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“Read, Hear/Heed” (Rev. 1:3): Obeying an Exegetical Clue to Understand the Overall Practical Messages of the Apocalypse¹

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Back in the 1990s, Charles Talbert began his slender, but thought-provoking, commentary on Revelation by lamenting three specific difficulties with the book: “(1) the apparent inaccessibility of its meaning; (2) the seeming impossibility of its pastoral application; and (3) its demonstrated susceptibility to abuse.”² I largely concur with Talbert’s “diagnosis” (though I disagree with the “treatment” he undertakes in his commentary to attempt to remedy these stated problems).

Talbert’s observations have stayed with me. One area has been especially disturbing: “the seeming impossibility of its pastoral application.” The reason is that, after many years of studying the Apocalypse in depth, I am embarrassed to admit that it’s only been recently that I have come to the point of having confidence that I have grasped the practical message of the Book.

That is what this paper is about: how I came to the understanding of, to use Talbert’s words, “the pastoral application” of the Book of Revelation, and what that message—or, more accurately, *messages*—are. First, the meaning of Revelation 1:3 will be explored as an up-front clue to the book’s practical intent. Second, I will explain where my renewed brainstorming on the “heeding” front initially took me in regard to a “big picture” sense of Revelation. Third, I will demonstrate how a grand chiasmic structuring of the Apocalypse actually has major practical implications. Fourth, I will lay out a “spread chiasm” of the seven beatitudes in Revelation, which provides complementary insight in understanding and obeying the Book’s practical message. Finally, I will briefly summarize my findings and offer a plea for interpreters to allow the Apocalypse to speak on its own practical terms.

Introduction: An Exegetical Understanding of Revelation 1:3

A common (mis)understanding of 1:3 is that whoever reads the book of Revelation is blessed. Of course, that is not even what the verse says and it definitely is not what it means.

What does it say? A fairly literal interpretive translation of Revelation 1:3 might be, “Blessed is the one reading and those hearing the words of the prophecy, that is, those keeping³ that which stands written in it, for the time is near.” Conceptually, this verse is very similar to Jesus’ words in Luke 11:28: “Those who hear the word of God and keep it are blessed” (HCSB).

¹ This article was originally presented as a paper to the Southwest Region meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, which was held at Dallas Theological Seminary, March, 2011.

² C.H. Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 2.

³ G.K. Beale (*The Book of Revelation* NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 184) thinks “hearing” and “keeping” are “a hendiadys emphasizing obedience.” G.R. Osborne (*Revelation* BECNT [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002], 58, states, “These two concepts, hearing and keeping, are combined frequently in both OT and NT. In fact, the Hebrew verb for ‘hear’ also means to ‘obey’; the two concepts are inseparable biblically.”

What did Revelation 1:3 mean in its original setting? There was one reader (i.e., “the one who reads”), vocalizing the contents of the Book of Revelation to the congregation of each of the seven churches (i.e., “those who hear”). However, any legitimate understanding of the blessing in Revelation 1:3 is incomplete without taking into account “those who keep.” That verb (Gk *tereo*) means to “keep, observe, obey.”

It is precisely this point—the practical intention (“keeping”) attached to the “hearing” of the Apocalypse—which must be emphasized if understanding of the book is to be brought into a proper balance. As Michaels forcefully states:

The beatitude here is the author’s way of saying, “Make sure you have this prophecy read in your worship assemblies! Make sure you listen and pay attention to your reader! And above all, make sure you act upon what you have heard!”⁴

Mounce is similarly on target: “That the congregation was to ‘take to heart’ the things written in the prophecy indicates that the work was to be considered moral instruction, not simply prediction.”⁵

Further underscoring that same point, in reading the Book of Revelation whole, one is soon struck by the fact that 1:3 has a “twin” verse in 22:7: “Look, I am coming quickly! The one who keeps the prophetic words of this book is blessed” (HCSB). In addition to the general observation that 22:7 is nearly identical conceptually to 1:3, this parallel is significant for three reasons: 1) The fact that “keeps” (Gk. *tereo*) is the only one of the three participles in 1:3 repeated in 22:7 clarifies the idea that heeding/taking to heart/acting upon the message of Revelation is its authorial intention not just at the book’s beginning, but from beginning to end; 2) The content of 1:3 and 22:7 mirror each other (a [1:3a] Blessedness in keeping the message; b [1:3b] The time is near; b’ [22:7a] Christ is coming quickly; a’ [22:7b] Blessedness in keeping the message,⁶ emphasizing the urgency of obeying the message of the book; 3) The latter “twin” verse is located immediately after the conclusion of the body of the book, making 1:3 and 22:7 an *inclusio* (i.e., a bookends literary effect) emphasizing obedience in regard to the entirety of the Apocalypse.

