

## Revelation: Structure and Purpose

### Section 1

**1:1-3: Introduction.** The apocalypse was revealed for the purpose of witness, which results in blessing.

The main emphasis here is the blessing obtained from reading the book and hearing it read.

**1:4-8: Salutation.** John greets the churches on behalf of the sovereign Father, Spirit, and Son, whose redemptive work results in the church members' new status, all to the glory of God.

These verses progress further by focusing on a greater goal of the book than blessing: that God be glorified.

**1:9-20: John's Commissioning.** He is to write to the churches because their confidence is grounded in Christ's installation as cosmic judge, priest, and ruler of the church, as a result of his victory over death.

The contents of the book are now made more specific. The church's confidence in Christ's work is to result in the church's blessing (vv 1-3) and ultimately in God's glory (vv 4-8), which is the high point of thought in the chapter. Therefore, this segment is probably the basis for the prior two.

**2:1-3:22: The Letters to the Seven Churches.** Christ encourages the churches to witness, warns them about compromise, and exhorts them to overcome compromise with the world in order to inherit the promise of eternal life with Christ.

This segment expands on ch.1, especially the Son of man vision in 1:9-20. Christ was introduced in 1:12-20 and now speaks as ruler and judge of the churches by addressing each church's specific situation. The repeated promise to the churches based on their future overcoming is a detailed development and explanation of the nature of the blessing due to obedience of the prophecy (1:3).

### Section 2

**4:1-5:14: The Throne, the Scroll, and the Lamb.** God and Christ are glorified because Christ's resurrection demonstrates that they are sovereign over creation to judge and to redeem.

Christ's role as judge and sovereign king from 1:12-3:21 is further developed. As king he is in the letters the model for true Christians who will "overcome" (see 5:5-6); Christians who suffer can be comforted that God and Christ are sovereign over all things, will bring salvation and good out of their suffering, and will judge the compromisers among them as well as those outside the churches who cause oppression. Chs. 4-5 spin out directly from 3:21 in particular, where the Father's and Christ's throne is mentioned; chs. 4-5 explain the nature of God's sovereignty and how Christ achieved his position with the Father on the throne of the cosmos. The main point of chs. 4-5, however, has to do with none of these themes. The conclusions of the two chapters climax respectively with the glory of God and the glory of both God and the Lamb because of their sovereign rule. This then returns to the main point of ch. 1 (and of all of chs. 1-3): the glory of God (1:6).

**6:7-8: The First Four Seals.** Christ begins to exercise his role as judge and king of his people by using evil heavenly forces to inflict trials on people throughout the church age, for either purification or punishment.

**6:9-11: The Fifth Seal.** Christians persecuted (by the woes of 6:1-8) and glorified appeal to God to demonstrate his justice by judging their persecutors. They will be answered when all God's people complete the suffering that he has determined for them.

**6:12-17: The Sixth Seal.** God answers the plea of the saints: he will demonstrate his justice by executing the final judgment on the unbelieving world.

**7:1-8: The Sealing of the Tribes.** Angels prevent the evil forces of 6:1-8 from commencing their destructive activity on earth until believers are given spiritual protection against losing their faith.

**7:9-17: The Multitude.** God and the Lamb are praised for making manifest the redemption of multitudes by means of protecting them through a purifying tribulation.

### Section 3

**8:1, 3-5: The Seventh Seal as the Conclusion of the Seal Series.** The last judgment is reiterated as a formal response to the saints' petition in 6:10 that God punish the unbelieving world.

**8:6-9:11: The First Six Trumpets.** God responds to the saints' prayer in 6:10 by using angels to execute judgments on the persecuting world that lead up to the last judgment.

**10:1-11: John's Recommissioning.** He is to prophesy about judgment, concerning which he paradoxically both rejoices and mourns.

**11:1-14; The Two Witnesses.** God's decree ensures his presence with his people and their effective witness, which leads to their apparent defeat and culminates in judgment of their oppressors.

