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HEAVEN'S VIEW OF THE CHURCH IN REVELATION 2 AND 3

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The earthly-heavenly duality of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, evidenced by their prophetic character as letters from Jesus, the use of symbolism (much of which is already introduced in John's vision of the heavenly Son of Man, 1:9–20), and structural clues evident from the surrounding context, shows that these letters are to be read not only as first-century epistles to particular churches but also as a portrayal of the checkered progress of the church throughout history. A corollary of this study is that even these "epistolary" chapters can be viewed as apocalyptic in harmony with the overall genre of the book.

Key Words: apocalyptic, genre, church, structure, visions, septet, letter, Rev 2–3, ecclesiology

1. Introduction

Revelation is generally classified among the "historical" apocalypses.[1] No doubt the main reason for this is the fact that the early chapters anchor the book within a specific historical setting: Patmos and "the seven churches" of Asia Minor (Rev 1–3). This is comparable to the book of Daniel, in which the first six chapters set the later visions within the historical context of life in the royal courts of Babylon and Medo-Persia.[2] Among the explanations for the apparent dichotomy between the so-called "historical" and "visionary" sections of Revelation are that it stems from different sources[3] or sim-

1 E.g., John J. Collins, "Genre, Ideology and Social Movements in Jewish Apocalypticism," in *Mysteries and Revelations: Apocalyptic Studies Since the Uppsala Colloquium* (ed. John J. Collins and James H. Charlesworth; JSPSup 9; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 16.

2 It should not be overlooked, however, as Christopher C. Rowland, "The Book of Revelation: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander E. Keck; 12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 12:521–22, correctly argues, that the viewpoint towards empire differs markedly between Daniel and Revelation, the latter being highly pessimistic.

3 See David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (WBC 52A; Dallas: Word, 1997), cx–cxvii, for a convenient summary of the various source-critical proposals. Aune himself finds two editions of the book written in three stages (pp. cxx–cxxxiv).

ply reflects different genres.[4] The purpose of this study is to suggest that the intertwining of the historical and visionary material in the first three chapters of Revelation is a deliberate attempt by the author to make an ecclesiological statement in apocalyptic terms. Before elaborating on this contention however, some further remarks need to be made about the genre of the book.

2. The Genre of Revelation

In recent years, the precise definition and contours of the genre of apocalyptic have been vigorously discussed. The book of Revelation is widely regarded as epitomizing this genre, having given its name to it.[5] Nevertheless, some interpreters classify Revelation as a letter[6] or prophecy[7] rather than as an apocalypse.[8] Others take a mediating position, describing the genre of the book as various combinations of the three.[9] However, there are problems with viewing Revelation as a book of mixed genre. First of all, for the designation to be meaningful, "genre," as distinct from *Gattung*, should be applied to the dominant form of the work as a whole, not to its constituent elements.[10] The reason for this is that readers recognize various signals

4 See, e.g., Jon Paulien, "The End of Historicism? Reflections on the Adventist Approach to Biblical Apocalyptic—Part One" *JATS* 14 (2003): 15–43, esp. 39, n. 123.

5 So, e.g., Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT 17; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 23–24, also noting how Revelation differs from "standard apocalyptic."

6 Martin Karrer, *Die Johannesoffenbarung als Brief* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986); Jürgen Roloff, *The Revelation of John: A Continental Commentary* (trans. John E. Alsup; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 7–8.

7 Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 28.

8 James L. Blevins, "The Genre of Revelation," *RevExp* 77 (1980): 393–408, argues for the book's similarity to Greek tragedies but this has not proved persuasive.

9 Some class it as prophetic-apocalyptic: Craig S. Keener, *Revelation* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 32. Others argue that the Revelation combines all three: Craig L. Blomberg, "New Testament Genre Criticism for the 1990s," *Them* 15 (1990): 40–49, esp. 45–46; Joel Musvosvi, "The Issue of Genre and Apocalyptic Prophecy," *AASS* 5 (2002): 43–60, esp. 44 (limiting its application to the *content* of the book as distinct from its *genre*); Paulien, "The End of Historicism?" 34, 38–39; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 12.