In making these observations, though, an inconsistency emerges: While there are many helpful in-depth exegetical, and some theological, studies out there on the Book of Revelation, there are few significant practical ones. The works that do more than give lip service, or sporadic reality, to the need for a practical understanding of the Apocalypse are rare.⁷

Reading, Hearing and Heeding the Practical Threads of the “Big Picture” of the Apocalypse

⁴ J.R. Michaels, *Revelation* IVP NT Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 51.

⁵ R.H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 43.

⁶ The type of inverted parallelism that is not consecutive in a passage is known as “spread chiasm,” a fairly common literary phenomenon which will be dealt with in more detail later in this article.

⁷ The implied promise of practical insight in the title Donald Guthrie’s volume, *The Relevance of the Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), was not delivered in any meaningful sense. In fairness to Guthrie, though, the book was a published lecture series, not his typical comprehensive treatment. Of full-length treatments, I am only aware of Craig Keener’s *Revelation* in the NIV Application Commentary series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) doing more than inconsistently offering very sketchy general applications.

Not long ago, a couple of ideas related to discerning the practical message of Revelation crystallized in my thinking. First, and more generally, the “hearing/heeding” requirement of Revelation 1:3 infers that anyone in pursuit of the blessing must seek out the applicational parts of the book and pay close attention to what is there. Second, it seemed likely that the remaining nine uses of *tereo* in Revelation (i.e., 2:26; 3:3, 8, 10; 12:17; 14:12; 16:15; 22:7, 9), in conjunction with 1:3, would provide additional helpful practical insight.

In regard to the first spotlighted area, the most obvious things occurring to someone reading through the Apocalypse over and over in search of the promised blessing of 1:3 is that each of the seven letters ends on a practical note with the promises to the “overcomers”/“victors” (2:7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21). Relatedly, you soon notice two things: 1) there will be “overcomers” during the period just prior to Christ’s coming, who will be victorious “by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony, for they will not love their lives in the face of death” (12:11, HCSB); and 2) the ultimate fulfillment of each of the promises to the overcomers in chapters 2-3 occurs in either the “1,000 years” (20:4-6) or the “new heaven and new earth” (see 21:1-22:5).

Those two observations alone take you a long ways in the direction of establishing that, at least from a practical standpoint, Revelation should be approached from at preterist/idealist/futurist perspective. Why? 1) The admonition in each of the letters was directed to the seven first century congregations (i.e., the *preterist* aspect); 2) The emphasis in the letters that the Spirit is speaking to all the churches of all those reading the book—and expects them all to hear and obey—definitely fits with 2 Timothy 3:16’s emphasis that “all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for... rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness...” (HCSB). That the practical principles of the inspired Book of Revelation are “timeless truth” means that the *idealist* understanding has applicational validity; and 3) The fact that the fulfillment of the promises related to the practical obedience of those reading/hearing/heeding the Apocalypse is in the end times and the eternal state requires a *futurist* understanding.

In addition, two other practical factors in the early chapters of Revelation call attention to themselves in reading the book as a whole. They are: 1) John’s practical partnership (Gk *sunkeinonos*) in “the tribulation, kingdom, and endurance that are in Jesus” (1:9, HCSB) with the Christians in the churches in Asia, implying his audience is, at least to some degree, experiencing the same realities; and 2) The unusual attention focused on the false prophetess, Jezebel⁸ (2:20-25), particularly the strikingly pointed practical statement: “Then all the churches will know that I am the One who examines minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you according to your works” (2:23, HCSB).

Considering the second of these first, the description of Jezebel strongly parallels the woman Babylon the Great (17:1-6), inferring that Jezebel was some kind of first century predecessor to, or form of, Babylon.⁹ In addition, in the midst of the description of the just destruction of Babylon the Great, the reader encounters seemingly awkwardly-placed words, apparently meant for the original audience: “Come out of her, My people, so that you will not share in her sins or receive any of her plagues” (Rev. 18:4, HCSB). Particularly intriguing here

⁸ Due to lack of any real evidence one way or the other, it’s impossible to know whether “Jezebel” in Rev. 2 is a given name or a nickname, harking back to the evil queen of the northern kingdom of Israel (though the latter understanding definitely fits the parallelism with Babylon the Great in the latter part of the Apocalypse).