Rev 10:1-11:13 is a parenthetical section and is not a chronological delay but a literary delay like ch. 7. The first six trumpets have focused on the judgments that the godless suffer throughout the church age, but the parenthesis in 10:1-11:13 explains the relationship between the wicked and the righteous during the same time: the former persecute the latter. Unbelievers are punished by the trumpet judgments throughout the church age because of this antagonistic relationship. The literary parallel of delay between the sixth and seventh seals and trumpets suggests a thematic parallel. Ch. 7 shows that Christians are sealed against the spiritually destructive harm of the six trumpet judgments. 11:1-13 reveals that they are sealed so that they can bear an enduring and loyal witness to the gospel, which begins to lay a basis for the final judgment of those rejecting their testimony.

Therefore, the parenthesis does not intervene chronologically between the sixth and seventh trumpets but offers, rather, a further interpretation of the same period of the church age covered by the first six trumpets. In particular, it explains the theological basis for the punishment portrayed in the trumpets. This expresses more explicitly the hint of the preceding chapters that the trumpets are God's answer to the saints' petition for vindication and for punishment of their oppressors (6:9-11; 8:3-5; 9:13). Consequently, John's prophecy in chs. 10-11 focuses more on the judgment of the ungodly than on the reward of the godly. The witnesses are described (ch. 11) mainly to provide a basis for the judgment of the persecutors: the witnesses' vindication is secondary.

#### Section 4

**11:15-19: The Seventh Trumpet.** God establishes the consummated kingdom and executes the consummated judgment as the content of the seventh trumpet and as the conclusion and climax of the trumpet series.

**12:1-17: Christ's Victory over the Devil.** God protects the messianic community against the devil's wrathful harm.

Though ch. 12 starts a new vision, it develops themes from the previous sections of the book. It goes into the deeper dimension of the spiritual conflict between the world and the church, which has been developed progressively in chs. 1-11. John explains the conflict in chs. 2-3 as one in which Christians are tempted to compromise in various ways. The temptations arise from both inside and outside the church. In each subsequent vision, John pictures in increasing intensity the spiritual sources of the conflict. The seven seals show that spiritual forces of wickedness are ultimately unleashed against believer and unbeliever alike by the four living creatures around God's throne, in accordance with the command of the resurrected Christ. The seven trumpets show that demonic forces of judgment are sent forth to punish hardened humanity. Yet even these are released by angelic beings. The seals and trumpets are punctuated by parenthetical segments to demonstrate that God's people will be protected spiritually throughout the trials, which for genuine believers serve as ordeals to refine their faith.

Chs. 12-22 tell the same story as chs. 1-11, but explain in greater detail what the first chapters only introduce and imply. Ch. 12 reveals that Satan himself is the deeper source of evil. Hints of the devil have appeared already in 6:8 and 9:11. 11:7 has referred to the appearance of "the beast" at the end of history. Ch. 12 uncovers a greater fiend. The devil is the grand evil initiator of the trials and persecution of the saints (as in 12:10, 13), and he is the one who inspires the appearance of the "beast" in order to oppress God's people and to deceive the world.

**12:18 - 13:18: Exhortation.** The believers are exhorted to be discerning about falsehood, withstand persecution, and not participate in false worship propagated by the devil and his beastly allies, in order to hold on to their faith.

**14:1-20; 15:2-4: The End of History.** God accomplishes his glory by rewarding believers and punishing the beast and his followers at the end.

The main goal of divine glory accomplished through judgment and blessing is again highlighted, as it was in chs. 4-5, but now in greater detail.

## Section 5

### 15:5-13: The Introduction to the Seven Bowl Judgments Resumed

**16:1-21. Punishment of the Ungodly.** God punishes the ungodly during the inter-advent age and consummately at the last day, because of their persecution and idolatry.

