

1 THE SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF FOUR VISIONS: THE STRUCTURE OF REVELATION

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Introduction:

In most literary works, structure – how the material is arranged – is a factor in both interpreting and comprehending the content. Elisabeth Fiorenza suggests about Revelation that the author “embodied his theology in a unique fusion of content and form.”¹

J. Ramsey Michaels notes, “There is a circular relationship between the literary structure of the Book of Revelation and the interpretation of specific passages: An understanding of the parts is influenced by one’s view of the structure of the whole, and a view of structure depends on how certain individual texts are read.”²

It is important to discover a book’s structure while not imposing a pattern or arrangement on an author’s work. Structural markers indicate that Revelation, while being a series of word pictures, has literary structure. It is beneficial to search for this structure while concurrently respecting the sensory quality of the book.

Body:

I. THE SIGHTS, SOUNDS, AND STRUCTURE OF REVELATION

Though the Revelation of Jesus Christ is now in written form, the message first was an audio-video event. What John “saw” and “heard” occupies a major place in the book. John describes in words what he first experienced with his senses.

The opening statement (1:1-2) indicates that John was to “show” what he “saw” (cf. 22:6), what had been shown to him (4:1, 17:1, 21:9, etc.). Thus, the nature of the scenes that follow is described from the beginning.

John’s showing to Jesus’ servants what he saw and heard indicates that those who read the words may re-envision and thus re-experience the scenes so as to heed the message (1:3, 22:7). Indeed, it is essential that we do so.

John was also explicitly instructed to “write” what he saw. (1:11, 19; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5), so the book has both literary form and a sensory quality.

We are correct to acknowledge the literary quality of the work and thus to search for literary devices and structure. The literary markers help delimit the visions and scenes so we may detect their beginnings and endings. In this process, the sensory quality of the book must be given full weight, as the sheer volume of sights and sounds indicates. The dominant place of the sights and sounds implies that the literary features should serve the sensory ones, not the other way around.

Revelation is a record of visions – word-pictures written so we may “see” and “hear” the drama first shown to John. The visions are not presented indiscriminately; the scenes

¹Elisabeth Fiorenza, “Composition and Structure of the Book of Revelation,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 39 (1977): 344.

²J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 51.

are carefully arranged for dramatic effect. For the message of Revelation to have its intended impact, we must allow the mind's eye and ear to operate as we are guided through the scenes. Recognizing the structure of Revelation helps us do this most effectively.

REVELATION'S STRUCTURAL MARKERS

- I.
- II. Structural markers are linguistic devices or verbal clues such as repeated words or phrases indicating features such as an introductory pattern or the limits of a section. In Revelation, the most evident structural markers are repeated phrases denoting scenes within a vision.
- III. Jesus furnished the divisions of chs. 2 and 3 by His repeated introductory words: “*To the angel of the church in . . . write*” (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). Similarly, He closed each letter with identical words at or near the end: “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).
- IV. The panels in other visions are indicated by repeated phrases, sometimes with slight variations:
- V. “*And when He broke the . . . seal*” (6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12; 8:1)
- VI. “*And the . . . angel sounded*” (8:7, 8, 10, 12; 9:1, 13; 11:15)
- VII. “*And the . . . angel poured out his bowl upon*” (16:2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17)
- VIII. John employs a phrase four times in such a way that it serves as a marker indicating the major divisions of Revelation.
- IX. John describes himself as “*in the Spirit*” (*en pneumati*) on the Lord’s day on the island of Patmos (1:9-10). This phrase would not initially be noticed except that the identical words are repeated at three strategic points in the book (4:1-2, 17:1-3, 21:9-10). Not only is the phrase strategically repeated, but the following similarities show that it is also used in a stylized way:
- X. With each usage, a change of location occurs, indicating a shift in the action: on Patmos (1:9-10), in heaven (4:1-2), in the wilderness (17:3), and on a great and high mountain (21:10).
- XI. The first two references to John’s being “*in the Spirit*” involve the same voice like the sound of a trumpet (1:10, 4:1). The final two references involve one of the seven angels who had a bowl and carried John away “*in the Spirit*” (17:1, 21:9).
- XII. The similarities are enough to establish a pattern and indicate a marker. Considering the book’s content and the position of this marker shows that “*in the Spirit*” denotes the major divisions of Revelation. In fact, this marker sets off the four primary visions of the book, indicating their respective parameters.
- XIII. Though the phrase “*in the Spirit*” is a structural marker mapping out the visions, it is not only this. “*In the Spirit*” also describes John’s condition as he saw the message he was to show to Jesus’ servants. It was a condition induced and directed by the Spirit of God, enabling him to see and hear the scenes. Against the larger context of Scripture, “*in the Spirit*” implies the inspiration of the message by the Holy Spirit (cf. Eph. 3:5). Revelation is a divinely-directed drama.