⁹ Emily Hunter McGowin and I teased out these parallels in considerable depth in our unpublished 2004 ETS paper, “Getting in Touch with the Feminine Side of the Apocalypse.”

is that “share” renders the Greek *sunkoinoneo*, the verbal side of the same idea of partnership seen in 1:9—which are the only uses of this cognate noun and verb in Revelation. It’s as if the pointed question is being asked “With whom are you *really* partners?”

Going back to 1:9, the Greek *thlipsis* (“tribulation, affliction, suffering”) is used four additional times in the Apocalypse (2:9, 10, 22; 7:14). Two of those uses (2:9, 10) relate to affliction being presently experienced by a part of John’s audience.¹⁰ Another (2:22) is a threat of great suffering for the followers of Jezebel, the false prophetess, unless they repented. The final use (7:14) refers to the time of unprecedented affliction at the end of the age.

The other relevant uses of “kingdom” (Gk *basileia*) in the Apocalypse are found in 1:6, 5:10 and 20:4, 6. The first two state believers are already a “kingdom.” Then, 5:10 predicts that believers “will reign (Gk *basileuo*) on the earth” (HCSB), which is fulfilled in 20:4-6.

The Greek *hupomone* (“endurance, perseverance, steadfastness”) is found six times (2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12) in Revelation beyond the use in 1:9. The first four uses describe the perseverance of the churches in John’s day. The final two uses (13:10; 14:12) initially seem quite odd. At first glance, both seem to stick out like sore thumbs in their contexts. These two passages will be discussed in more depth throughout the paper.

This is the point to bring back into play the other nine uses of *tereo* in the Apocalypse. They speak of the obedience present, or needed, in the seven churches of John’s time (2:26; 3:3, 8, 10), as well as by those pursued by the Dragon (i.e., the Devil) at the end of the age (12:17). However, *tereo* is also found in, or in close proximity to, three of the other “blessings” of the book (14:12; 16:15; 22:7). There again we note 14:12, which was just highlighted above, because of the presence of *hupomone*.

In summary, “tribulation” describes the (at least occasional) earthly circumstances and “kingdom” the heavenly reality for those who are John’s brethren and partners (1:9). If that is correct, “endurance” is the means by which they are able to obey the Lord in the midst of difficult, painful circumstances (i.e., tribulation) and faithfully live a kingdom lifestyle.

The factors discussed above fit quite neatly within a conventional outlining of the Book of Revelation, as previewed in 1:19: “Write what you have seen, what is, and what will take place after this” (HCSB). “What you have seen” is the vision of the Son of Man in chapter 1. “What is” describes the letters to the churches in chapters 2-3. “What will take place after this” refers to the remainder of the book in overview (i.e., chapters 4-22).¹¹

A resulting broad skeletal outline highlights the following elements:

I. “What you have seen” (Rev. 1)

The blessing for obedience to the message of the book in 1:3 and the three-aspect practical partnership John lays out in 1:9 set the stage for the development of the book’s practical thrust, whether in the lives of the first century churches (chs. 2-3) or against the mirror of the end times events (chs. 4-22).

¹⁰ It is surprising to many to learn that the vast bulk of the 45 uses of *thlipsis* in the NT speak of affliction in the Christian life, while only a handful refer to the period of unparalleled tribulation at the end of the age.

¹¹ I developed this outline in much more depth, but with slight variations, in the introductions to the Book of Revelation in my segments in both the *Nelson Study Bible* (gen. ed. Earl D. Radmacher [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997]) and the *Holman Christian Standard Bible Study Bible* (gen. eds. Edwin Blum and Jeremy Howard [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010]).

II. “What is” (Rev. 2-3)

The seven churches are either already obeying/persevering, or are commanded by the glorified Christ to do so. This is being worked out in the midst of sometimes very intense, but spotty and short-term, suffering (i.e., “tribulation”). Their perseverance is complicated by the fact that, like Paul’s words in Acts 20:29-30, there are not only external dangers, but internal ones—in this case, the inroads of the Nicolaitan heresy and, apparently even more so, the false teaching and seductive lifestyle of “Jezebel.”

III. “What will take place after this” (Rev. 4-22)

Before God’s people will reign with Christ (20:4-6), examples of great suffering and martyrdom of the “saints” in the end times are seen. But, standing out against the stark depiction of those future events are strategically-placed practical exhortation for those who read and would hear/heed the message of Revelation long before the *eschaton*. These emphasize: 1) the necessity of the endurance/perseverance of “the saints” (13:10; 14:12); and 2) the removal from entanglement with whatever the worldly entity Babylon the Great is (18:4). Both of these practical points have already been made in chs. 2-3. However, “hearing” how critical they will be in the end times underscores their practical urgency for the present tense audience.