10 Roy E. Gane, "Genre Awareness and Interpretation of the Book of Daniel," in *To Understand the Scriptures: Essays in Honor of William H. Shea* (ed. David Merling; Berrien Springs, Mich.: Institute of Archaeology, 1997), 137–48, esp. 139; Collins, "Genre," 14, now prefers to speak of the "dominant genre" of a work though he allows for an occasional work of mixed genre such as *Jubilees*.

which aid them in its categorization and guide them in how it is to be understood. Therefore, the utility of interpreting individual parts of the book on the basis of a genre normally applicable to whole works is not at all clear. Second, in the case of Revelation in particular, it is generally recognized that the book fits the category of apocalyptic more closely than any other genre. John himself suggests as much by his use of Daniel's visionary framework and imagery. Furthermore, his choice of σημαίνω to describe what he means by "apocalypse" seems designed to indicate that the bulk of the book is to be figuratively understood.[11] Finally, despite the inclusion in 1:4 of a standard epistolary salutation, the book does not really fit the letter form very well, a point which requires some elaboration in connection with a consideration of the larger structure of the book.[12]

3. The Structure of Revelation

Frequently, the suggestion is made that Rev 1:19 is programmatic for the book.[13] As persuasive as this seems on the surface, the assertion overlooks some important structural clues earlier in the chapter. The very general descriptions in vv. 1–3 are best understood in reference to the book as a whole.[14] Beginning with v. 4, the seven churches are introduced, together with an epistolary greeting extending to v. 7 which underscores the centrality of Jesus in salvation history and neatly prepares the reader for the audition and vision of Christ to follow (vv. 9–20). The audition (v. 11) makes it clear that v. 19 cannot be understood as programmatic. Rather, the two verses are mutually interpretative and show that the letters to the seven churches concern both the present and the future, thus hinting that they are to be read like the rest of the book, as prophetic messages from Jesus—a

[11] G. K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (JSNTSup 166; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 295–98.

[12] A complete exposition of these structural clues would in itself constitute another whole study which cannot be pursued here.

[13] For example, Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introd., Notes and Indices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 21; Robert L. Thomas, "John's Apocalyptic Outline," *BSac* 123 (1966): 334–41. For an overview of the principal interpretative options, see G. K. Beale, "The Interpretative Problem of Rev. 1:19," *NovT* 34 (1992): 360–87. Beale argues that the verse refers to the book as a whole, as does Heinz Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (RNT; Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1997), 90.

[14] The ἀποκάλυψις is given "in order to show ... what things must happen in a little while" (δεῖξαι ... ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει, v. 1). John further describes this revelation as "the things which he saw" (ὅσα εἶδεν, v. 2) and as "prophecy" (τῆς προφητείας, v. 3).

point which becomes explicit only later (2:1; cf. 4:1). In 1:19, John is told to write down the things which he saw (εἶδες), a clear reference to his vision of Christ (cf. βλέπεις, 1:11). He is also to write down ἃ εἶδες καὶ ἃ εἰσὶν καὶ ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα "the things which are and which must happen after these things," both phrases apparently referring to the temporal frame in which the letters to the seven churches are to be understood (cf. 4:1, signaling that the first-century setting is no longer in view). This structure can be more easily grasped by means of a brief outline of the Book of Revelation, diagrammed syntactically with the pivotal verses and phrases.

Introduction, 1:1–8

(1:1–3) Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ... δεῖξαι ...
ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει,
ὅσα εἶδεν ...
τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας
ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς ἐγγύς.

(1:4) Ἰωάννης ταῖς ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαις ταῖς ἐν τῇ Ἀσίᾳ ....

* (1:8) Ἐγώ εἰμι τὸ ἄλφα καὶ τὸ ὦ, λέγει κύριος ὁ θεός,
ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος,
ὁ παντοκράτωρ.

Vision (on Earth) with Prophetic Messages concerning the Seven Churches, 1:9–3:22

A: (1:10–11) ἤκουσα ὀπίσω μου φωνὴν μεγάλην ὡς σάλπιγγος
ὃ βλέπεις γράψον εἰς βιβλίον
καὶ
πέμψον
ταῖς ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαις ....

(1:19) γράψον οὖν
ἃ εἶδες καὶ ἃ εἰσὶν καὶ ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα ....

Vision (in Heaven) with Prophetic Messages concerning the Earth, 4:1–20:15

B: (4:1) ἡ φωνὴ ἡ πρώτη ἣν ἤκουσα ὡς σάλπιγγος
δείξω σοι ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα ....

No Further Need for Prophetic Messages—Vision of Heaven and Earth Reunited, 21:1–22:5

AB: (21:6) γέγοναν

* ἐγώ [εἰμι] τὸ ἄλφα καὶ τὸ ὦ,
ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος ....

Conclusion, 22:6–21

(22:6) δεῖξαι τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ
ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει

(22:10) ὁ καιρὸς γὰρ ἐγγύς ἐστιν ....

* (22:13) ἐγὼ τὸ ἄλφα καὶ τὸ ὦ, ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος,
ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος ....

(22:16) μαρτυρῆσαι ὑμῖν ταῦτα ἐπὶ ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις ....

(22:20) Λέγει ὁ μαρτυρῶν ταῦτα· ναί, ἔρχομαι ταχύ ....