What the trumpets state in a highly figurative manner is stated more directly in the bowls. Generally, the first six trumpets and first five bowls cover the period between Christ's resurrection and his final coming, while the last trumpet and bowl narrate the final judgment. Though there are some differences between the corresponding trumpets and bowls, they are similar enough to be considered part of the same comprehensive program of divine judgments occurring during the same broad period. The phrase "seven last plagues" in 15:1 refers not to woes occurring after the seals and trumpets at the conclusion of history but to the bowls coming last after the seals and trumpets in the sequence of formal sevenfold visions seen by the seer. They are "last" in that they complete the thought revealed in the preceding woe visions. This means that the bowls judgments do not have to occur in historical time subsequent to the series of judgments in chs. 6-14. The bowls go back in time and explain in greater detail the woes throughout the age and culminating in the last judgment. The trumpets are recapitulated in the bowls in order to elaborate in more detail the extent and application of God's latter-day Exodus judgments, which began with the portrayal of the trumpets.

Like the trumpets, the bowl plagues are better viewed as judgments instead of mere warnings since the Exodus plagues are both a literary model and a theological model for the bowls. The bowls are also like the trumpets in giving God's further answer to the saints' plea in 6:9-11 that their persecutors be judged. Such a link is apparent in 16:5-7 in the reference to the "altar" and to God as "holy" and to his judgments as "true." This connection with 6:9-11 also explains why the bowls are not merely warnings but ultimately punishments and are called "bowls of wrath" (16:1; cf. 15:1). Those experiencing the punishment of the bowl plagues are judged because they identify with the beast and not with the Lamb. All the temporal judgments of the first six bowls climax in the great last judgment of the seventh bowl (16:17-21).

John applies the plagues from Exodus typologically to hardened unbelievers living between Christ's resurrection and final coming in the first five bowls and to the wicked at the conclusion of history in the last two bowls (the sixth bowl directly precedes the end). The number seven is figurative and refers not to seven specific woes but to the completeness and severity of these judgments. The goal of all seven bowl judgments is to demonstrate not only God's incomparability and just judgment of sinners, but ultimately his glory (so 15:8; 16:9; cf. 11:13, 15-16; 15:4; 19:1-7), so again the main point of God's glory is highlighted.

Earlier chapters portray the rise of the dragon (ch. 12) followed by the beast (13:1-10), then the false prophet (or second beast, 13:11-18), and finally Babylon (14:6-11). Ch. 16 begins a segment in which the order of these evil protagonists is reversed. Babylon is mentioned first in the explanation of their demise (16:17-21; chs. 17-18) followed by the beast and false prophet (19:17-20), and finally the dragon himself (20:10). This reversal points further to a lack of concern for chronological sequence in the book. The four foes are eliminated all at the same time, as is evident from the use of the same wording and the same OT allusions in the descriptions of their defeat (see on 16:14; 19:19; 20:8).

## Section 6

**17:1-18: The Woman-City.** The influence of the world's economic-religious system and of the state is lethal, yet the alliance will inevitably lead to the downfall of both.

17:1-19:10 is a large interpretative snapshot of the sixth and seventh bowls, which have prophesied the judgment of Babylon. Some have noted the apparent inconsistency that v 1 says that the main point of the vision is the judgment of the whore, yet only one verse out of the whole chapter (v 16) actually pertains to Babylon's judgment. But this inconsistency vanishes when the larger literary unit of 17:1-19:4 is viewed as dominated by the judgment of the harlot. So much space is taken up with the beast in ch. 17 because the woman's significance and power cannot be fully understood except in her relationship to the beast. Therefore, the beast must also be fully comprehended. In addition ch. 17 underscores what leads up to and brings about the collapse of Babylon (in development of 16:12-13), though the demise of the beast and his allies are also mentioned (in development of 16:14-21). 18:1-19:4, therefore, focuses only on Babylon's fall itself, as continuation of the vision begun in 17:3 (in development of 16:14-21 end of the main point announced in 17:1). That the full-blown description of the demise formally begins in 18:1ff is apparent from the virtual repetition of 17:2 in 18:3.

**18:1-24: Rejoicing over the Fall of Babylon.** Saints who do not compromise with the idolatrous world are to rejoice over God's judgment of the Babylonian world system because doing so demonstrates the integrity of their faith and of God's justice.