The above discussion provides very helpful practical insight and this would be a comfortable “stopping place.” However, it is worth asking, “Is there a way to textually validate this understanding of the practical message(s) of Revelation?”

Reading, Hearing and Heeding the Grand Mirroring Picture of the Apocalypse

Often overlooked is the fact that the Book of Revelation contains undeniable extensive book-wide parallelism. As “big picture” reading/ hearing of the Apocalypse continues, numerous mirror images between its earlier and the latter parts come into focus: 1) 1:3 and 22:7 and their clearly chiasmic (abb’a’) structure (see the discussion above); 2) the promises to overcomers in chs. 2-3 and the eternal fulfillment of those promises in ch. 21; 3) the promise of believers’ ruling in ch. 5 and its fulfillment in 20:4-6; 4) the white horses (only) in ch. 6 and in ch. 19; 5) the “innumerable multitude” (only) in chs. 7 and 19; 6) the “woes” of chs. 8 and 18; 7) “the great city” of chs. 11 and 17; 8) the women in the wilderness (only) in 12:1-6 and 17:1-6; 9) the wrath of the Devil vs. wrath of the Lord in chs. 12 and 16; and 10) the admonitions to endurance/ perseverance in the midst of chs. 13 and 14 (i.e., 13:10 and 14:12; see above).

The following inverted parallel (i.e., chiasmic) outline¹² pulls these phenomena together, as well as some additional relevant detail:

A (ch. 1) Introduction, including the first beatitude (1:3)

B (chs. 2-3) God’s people in the seven churches in Asia Minor, including introducing Jezebel (2:20-23), the contemporary parallel to Babylon the Great

¹² This structure is adapted from the proposal of my former student, Michelle Lee, in “A Call to Martyrdom: Function as Method and Message in Revelation,” *Novum Testamentum* 40 (1998). I have also previously worked with the same general structuring of the Apocalypse in the chapter, “John’s Epistles and Revelation as Inspired Preaching,” in my book with Richard Wells, *Inspired Preaching: A Survey of Preaching in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002).

C (chs. 4-5) The heavenly throne room, where it is first said that those whom the Lamb died for from all the nations will eventually reign on the earth

D (ch. 6) The first six seals (parallel to the “beginning of birth pains” in Matt. 24:4-14) are removed from the scroll and “the earth-dwellers” are identified as those who killed the martyrs under the altar in heaven (6:9-11)

E (ch. 7) The Jewish 144,000 are sealed on earth as God’s servants and the “innumerable multitude” from every nation is taken to heaven to serve the Lord there

F (chs. 8-9) The latter trumpet judgments are specifically said to be focused “woes” upon the “earth-dwellers” (8:13)

G (chs. 10-11) John is set apart to prophecy that the beast will kill the two witnesses in Jerusalem, “the great city,” and the “earth-dwellers” will celebrate as a result, though the witnesses resurrection/ascension will trigger a great revival of both Jews and Gentiles (11:13)

H (12:1-6) The birth of Christ from a godly Jewish woman and His protection through the ascension long ago are the model for a corporate righteous Jewish “woman” made up of newly spiritually “birthed” Jewish believers (see 11:13) fleeing to the wilderness, protected by God

I (12:7-17) As the expulsion of the Devil from heaven is explained, the “heaven-dwellers” are introduced by name (12:12) and it’s said Satan’s wrath will be focused on the earth from that point forward

J (ch. 13) Mid-point “Peak” I: Worshiping the beast (because you are an “earth-dweller” [13:8]) and persecuting/killing the “saints” because the “heaven-dwellers” are out of reach (i.e., in heaven), *with the striking present-tense exhortation in 13:9-10 (see the further explanation below)*

J’ (chs. 14-15) Mid-point “Peak” II: Fearing (trusting)/glorifying the Lamb (or suffering the eternal consequences of not being a “heaven-dweller”), *with the “twin” (to 13:9-10) exhortation in 14:12-13 (see the further explanation below)*

I’ (ch. 16) God’s wrath is focused on “the earth-dwellers”/beast-worshippers (16:2, 6, 7, 9, 11) and Babylon the Great (16:17-21)