XIV. In employing a marker such as “*in the Spirit*,” John used a convention of Jewish-Christian apocalyptic writings, some of which were roughly contemporaneous with Revelation. Christopher R. Smith demonstrates from several first century apocalyptic works that “while the general divisions of material can often be deduced simply from their content, the author also calls attention to the transition between sections through the repetition of a stylized formula.”³ Also, such devices were often more than section markers; they helped to create the sensory aura of the writings. Repeated action phrases such as “An angel said to me ...” or “I was taken up into heaven ...” have the effect of involving the reader and his senses in the scenes.

XV. THE BROADER STRUCTURE OF REVELATION

XVI. A letter framework

XVII. John employed common first century AD epistolary features (1:4, 22:21), supplying a letter framework for the largely apocalyptic middle section (1:9-22:5).

XVIII. The letter framework bracketing an apocalypse indicates that while John prominently employed apocalyptic features, he also tailored the genre for his specific use.

XIX. Four visions

XX. In the middle section of the book, John’s use of “*in the Spirit*,” as noted above, indicates the broad boundaries of the major divisions, and thus indicates the parameters of four visions composing Revelation:

XXI. Vision One (1:9-3:22)

XXII. Vision Two (4:1-16:21)

XXIII. Vision Three (17:1-21:8)

XXIV. Vision Four (21:9-22:5)

XXV. This arrangement takes into consideration the structural markers John supplies, without imposing on the material. More work must be done on the inner structure of each vision, though the “*in the Spirit*” marker employed throughout at strategic points confirms the unity of the whole book.

XXVI. THE FIRST VISION

XXVII. The structural marker “*in the Spirit*” inaugurates 1:9-3:22 as the first vision of Revelation. This vision is composed of the initial view of Jesus (1:12-20) interlaced with instructions to John (1:9-11, 19). The opening portrait of Jesus is followed by His speaking to seven churches respectively (chs. 2 and 3), one of the longest uninterrupted speeches of Jesus in the New Testament. As noted above (II, A, 1) the seven letters all begin and end the same way, though each is individualized.

XXVIII. As the vision unfolds, segments of the opening view of the Lord among the lampstands are incorporated into the first five, or perhaps six, opening statements to the churches:

XXIX. 2:1 = 1:12b-13a, 16a

XXX. 2:8 = 1:18a

XXXI. 2:12 = 1:16a

³Christopher R. Smith, “The Structure of the Book of Revelation in Light of Apocalyptic Literary Conventions,” *Novum Testamentum* XXXVI, 4 (1994): 381.

XXXII. 2:18 = 1:14b-15a

XXXIII. 3:1 = 1:16a

XXXIV. 3:7 = 1:18b (?)

XXXV. The final opening statement (3:14) contains a unique and supplementary description of Jesus. Variation is the Lord's prerogative. Integrating the initial view of Christ into the message to each church brings to bear the impact of the Lord among them. Each church is confronted with the dazzling Lord. The fact that He selected characteristics of Himself to present to each church may indicate that the church needed to see these features more clearly.

XXXVI. THE SECOND VISION (4:1-16:21)

XXXVII. This long and complex vision stands at the center of Revelation. The vision is composed of several scenes employing considerable variety, yet continuity is achieved by the use of various devices that not only delimit the scenes but also relate them to each other.

XXXVIII. The sub-structure of Vision Two is marked by three series of sevens, each of which is arranged in panels indicated by the repeated phrases noted above (II, A, 2).

XXXIX. Opening of seven seals (6:1-8:5)

XL. Blowing of seven trumpets (8:6-11:19)

XLI. Pouring out of seven bowls of wrath (16:1-21)

XLII. These series of sevens are surrounded by and in some cases interwoven with other scenes that introduce or expand the enumerated actions of breaking seals, sounding trumpets, and pouring bowls.

XLIII. The breaking of seven seals

XLIV. John, who was "*in the Spirit*," was called to "*come up here*" where he beheld a throne standing in heaven with flashes of lightening and sounds of thunder (4:1-5a). Chs. 4 and 5 introduce the breaking of the seven seals by depicting the throne, its occupant, and activities surrounding it.

XLV. Apparently John viewed the entire vision from the vantage point of the throne standing in heaven (4:2). There is no indication of a change of location until he is carried away "*in the Spirit into a wilderness*" (17:3).