The angel promised in 17:1 that he would show the seer "the judgment of the great whore sitting on many waters." But this judgment is portrayed, as we have seen, in only one verse in ch. 17 (v 16). The angel's promise, however, is fulfilled in detail throughout ch. 18. The declaration of Babylon's coming judgment (18:1-19) is the basis for the saints' rejoicing not only because it demonstrates their vindication (vv 20-24) and God's justice (18:20-19:6), but also because it is the reason they glorify God's kingship (19:1-6). 19:1-6 (perhaps also 19:7-8), which continues to emphasize Babylon's fall, is, from both literary and conceptual viewpoints, the conclusion to ch. 18.

**19:1-10: Wedding of the Lamb.** Babylon's coming judgment (18:1-19:5) and the consequent establishment of God's reign (19:6) is the basis for and leads to the righteous vindication and consummate union of Christ with his righteous People, for which they glorify God (19:7-10).

Again, as in preceding segments, the glory of God is the grand goal of his work of vindicating genuine saints and judging compromisers and persecutors.

**19:11-21: The Defeat of the Beast and Its Allies.** Christ will reveal his sovereignty and faithfulness to his promises by judging Babylon's former allies in order to vindicate his people.

The destruction of Babylon recounted in 17:1-19:3 was not a complete defeat of all the forces of wickedness. 17:12-18 reveals that God's instrument in overthrowing Babylon was the beast and his forces. Therefore, for the victory to be decisive these forces must also be destroyed. In particular, 19:7-9 says that God caused Babylon's collapse in order to vindicate his people. But the rest of the church's persecutors also must be judged in order to achieve complete vindication of the saints from the world's slander and persecution. Above all, the "testimony of Jesus" emphatically mentioned twice in the interlocking transition in v 10, must be seen as true. The judgment of Babylon followed by that of the beast, the false prophet, and their followers demonstrates that those who rendered his testimony were in the right after all and that the testimony is true. The judgment of the beast and false prophet, who denied the truth of the testimony together with their deceived followers, is the logical climax to 11-21 and is a fitting vindication of God's truth.

**20:1-15. The Millennium.** The millennium is inaugurated during the church age when God limits Satan's deceptive powers and when deceased Christians are vindicated through their reign in heaven. It is concluded by a resurgence of Satan's deceptive assault against the church and the final judgment.

Ch. 20 is a part of the larger literary segment extending from 17:1 to 21:8. The first sections of the literary unit have dealt with the announcement of Babylon's fall at the conclusion of history (ch. 17), elaboration of that fall, especially the responses drawn forth both from unredeemed and redeemed multitudes (18:1-19:10), and Christ's judgment of wicked world forces at the end of history (19:11-21).

The precise thematic and temporal relationship of ch. 20 to ch. 19 is hotly debated. This outline takes the position that 20:1-6 refers to the course of the church age and temporally precedes the narration of final judgment in chs. 17-19 and that 20:7-15 recapitulates the description of final judgment in 19:11-21.

## Section 7

**21:1-22:5: The New Jerusalem.** In the new world to come the community of the redeemed will be completed, perfected, inviolable, and glorious because God's consummated, glorious presence will reside among them forever, whereas the unfaithful will be excluded from such blessing.

21:1-8 concludes the last part of the sixth major segment of the whole book. The first verse of ch. 21 follows on the heels of 20:11, where "heaven and earth fled away from the presence [of God], and no place was found for them." In 20:12-15 judgment follows the cosmic destruction, but in 21:19 a new creation follows the dissolution of the cosmos in order to replace the former world. The theme of the new creation overshadows ch. 21, though the preceding idea of judgment is not completely forgotten (vv 8, 27).

21:9-22:5 is the last and seventh main segment of the book. 21:1-8 anticipates 21:9-22:5 and is recapitulated there. The five earlier segments (chs. 4ff.) have focused on aspects of past, present, and future, and the final judgment or Christ's triumph is narrated at least by the seventh subsection of each of these segments. The purpose of this last major segment is to highlight the contrast between the church imperfect (chs. 1-3) and the church perfected. Chs. 1-3 focus on the churches' weaknesses throughout the old age, but one intention here, in contrast, is to foresee the church's eternal perfected state. The vision also

contrasts the new Jerusalem with ungodly Babylon. These contrasts with the sins of the church and with Babylon, and the entire segment, are ultimately intended to exhort believers in the present to persevere against temptations to compromise so that they might participate in the consummated glory of the church and, ultimately, of God.