H’ (17:1-6) The evil corporate image of the woman, Babylon the Great, is stated to be responsible for the martyrdom of many believers throughout history

G’ (17:7-18) “The great city” is revealed to be Babylon the Great (17:18), whom the beast will betray, before being defeated by Christ and the “heaven-dwellers” (i.e., the elect) with Him

F’ (ch. 18) The final extended “woes” that began with the trumpet judgments are completed in regard to Babylon the Great, who receives the punishment earlier predicted to come upon the “earth-dwellers” (3:10; 8:13) for martyring God’s people (18:20, 24; see 6:10)

E’ (19:1-10) The “innumerable multitude” is portrayed as both heavenly choir and Christ’s bride

D’ (19:11-21) Christ and His armies of “heaven-dwellers” climactically defeat the gathered armies of “earth-dwellers”

C’ (20:1-10) God’s people reigning with Christ for 1,000 years

B’ (20:11-22:5) God’s people—pictured initially as a bride—as “new-heaven-and-earth-dwellers,” so to speak, after all “earth-dwellers” have been sent to eternal torment

A’ (22:6-21) Conclusion, including the last two beatitudes of the book (22:7 and 22:14)

In addition, a closer look at the conceptual interplay between Revelation 13:9-10 and 14:12-13 (i.e., the “twin peaks” seen at J, J’ in the grand chiasm above) reveals the following mirroring of thought patterns:

- a (13:9) “If anyone has an ear, he should listen” (Gk *akouo*; see 1:3, as well as the refrain at the end of each of the seven letters to the churches [2:7, 11, etc.]
- b (13:10a) Suffering and death allowed in God’s plan
- c (13:10b) Endurance and faith required of “the saints” (see Dan. 7, but also the beginning of many of Paul’s letters, making this wording equally applicable to believers today as in the “end times”)
- c’ (14:12) Endurance is required of “the saints,” that is, “those who keep (Gk *tereo*) God’s commands and their faith in Jesus” (which, again, is as relevant today as the end of the age)
- b’ (14:13a) The blessedness of dying in the Lord (i.e., martyrdom)¹³
- a’ (14:13b) “the Spirit” (significantly, the only mention—besides being “in/carried away by” the Spirit in 4:2, 17:3 and 21:10—of the Holy Spirit in the body of the Apocalypse [4:1-22:5]), echoing the remainder of the sentence repeated at the end of the seven letters (“what the Spirit says to the churches” [2:7, 11, etc.]¹⁴)

Before analyzing the relevant meaning of what I have just laid out, it’s worth asking (again), “Is the thought that a prophetic/apocalyptic work like Revelation could reflect such an elaborate chiasmic structuring as seen above still too far-fetched to handle?” It should be less so, if you look carefully at how the entire Aramaic portion of Daniel (chs. 2-7) is structured:

- A (ch. 2) Nebuchadnezzar’s “metallic” vision of four Gentile kingdoms, with an emphasis on what leads to the final kingdom of God
- B (ch. 3) A test of faith (I; see Heb. 11:34): Daniel’s three friends in the fiery furnace
- C (ch. 4) The humbling of Nebuchadnezzar after his arrogant profession of “Babylon the Great”
- C’ (ch. 5) The humiliation of Belshazzar and the fall of Babylon (the first empire of Dan. 2, 7)
- B’ (ch. 6) A test of faith (II; see Heb. 11:33): Daniel in the lion’s den
- A’ (ch. 7) Daniel’s “beastly” vision of four Gentile kingdom, with an emphasis on the latter aspect of the fourth kingdom and the Ancient of Days, the Son of Man and the suffering, then “happy ending,” rule of the saints¹⁵

What the focal centerpoint of the above grand chiasm of Revelation is communicating¹⁶ is two-fold (or two-layered): 1) for non-Christian hearers—at whatever point in time—with the

¹³ I have discussed the biblical data on martyrdom in the Apocalypse elsewhere in “Martyrdom,” *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, gen. eds. R.P. Martin and P.H. Davids (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997), ; and “Martyr,” *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, forthcoming.

¹⁴ As far back as the research for my 1995 ETS Far West regional paper, “Twin Peaks: The Inverted Parallel Structure of Revelation 13-15,” in 1995, I observed that Rev. 13:9-10 and 14:12-13 played some kind of central role in a proper grasp of the Apocalypse. However, at that time, I could not determine what that role was. In spite of periodic reflection over the years, I was not able to do so until recently.