XLVI. The breaking of each seal includes what John both heard and saw. The first four seals follow a similar pattern of an exhortation by a "*living creature*" to "*Come*," followed by a horse and rider going forth.

XLVII. The fifth, sixth, and seventh seals mention only what John saw. These seals are grouped with the first four by enumeration, but do not mention a living creature. A four-three scheme is thus established, a scheme also employed in blowing the trumpets.

XLVIII. The sixth seal (6:12-17) is expanded (7:1-17) followed by the seventh seal (8:1). The series is held together by enumeration, but the expansion of the penultimate (next to last) seal must be considered.

XLIX. Interwoven scenes or a vision within a vision

- L. The opening of the sixth seal is expanded by the scenes of 7:1-17. The device is called ‘intercalation’: inserting a section between sections that belong together.⁴ Intercalation is used in both the seals and trumpets series.
- LI. The series are indicated by enumeration. We are told to look for “seven” at the beginning of each series (5:1; 6:1; 8:2; 15:1, 6; 16:1). Within the seals series is a scene or scenes interwoven between seals six and seven:
- LII. Seal six 6:12-16
- LIII. Intercalated scene(s) ch. 7
- LIV. Seal seven 8:1
- LV. The same arrangement is found between the sixth and seventh trumpets:
- LVI. Trumpet six 9:13-21
- LVII. Intercalated scene(s) 10:1-11:14
- LVIII. Trumpet seven 11:15-18
- LIX. The effect of this interlacing arrangement is to guide the reader to view the series of broken seals as a whole, while providing the means to present simultaneous action occurring on another front. On one hand, the unity of the series is preserved by the literary devices of enumeration and repeated phrases. On the other hand, the sensory quality of the vision is achieved as movement is indicated and the reader is guided from scene to scene. This is an example of how the literary quality of Revelation serves its sensory quality: readers are not only shown the sights and sounds but are also led through the scenes.
- LX. This is also an example of how one’s understanding about structure impacts the interpretation of the scenes. If the intercalated scenes depict action simultaneous with the breaking of the seals, then the scenes run contemporaneously instead of chronologically. This effect may be confirmed by the fact that the question at the end of seal six, “*Who is able to stand?*” is answered by references to four angels “*standing*” at the four corners of the earth (7:1) and a great multitude “*standing*” before the throne (7:9).
- LXI. The blowing of seven trumpets
- LXII. The first four trumpets follow a similar pattern (8:7-12): an angel sounded a trumpet the effect of which was to destroy “a third” of something.
- LXIII. Following the fourth trumpet, a flying eagle announced three “Woes” that will accompany the remaining three trumpet blasts (8:13). The passing of the first two “Woes” is noted at the conclusion of each (9:12, 11:14a), while the third “Woe” is only announced at its beginning (11:14b). The effect of these notations is that:
- LXIV. The fifth trumpet = the first woe (9:1-12).
- LXV. The sixth trumpet along with its expansion scenes = the second woe (9:13-11:14).
- LXVI. The seventh trumpet (11:15f) = the third woe (introduced at 11:14b as “*coming quickly*”), though its limits are not clarified, as will be noted momentarily.

⁴Fiorenza, “Composition and Structure,” 360.

