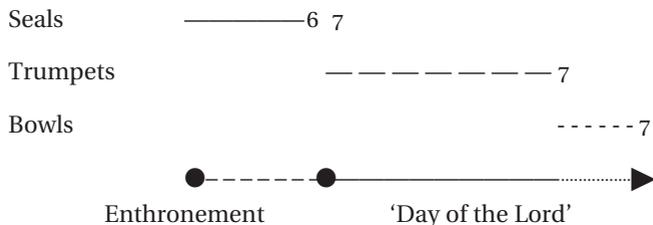


Figure 3

This chart encapsulates two important points. First, while John sees his prophecy as covering the time from Christ's enthronement to the 'end' – whatever that may mean – he also understands this time to contain at least three different stages, leading up to the final consummation of God's kingdom. These three stages correspond to the three septets.⁵¹ The *seals* portray what the Synoptic apocalypse

⁵⁰ Bøe, *Gog*, 343; see the detailed comparison, 300–44, and esp. the summary of correspondences, 342–3. Bøe objects that the use of Ezekiel in Rev 19 and 20 does not prove that both refer to the same event (376). His analysis of John's use of Ezek 38–39 is similar to the one presented in this essay, though he deliberately refrains from making an explicit statement regarding the recapitulation theory or its implications for the millennium debate.

⁵¹ According to Farrer (*Revelation*, 21), these three periods correspond to the three essential stages of Christ's prophecy on Olivet: 'the waiting of the saints, the kingdom of Antichrist, and the overthrow of the heathendom'. For him, '[t]he sequence [of John's visions] is a sequence of topics . . . without strict adherence to a single or continuous time-scheme. Yet the topics themselves attach to three periods which are in genuine historical sequence' (*ibid.*, 22–3). I agree with Farrer with regard to this general statement, though our approaches differ in many details.

A similar proposal has been put forward by Court. Like Farrer, he sees the three septets as corresponding to three stages in the Synoptic apocalypse: the seals represent the θλίψεις of events and circumstances contemporary to John (Mark 13.5–23); the trumpets symbolize the ὠδίνες, heralding the end (24–5); and (apparently) the bowls are the τέλος, a judgment with systematic punishment, culminating in the parousia of Christ (26–7). Court's thesis rests primarily on a non-traditional reading of the Synoptic apocalypse (Beale, *Revelation*, 121 n. 65; Court, *Myth*, 47) and is dependent on seeing John's present as being between the fifth and sixth seals. He also seems to understand the OT 'Day of Yahweh' as an event corresponding to the 'end of the world' (*Myth*, 68), rather than covering both the trumpets and the bowls.

calls ‘the beginning of the birth pains’: there are wars, famines, earthquakes and general unrest, but it is only the sixth seal that signals the arrival of the Day of the Lord. The stage symbolized by the *trumpets* is characterized by a twofold nature. On the one hand, warning judgments are executed on the earth-dwellers, but there is still time to repent. On the other hand, the beast reaches the height of its power, persecuting the saints until the roll of the martyrs is complete. When the Day of the Lord culminates in the seven *bowls*, the opportunity for repentance is over and it remains only to destroy the destroyers of the earth, the beast and his forces.

Second, while the chart resembles the one introduced earlier as the simplified version of the futurist position, the reading proposed here does not require commitment to the traditional futurist position. In other words, it is not necessary to see the septets as providing a blueprint for the future, or to attempt to find one-to-one correspondence between individual elements of the septets and events in the real world. Indeed, only the seventh element of each septet and the sixth seal are marked on the chart, as they are the key elements in the reading proposed in this study. Some of the less important elements do not necessarily exhibit a strict chronological order.⁵² It is these key elements, signalling a change from one stage to another, that have been the focus of this study.

3. Conclusion

In its simplest form, the recapitulation theory maintains that the breaking of the seals, the blowing of the trumpets and the pouring out of the bowls are parallel and describe the same events or the same period of time, although from a different angle and with intensification or development, and that the ‘end’ is reached with the seventh of each series. In contrast, this study has attempted to show that no such conclusion is necessary. The seventh seal and the seventh trumpet do not portray the ‘end’, but merely significant transitions from one stage to another, as the full consummation of God’s kingdom is moving towards its climax. The former ushers in the Day of the Lord and the latter marks the closing of the door of repentance and the beginning of the process described as the ‘destruction of the destroyers of the earth’. The so-called theophany formula can be read as indicating the approach of the consummation of temporal judgments, rather than as evidence that ‘the End has been reached’ and then recapitulated twice. Furthermore, although 19.17–18 and 20.8–9 both draw on Ezek 38–39, this fact can be better explained without recourse to the recapitulation

⁵² For example, though each of the first four seals is portrayed as resulting from the Lamb’s enthronement, they do not seem to be single events that begin and end before the next seal, but rather overlap and extend to the other septets.

theory.⁵³ If these conclusions are correct, it suggests that John had, in true apocalyptic fashion, more interest in the chronological progression within the last days than is usually acknowledged in critical scholarship.

53 Although I have argued for chronological progression in places that are normally adduced in support of the recapitulation theory, I do not wish to suggest that there is no recapitulation in John's Apocalypse. For example, the beast's conflict with the saints is first mentioned in chapter 11 and then described again in chapters 12–13. Moreover, the grain harvest in ch. 14 may present another angle to the resurrection of the witnesses in chapter 11, and the grape harvest is probably expanded on in chapter 16.

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