¹⁵ I have worked with this structuring of Dan. 2-7 since the early 1990s. I did not, however, encounter research that agreed with this perspective until D.A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 260. See also A. Lenglet, “La Structure Littéraire de Daniel 2-7,” *Biblica* 53 (1972) 169-90, likely the earliest published discussion of this particular literary structure. In the context of the present paper, though, this chiasm eerily previews what will be seen to be the general focus of the spread chiasm of the beatitudes in Rev.: the destruction of arrogant Babylon the Great. In Dan. 4, Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself and repented, and was spared. In Dan. 5, Belshazzar did not, and was destroyed. That is essentially the choice of the hearer of the Apocalypse: *come out of “Babylon” or be part of her judgment* (18:4)!

threat of persecution/martyrdom, there is a stark choice between Satanically-inspired idolatry (ch. 13) and believing the gospel (the only use of *euangelion* in Rev. is in 14:6) in ch. 14), and there are dramatic eternal consequences with both choices (chs. 14, 15); and 2) for Christian hearers/heeders, the wording at the “twin peaks” (13:9-10 and 14:12-13) echoes the practical endings of the letters in chs. 2-3: “If anyone has an ear, he should listen” (13:9) and the rare mention of the Holy Spirit in 14:13. The “perseverance (Gk *hupomone*) of the saints” calls to mind their early-stated partnership with John (1:9). Finally, 14:13 contains a strategically-placed usage of *tereo* (“keeping, obeying”), harking back to where we started our search: Revelation 1:3.

In regard to the first of these “twin peaks” (13:9-10), Osborne’s conclusion is much the same as mine, although arrived at from a different exegetical basis:

By repeating the command to heed from the seven letters, the vision addresses not just the saints of the final period of history but also believers of John’s day. My position... is that these futuristic passages must be understood at all three levels: the saints of the “tribulation period” (the futurist approach), the Christians of John’s day (the preterist approach), and believers in our own day (the idealist approach). This is made explicit here with the repetition of the warning to the seven churches. God is here giving instructions regarding the conduct of his people in the face of massive persecution. He demands that we “open our ears” to hear and obey the instructions.¹⁷

To this point, we have found a way (i.e., through the spotlighted portion of the grand chiasm in 13:9-10 and 14:12-13) to validate the “obedience” and “endurance” aspects of the practical message of the Apocalypse seen in our initial consideration of the conventional outlining of the book. But, what about the proposed Jezebel-Babylon the Great connection mentioned earlier (see 18:4)? Does it recede in practical importance for lack of further validating evidence?

Reading, Hearing and Heeding the Blessings (and Woes) of the Apocalypse

Doubling back to where we started—Revelation 1:3—another question has waited patiently to be asked for a very long time, perhaps throughout the history of the interpretation of the book: “What is the reader seeking the practical message of the Apocalypse to make of the seven beatitudes spread seemingly randomly throughout its entire length?”¹⁸

As dramatic as the idea may seem to some that Revelation could even have two intended literary structure, is it out of the question to propose a third book-encompassing structure in the Apocalypse? I certainly hope not, because that’s precisely what I am about to do as the answer

¹⁶ I am in the process writing a sort of expositional guide on Revelation in which I will treat in some depth the meaning and exegetical/practical implications of the entire grand chiasmic structure.

¹⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 504.

¹⁸ Beyond the possible significance of the fact that there are seven (i.e., the number of completeness or perfection) blessings and various comparisons to the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, essentially no publication that I have been able to find has focused on their collective meaning and significance within the wider Book of Revelation. Thus, if nothing else, it is my hope that this article will spur further reflection in this area and, ideally, at least some written fruit.

to our ongoing search regarding the validity of the practical message concerning entanglement with Babylon the Great.

However, that answer is found in an inverted parallel structure of a different kind: a “spread chiasm,” but one far more comprehensive than the mirroring *inclusio* between Revelation 1:3 and 22:7 seen above and below:

- A (1:3) *a*- Blessed for reading, hearing, heeding; *b*- the time is near
- B (14:13) Blessed are the dead in Christ
- C (16:15) *Blessed is the one who stays awake and clothed* (see Matt. 24:43-44)
- C' (19:9) *Blessed are those invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb* (see Matt 22:1-14)
- B' (20:6) Blessed and holy are those in the first resurrection
- A' (22:7) *b'*- I am coming quickly; *a'* Blessed are those who heed
- D (22:14) Blessed are those who wash their robes (i.e., in the Lamb's blood)