- LXVII. Similar to the arrangement of the seals series, scenes are interwoven between the sixth and seventh trumpet blasts (10:1-11:14). Note that the intercalated section includes reference to what will occur in “*the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound*” (10:7). This reference links the interwoven scenes to the trumpet series, as does the references to the “Woes” that bracket the section (9:12, 11:14). The Spirit carefully arranged the vision; the various devices employed guide the reader around the panorama so he might see the whole vision while also recognizing its specific scenes.
- LXVIII. J. Ramsey Michaels notes that “the material in 10:1-11:13 is placed where it is for a reason. The first six trumpets end on a note of nonrepentance (9:20-21), while the additional material in chapters 10 and 11 ends with the repentance of ‘the great city, which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt’ (11:8). After a ‘great earthquake’ in which ‘a tenth of the city fell’ (7000 in all), ‘the rest became fearful and gave glory to God in heaven’ (11:13). ... Despite all the judgments on the earth and the refusal of its inhabitants to repent, there is a glimmer of hope. God’s two witnesses, though slain in the streets of the city before ‘the inhabitants of the earth’ (11:7-10), are vindicated by being raised from the dead (vv. 11-12), and the city turns to God (v. 13). Nonrepentance is not the final word.”⁵⁵
- LXIX. The limit of the seventh trumpet
- LXX. The seventh trumpet sounded (11:15-18), presumably ending the trumpet series, yet the bowls of wrath do not begin until 16:1 (with its introduction 15:5-8). Between the seventh trumpet and the bowls are the intervening “signs” (12:1-15:4). Where does the seventh trumpet end?
- LXXI. It is possible that a structural marker defines the limits of the seventh trumpet. The sounding of the seventh trumpet was loud voices in heaven (11:15-18). Immediately following, the temple of God in heaven opened accompanied by flashes of lightning, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a hailstorm (11:19).
- LXXII. Lightning and thunder are mentioned at strategic locations in the vision:
- LXXIII. Beginning Vision Two (4:5)
- LXXIV. Transposition between seals and trumpets (8:5)
- LXXV. Transposition between trumpets and signs (11:19) (?)
- LXXVI. End of the bowls of wrath (16:18-21), which is the end of Vision Two
- LXXVII. The cataclysmic sensory activities (lightning, thunder, etc.) serve as transitional devices – beginning (4:5) and ending (16:18-21) Vision Two, and marking developments within the vision (8:5, 11:19).
- LXXVIII. It must also be considered from the standpoint of content that 12:1-15:4 contains repeated references to “*a sign ... in heaven*” (12:1, 3; 15:1) that may mark it as a vision in its own right. At the same time, the prelude of lightning and thunder link it to the whole vision. Finally, a verbal clue occurring at 11:19 and 15:5-6, the reference to the sanctuary in heaven opened where the ark of the covenant was visible, may be a resumption device indicating that 15:5f takes up where 11:19 left off.
- LXXIX. The “signs” segment appears to be a part of the seventh trumpet and a bridge to the seven bowls. The seventh trumpet, then, extends from 11:15 to 15:4, containing what may be a vision within a vision, followed immediately by the bowls of wrath series.

5J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 59-60.

LXXX. The effect of these devices is that the seals open out into the trumpets that in turn open out into the bowls, the three series unfold from and expand each other. Vision Two (4:1-16:21) is composed of distinct scenes and series deliberately integrated for the sensory effect that intensifies the message. The series emerge from one another like boxes within boxes, or like opening windows within windows on a computer screen revealing ever richer detail.⁶

LXXXI. The pouring out of seven bowls of wrath

LXXXII. This series of seven (16:1-17), introduced in 15:5-8, is the most compact and concise of the three. It contains no four-three pattern and no intercalated scenes.

LXXXIII. This terse presentation gives the impression of a definite conclusion – judgment: *“It is done”* (16:17). The judgments of the bowls are the most intense of the three series of sevens. They are without the “one-third” restrictions of the trumpets and humans are at serious risk from the start.

LXXXIV. THE THIRD AND FOURTH VISIONS

LXXXV. Each of the final two visions is introduced by one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls and carried John away in the Spirit (17:1-3 and 21:9-10).

LXXXVI. *“In the Spirit”* delimits Vision Three as 17:1-21:8 and Vision Four as 21:9-22:5. The almost identical beginning of these two visions may indicate they go together as a contrasting pair. Each vision depicts a city personified as a woman. Babylon is a harlot; Jerusalem is a bride.

LXXXVII. That each vision is introduced by *“one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls”* likely indicates that these visions grow out of Vision Two, in effect unifying and integrating Visions Two, Three, and Four, the primarily apocalyptic segment of the book.

LXXXVIII. The third vision – Babylon the Harlot

LXXXIX. The content of the third vision is explicitly defined – *“the judgment of the great harlot”* (17:1-2). The great harlot’s name is BABYLON THE GREAT (17:5); she is *“the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth”* (17:18). The angel carries John (and the reader) through a detailed explanation of the “woman” and the beast on which she rides (17:3-13).

XC. The Lamb overcomes the evil cohorts (17:14-18) and a long lament ensues (18:1-24) followed by a song of triumph (19:1-8). Wicked Babylon dominates the vision until its doom is secure, then John saw *“the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband”* (21:2).

⁶Suggested by Michaels, 57.