## **22:6-21: Exhortations to Holiness.**

This segment is the formal conclusion to the whole book. These final verses especially tie in to the introduction in 1:1-3: both identify the book as a communication from God (using the same wording from Dan. 2:28-29, 45), both focus on John as a "witness" to the revelation that he has been given, and both speak of the revelation as a "prophecy" communicated to "hearers." But the conclusion is longer than the introduction, since it also picks up other themes in the book. While the introduction pronounces a blessing on all who obey the revelation, the conclusion issues an emphatic curse on all who disobey it and stresses the final judgment of disobedience and the final coming of Christ (which is hinted at in 1:7). The last judgment occurs at the climactic coming of Jesus Christ.

This conclusion shows that the purpose of the book is to induce holy obedience among God's people so that they might receive the reward of salvation. The climactic idea of God's glory shared by God's people in 21:1-22:5 is the primary point of the book up to that point, but that climax is not the ultimate point of the book. It serves, rather, to support the exhortation to holiness in 22:6-20. The repeated exhortations to holiness are the main point of the epilogue, since they are supported by the exclamations about Christ's coming. No fewer than eight of the final fifteen verses underscore the book's intention to encourage obedience either through exhortations to obedience, through promised blessings for holy living, and through warnings of judgment for unholy living. This is in keeping with 1:1-3, where the main point is blessing for obedience. Such blessing is the goal of the revelation (1:1) and John's witness to it (1:2). Indeed, both the introduction and the epilogue ground the exhortation to holiness and the warning of judgment on revelatory events to come (cf. 1:3b with 22:7a and 22:7b, 11-12, 18-20).

Verse 21 is a typical epistolary closing, not only for 22:6-20 but the entire book.

## **Overall Purpose Statement**

The introduction and conclusion of the book thus show that the main goal of the argument of John's Apocalypse is to exhort God's people to remain faithful so that they might inherit final salvation. Chs. 4-5 form the introduction to the remainder of the book's visions up to 22:5; this introduction overshadows everything in 6:1-22:5, but it draws into itself the major themes of chs. 1—3: Christ's rule in blessing the saints and judging the ungodly results in the glory of God and Christ. The main idea of chs. 4-5 is: God and Christ are glorified because Christ's resurrection demonstrates that they are sovereign over creation to judge and to redeem. All the subsequent visions flow out of the introductory vision in chs. 4-5 and are to be seen as the historical consequence of divine sovereignty: for example, the visions of seals, trumpets, unnumbered visions (chs. 12-14), and bowls (together with the appended visions in chs. 17-19) show the results in past, present, and future history of divine sovereignty in its exercise of redemption and judgment. Some of the succeeding segments after chs. 4-5 also highlight God's glory as the goal of his work in judging the wicked and blessing saints (e.g., ch. 15).

As at the ends of ch. 4 and ch. 5, so toward the end of the visionary segment, in 19:1-8, we see the affirmation that saints are to glorify God; this glorification comes at the conclusion of history because of Babylon's final fall and because of the wedding of the Lamb with his bride, who will be perfectly adorned for the occasion; focus on the adorned bride is intended to lead the saints to glorify God. This notion of divine glory is central also to 21:1-22:5, since, as we have seen, the new Jerusalem (= God's people) can only be defined in relation to its luminescent reflection of God's glory.

Yet, the main point of divine glory in 1:1-22:5 serves to support John's ultimate goal in exhorting saints to holiness in 22:6-20, so that the main idea of the entire book may be roughly formulated as follows: *The sovereignty of God and Christ in redeeming and judging brings them glory, which is intended to motivate saints to worship God and reflect his glorious attributes through obedience to his word* (see, e.g., on 22:9). The exhortation in 14:7 comes close to summarizing this point of the book: "*fear God and give to him glory because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship the one who has created*" all things.