Beyond 1:3 and 22:7, the presence of the literary phenomenon of a spread chiasm in Revelation is not unique in existing studies. For example, Bauckham detected the following chiasmic pattern at the beginning and toward the end of the book:¹⁹

- A (1:8) end of prologue God Alpha and Omega
(connection with *parousia* [1:7])
- B (1:17) beginning of vision Christ first and last
(connection with new life [1:18])
- B' (21:6) end of vision God Alpha and Omega/beginning and end
(connection with new life [21:5-6])
- A' (22:13) beginning of epilogue Christ Alpha and Omega/first and last/beginning and end
(connection with *parousia* [22:12])

Nor is the ACCC'B'A'D structuring of the seven beatitudes proposed above biblically unprecedented, either. The Book of Ruth is structured this way, as I concluded in researching my commentary, *God behind the Seen: Expositions of the Books of Ruth and Esther*, for Baker's “Expositor's Guide to the Historical Books” series:²⁰

- (A) Scene 1 (1:1-5) Emptied of hope for the family's future through death
- (B) Scene 2 (1:6-22) First steps toward hope through faith/commitment and honesty
- (C) Scene 3 (Ch. 2) Immediate provision and protection through a gracious *goel*
- (C') Scene 4 (Ch. 3) Ongoing provision and protection “proposed” to a willing *goel*
- (B') Scene 5 (4:1-12) Final steps toward a hopeful future through shrewdness and commitment
- (A') Scene 6 (4:13-17) Refilled with joy at the family's future, through birth
- (D) Epilogue (4:18-22) A family's past, present and royal (i.e., Davidic) future²¹

¹⁹ R. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 54-58.

²⁰ This edition is out of print. The second edition is A.B. Luter and B.C. Davis, *Ruth and Esther: God behind the Seen* Focus on the Bible (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003).

²¹ Luter and Davis, *Ruth and Esther*, 21. This diagram was adapted with slight modifications from A. B. Luter and R.O. Rigsby, “An Alternative Symmetrical Structuring of Ruth,” *JETS* 39/1 (1996) 15-31. The article was actually

This structuring in Ruth serves a very important wider purpose: a focus on the passing on of the Messianic line forward in a striking way, when it almost died off in Moab (see Ruth 1:1-5). Notice how significant the material covered at the book's midpoint (i.e., C, C') is in regard to the wide-angle purpose of the book (i.e., as David's "bloodline" claim to the throne of Israel [D]). If Ruth had not "chanced" (i.e., the tongue-in-cheek literal Hebrew wording of Ruth 2:3) into Boaz's field in chapter 2 (C), or had Boaz not listened to Ruth and pursued the possibility of being her *goel* (C'), David (D) could have been born in nearby Bethlehem—nor Jesus, many centuries later, for that matter!

Is the structuring of the seven beatitudes in the Apocalypse similarly purposeful? That does appear to be the case. As seen above, the third and fourth blessings (C, C') echo passages from Matthew dealing with being prepared for Christ's coming. However, it is the material bracketed between the third and fourth beatitudes (i.e., from the end of Rev. 16 to the early part of ch. 19) that is of particular importance here: the climactic seventh bowl of wrath poured out on Babylon the Great (16:17-21); the exposure of the great harlot who kills the martyrs (17:1-6) and is betrayed by the beast and his allies (17:7-18); the lamented "great city" over which the climatic "woes" of the book are pronounced (ch. 18); and the innumerable multitude in heaven singing the "hallelujah chorus" because the blood of the martyrs has been avenged on the Babylon (19:1-5).

Simply put, in stark contrast to the *blessings* available to those who obey and endure, the fierce judgment and "woes" in this bracketed section effectively represent God's *curse* on Babylon the Great. Further, at almost the exact midpoint of this section²² about the judgment of Babylon the Great, the reader encounters 18:4: "Come out of her, My people, so that you will not share in (Gk *sunkoinoneo*; contrast 1:9) her sins or receive any of her plagues" (HCSB).

Is this coincidence? Certainly no more than finding 13:9-10 and 14:12-13 at the "twin peaks" of the grand chiasmic structure of the book. If nothing else, the bracketing of Babylon the Great's judgment (chs. 16:15-19:5) and the spotlighted command for God's people to get out of that relationship or face judgment (18:4) at the midpoint of the beatitudes goes quite a ways in establishing that the seven blessing statements in Revelation are not randomly placed.