Figure 1: Outline of the Visionary Structure of the Book of Revelation

As the diagram helps to make clear, the book of Revelation can be read as consisting of two principal visions containing prophetic messages from Jesus.[15] The first reveals heaven's view of the church and the second reveals heaven's view of the events on earth that affect the church. The climactic vision of the book describes the reunion of God with his people, marking the end of the separation between heaven and earth caused by sin.[16] Viewing the book in this way underscores the claim made from the beginning, that the book is a revelation from Jesus Christ.[17] It may be too that the letters, with their repeated call to "hear" what the Spirit says, are intended not only to encourage readers to pay attention to the message of a given letter but also to prepare readers for comprehending chapters 4–22.[18]

4. The Letters as Prophetic Oracles

Turning our attention more specifically to these letters, several unique features set them apart in important respects from the New Testament epistles. First, despite the salutation in 1:4, the letters to the seven churches are not actually from John but from Jesus himself (Rev 1:17b; cf. 4:1), who is seen by John in a glorified state walking in the midst of the churches (1:9–20). As

15 No agreement exists as to the overall structure of the book. For a discussion, see e.g. Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2002), 25–40.

16 The use of γενέσθαι with the neuter plural relative pronoun occurs only in 1:1, 19; 4:1 and 22:6. The identical expressions in the prologue and epilogue mirror each other whereas the use in 1:19 and 4:1 provide an ordering principal for the book. The exclamation in 21:6 (γέγοναν, also neuter plural unlike 16:17) refers in the immediate context to God's making all things new (21:5) but in the larger context of the book announces the conclusion of the salvation history being foretold. The significance of this usage is generally overlooked but has been highlighted recently by Richard Sabuin, "Repentance in the Book of Revelation" (Ph.D. diss., Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, 2006), 54–61. Apart from the references in the prologue and epilogue, 21:6 is the only other time the "Alpha and Omega" speaks, a fact which further serves to highlight the importance of the verse for the narrative's development.

17 The initial genitive in 1:1 is considered by some to have a double meaning, and to be understood both subjectively and objectively, i.e., that the revelation is *from* Jesus as well as *about* Jesus (what Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 119–21, calls a "plenary" genitive). Quite apart from the questionable propriety of this assertion, the diagram provides support for interpreting the initial phrase as a subjective genitive.

18 So Wiard Popkes, "Die Funktion der Sendschreiben in der Johannes-Apokalypse. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Spätgeschichte der neutestamentlichen Gleichnisse," *ZNW* 74 (1983): 90–107; cf. Beale, *John's Use*, 312, linking the hearing formula with the "visionary parables" of chaps. 4–21.

such, these are no ordinary letters, which is why some prefer to call them "prophetic oracles."[19] Second, the scope of these letters is not limited to the congregation addressed because, in each case, the admonition is given "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying *to the churches*" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Third, the entire book of Revelation is addressed to the seven churches, not just the letters of chapters 2 and 3 (1:4; 22:16). Therefore, if the application of the letters to the seven churches is to be restricted to the local churches of Asia Minor, why not the whole book?

As with the book as a whole, the seven letters cannot be restricted in application to the first-century. The fixed structure and symmetry of the letters,[20] as Mounce observes, "betray a purpose that goes beyond ethical instruction to seven particular churches in the Roman province of Asia."[21] This becomes clear also from an examination of their contents, which address concerns that extend beyond the confines of a given congregation (implied also by 2:23).[22]

Such a scrutiny of the letters reveals several common themes. One is that Jesus wants a close relationship with his church.[23] The letter to Ephesus re-

19 André Feuillet, *The Apocalypse* (trans. Thomas E. Crane; Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, [1965]), 48–49; J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 35, cf. 52; Beale, *John's Use*, 303–4. The use of τάδε λέγει in 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14 (cf. Acts 21:11) recalls its frequent usage in the LXX for "thus says the Lord."

20 The pattern, with little variation, is: (1) command to write to the angel/messenger of the given church, (2) self-description of Christ, (3) commendation, (4) rebuke, (5) warning, (6) exhortation to listen, (7) promise to the overcomer. Robert L. Muse, "Revelation 2–3: A Critical Analysis of Seven Prophetic Messages," *JETS* 29 (1986): 147–61, esp. 149–50, notes certain similarities with the Pauline epistles but ultimately, because of their highly stylized form, pronounces these letters unique.

21 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 84; see also the observation by Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 16–17, that the letters address representative contexts which Christians in later periods have found applicable also to the church of their time.

22 This point is frequently acknowledged by commentators and was in fact already recognized in the early centuries. According to the Muratorian Canon, *Et Iohannis enī In a pocalebsy licet septe eccleseis scribat tamen omnibus dicit ueru*. Victorinus, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of the Blessed John* 1.16 (*ANF* 7:345) wrote similarly of the seven letters that "what he says to one he says to all."