- XCI. J. Ramsey Michaels makes an intriguing observation concerning the last half of Vision Three (19:11-21:8). Going back to chs. 12-13, he notes that three evil figures were brought on the scene – the fiery Dragon (ch. 12), the Beast from the sea (13:1-10), and the Beast from the earth (13:11-17). A fourth figure, Babylon the prostitute, was introduced in chapter 17. In the third vision “the four are removed from the scene in reverse order: first Babylon (18:1-19:9); then the two Beasts (now designated as the Beast and the False Prophet) are defeated in battle and thrown into the lake of fire (19:11-12); finally the Dragon ... is removed from the scene in two stages (20:1-10). First he is bound in the ‘abyss’ from which he came (see 11:7, 17:8) for a thousand years (20:1-3); then he is released from there only to be thrown (after a little more mischief) into the lake of fire, ‘where the Beast and the False Prophet are’ (20:7-10).⁷ As the Dragon is bound in the abyss, we see beheaded saints reigning with Christ (20:4-6).
- XCII. What the reader understands about the nature and structure of the scenes has bearing on the interpretation on the thousand-year interval. If this scene constitutes yet another word-picture reiterating a similar message, and the scenes are not intended to be viewed in linear fashion, then an ‘amillennial’ interpretation is valid.
- XCIII. The fourth vision – Jerusalem the Bride
- XCIV. For a fourth time John is “*in the Spirit*” and on this occasion is carried away to a great and high mountain from which he views the holy city, Jerusalem (21:9-10).
- XCv. The content of the fourth vision is explicitly defined – “*the bride, the wife of the Lamb*” (21:9), thus Vision Four contrasts Babylon the Harlot of Vision Three. The final, forceful vision gloriously portrays the holy city, Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God with its outstanding characteristics and effects (21:9-22:5).
- XCVI. THE SIGHTS, SOUNDS, AND STRUCTURE OF REVELATION IN TEACHING AND PREACHING
- XCvII. Respect both the sensory and literary qualities of Revelation. We should be aware of the literary structure, but make sure it serves the sensory qualities of the work in teaching and preaching. We should not overwork the structural apparatus of the book. It is to guide the reader but not draw attention to itself. Revelation is word-pictures to re-envision instead of unravel.
- XCvIII. Emphasize drama over detail
- XCIX. The stirring and often disturbing visions are shaped into a vivid drama. Robert Surridge describes it as “a cosmic stage play with distinct acts.”⁸ The arrangement of the scenes and visions is not linear but symphonic – a theme is stated and developed along several lines, without straying far from the initial theme. There is some development of thought (from breaking seals to pouring out of bowls, for example), some reiteration, and a rising level of intensity, but essentially the same chord is sounded several times.
- C. We best serve our students and listeners by guiding them to hear the sounds and see the sights of Revelation in their divinely-supplied arrangement, instead of deciphering the book as a program of history either past or future. Details such as colors or horns or measurements are included, but their significance is to be found in contributing to the whole scene and not in drawing attention to themselves.

⁷Michaels, 66-67.

⁸Robert Surridge, “Redemption in the Structure of Revelation,” *The Expository Times*, 101 (May 1990): 233.

- CI. L. A. Mott suggests this analogy: “It is like a great painting that covers a whole wall. You have to stand at the opposite wall to see it all. Then you walk up to it and get a closer look at details. Then you take out a magnifying glass and study certain aspects even closer. So with Revelation. We are first shown the whole big picture – at least the main outlines. Then we are given a closer look at details. Later some details will be magnified even more. Here and there visions are inserted to provide information needed for understanding the struggle the church faces.”⁹
- CII. If I may suggest a slight modification of Mott’s suggestion, Revelation is an audio-video panorama instead of a painting. The animated panorama stretches far, vividly portraying various scenes of the Great Conflict between God and Satan, the church and the world. A view closer up depicts the people of God pressed and persecuted, yet graciously, powerfully protected by God. Another close-up look shows the devastation of God’s enemy who falls under His wrath. Stepping back to take in the larger view, it becomes clear that though the opposition is fierce Jesus decisively wins the war.
- CIII. Teach and preach Revelation in blocks of material, not verse by verse
- CIV. Detecting and viewing an entire vision are important if the book has its intended effect. The limits of the sections are defined by structural markers. These markers define blocks of material conveying visions, each of which should be re-envisioned as a whole as much as possible. In examining and studying the individual sections of the book, first view the larger vision in which a panel is located.
- CV. I suggest preaching sermons from Revelation so that each deals with a vision or a major segment of a vision. The divinely-supplied literary structure guides us to integrate the panels into a coherent whole, with its meaning and message conveyed in word-pictures.
- CVI. Without overworking the literary features of the book, but allowing them to guide us through the visions, we should present material in a way that the sights and sounds of Revelation have their full impact.

⁹L. A. Mott, “The Content and Structure of Revelation (II),” *Christianity Magazine*, 1:4 (April, 1984): 24.

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Body:

I.

Conclusion:

I.

Kevin Kay
Source:
SER