Still, the seventh beatitude and how it fits into the overall picture has not even been mentioned: "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates" (22:14, HCSB). This final blessing statement effectively functions as a beautiful climatic offer of the gospel utilizing the imagery of the Apocalypse. It is shortly followed by verse 17, which is more direct:

Both the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" Anyone who hears (there's our verb *akouo*, echoing 1:3!) should say, "Come!" And the one who is thirsty should come (clearly

written and presented as an ETS Far West regional paper by Richard Rigsby and myself several months before I completed the manuscript of the original commentary. However, there was a two-year backlog of accepted articles with *JETS* at that time.

²² This claim is based on only the simplest kind of comparison of proportion: it is 56 verses between the third blessing statement in Rev. 16:15 and the fourth in 19:9, with 18:4 being the 28th verse of those 56. While there was obviously no versification in the original text of the Apocalypse, this at least serves to place 18:4 roughly midway between 16:15 and 19:9.

echoing Jesus' evangelistic offer in John 7:37-39!). Whoever desires should take the living water (clearly echoing Jesus in both John 7 and 4:10!) as a gift (i.e., of grace).

If it is not yet clear, 22:14 is the initial means of entry into the blessedness of the Book of Revelation by anyone reading the book: listening to/heeding the gospel, thus being saved. None of the other blessings are possible until that first step is taken. It is also striking that 22:14 is absolutely consistent with the choice available at the chiasmic midpoint of the book to "every nation, tribe, language, and people" still alive at the end of the age by the preaching of "the eternal gospel" (14:6, HCSB): "Fear God and give Him glory" (v. 7)... or be tormented forever along with Babylon the Great (v. 8) and all who worship the beast (vv. 9-11).

In summarizing, is the significance of noting 18:4 in the middle of the spread chiasm of the seven beatitudes in Revelation being overblown here? Not according to Michaels, who concludes that the command in 18:4 "sums up the book's message."²³

Michaels' view is somewhat overstated, however, in regard to both the practical message of the book, as well as the fact that he limits his understanding of "Babylon the Great" to the Roman Empire.²⁴ That "Babylon" is not *exclusively* Rome in the Apocalypse is shown by the fact that "the great city" is seen to be as much Jerusalem (11:8) as Rome (17:9, 18). In addition, since Babylon the Great justly receives the judgment (19:2) expected to come upon the "earth-dwellers" (6:10), and the "earth-dwellers" turn out to be the non-elect²⁵ (13:8; 17:8), Babylon is much more likely the world system which has the non-elect firmly snared—and makes every effort to do the same with Christians.²⁶

John's parallel words elsewhere echo in our ears in looking at Revelation 18:4 in its context:

Do not love the world or the things that belong to the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For everything that belongs to the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride in one's lifestyle—is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world with its lusts is passing away, but the one who does God's will remains forever (1 Jn. 2:15-17, HCSB).

Whether expressed in an epistle or an apocalyptic vision, the need for God's people to avoid worldly entanglement comes through loud and clear, *if* we will but "obey" (Rev. 1:3).

Conclusion: Let the Book of Revelation Have Its (Practical) Say!

As the dust settles, we are left with the confidence that the practical message Revelation 1:3 urged to be heard and obeyed is indeed accessible, *if* the person approaching the Apocalypse

²³ Michaels, *Revelation*, 203.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ As Rev. 17:8 puts it, "Those... whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world" (HCSB).

²⁶ This conclusion reflects considerable subsequent reflection, and ventures a significant step, beyond where Emily Hunter (now McGowin) and I left things in our article, "The 'Earth-Dwellers' and the 'Heaven-Dwellers': An Overlooked Interpretive Key to the Apocalypse," *Faith and Mission* 20/1 (2003) 3-18.

is willing to *hear and heed*. It basically boils down to perseverance in obedience and separation from the prevalent worldliness surrounding and wooing the believer.

Sadly, however, it is far too likely that such insight will be ignored by many readers for at least three reasons: 1) Those who study Revelation seriously very much tend to intellectualize the book, minimizing or overlooking the practical angles; 2) Every interpreter approaching the Apocalypse has the (at least subconscious) tendency to read in theological ideas from elsewhere in Scripture or their personal theological tradition, overshadowing what the book is actually saying; and 3) Readers desire the blessings of Revelation 1:3 and 22:7—not to mention the other five!—but on their own terms, not the Lord's.

In conclusion, it is not only possible to read and understand the Book of Revelation from a practical perspective, it's exactly what God desires (1:3; 22:7). In fact, as the reader has to look no further than 1:3 to grasp, it is the only way respond to the Apocalypse that He *fully* blesses!