23 Even the use of the second person personal pronoun may point in this direction. Usually it is singular (30 times). The plural form only occurs in the letters to Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira (6 times). While the singular pronoun could be read as addressing only the "angel" of a given church, it more plausibly suggests a preference to address the members of the church as individuals rather than as a group. The alternative would be to suppose a kind of hierarchical ecclesiology at odds with the Revelation's

veals that the church has left its first love behind (2:4), reminiscent of how the classical prophets describe Israel's departure from their relationship with God (e.g., Jer 2:2; 3:1; Hos 2:12–15). Jesus assures the church in Smyrna that he knows their suffering and poverty, alluding perhaps to his own life of suffering (cf. 2 Cor 8:9), and encourages them to be faithful until death (2:9-10, cf. 1:5 which affirms Jesus as ὁ μάρτυς, ὁ πιστός, ὁ πρωτότοκος τῶν νεκρῶν). Those in Pergamum are commended for "holding fast" to the name of Christ and not denying their faith in him (Rev 2:13).[24] In the letter to Thyatira, the church is commended for their love, faith, and service to Jesus and yet also reproved for tolerating Jezebel who is leading many away from him and into idolatrous practices (2:19–20). Those in Sardis who do not defile their garments can look forward to walking with Christ in white (3:4). The church in Philadelphia has a special bond with Jesus because they have not denied his name and have kept the word of his patience. And, in the end, Jesus says of those who do not have such a relationship with him, "they will learn that I have loved you" (3:8–9). By contrast, the church of Laodicea is lukewarm in their attitude to Jesus (3:16). Nevertheless, he knocks and waits, longing for a deeper, closer relationship with his people (3:20).

Another theme in these letters is the importance of the genuineness of one's profession. The letters refer to those who falsely claim to be apostles or Jews (2:2, 9; 3:9). The Jezebel in Thyatira calls herself a prophetess but leads the church astray. And it is in this context that a more general warning is given: "And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve" (2:23). As for Sardis, it has a name of being alive but is in fact dead (3:1). Worst of all, Laodicea is self-deceived, thinking itself rich and in need of nothing when actually it is poor and in need of everything, even clothing (3:17). Related to the need for genuineness is the concern about false teachers, including Balaam, the Nicolaitans, Jezebel, and those who focus on the "deep things" of Satan (2:14–15, 20, 24). Christ's followers, by contrast, are, like him, to be faithful witnesses (2:13; 3:14).

These themes of relationship to Jesus, genuineness of profession, and giving a faithful witness can be seen as applicable in every place and at all

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total avoidance of the more familiar NT terms such as ἐπίσκοπος and διάκονος, which never appear, and πρεσβύτερος, which is used only of the 24 elders before God's throne.

[24] Following the rendering of the NRSV. The last phrase is literally "you did not deny my faith" (οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὴν πίστιν μου). The faith of the saints and the faith of Jesus are closely identified in later chapters (12:17; 13:10; 14:12).

times, not just for a particular first-century church. This is not to deny that these letters held historical significance for the seven cities since they so clearly reveal knowledge of the history, topography, and economics of each location addressed.[25] At the same time, the prominence given to these letters, in terms of the overall visionary structure which we have observed as well as the fact that they constitute the first of the four septets of the book, suggests that they may also have a *prophetic* significance. A more detailed analysis of the language of each letter, showing that apocalyptic imagery and ideas are embedded in every letter, also points in this direction.

The letters are from Jesus himself, whom Rev 1:9–20 depicts in apocalyptic terms drawn primarily from Dan 7 and 10.[26] In each of the seven letters, Jesus employs some of this apocalyptic imagery to present those characteristics of himself which that particular church most needs.[27] The leading church of Ephesus is reminded that it is Jesus who is really in charge as he holds the "stars" or angels of the seven churches in his hand and walks personally among the churches (2:1; cf. 1:12–13, 16). For the persecuted church of Smyrna, Jesus describes himself as the one who "was dead and came to life" (2:8; cf. 1:17–18). Jesus wields a sword before Pergamum (2:12; cf. 1:16) to warn them against compromise with the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (2:16). In view of the apostasy of Thyatira, Jesus appears as the all-knowing Son of God with eyes "like a flame of fire" and feet "like burnished bronze" (2:18; cf. 1:14-15). The dead church of Sardis is reminded that Jesus has the life-giving Spirit, represented by the "seven spirits of God" (3:1; cf. 1:4, 16).[28] The attention of those in Philadelphia is directed toward Jesus' intercession in the heavenly temple and dominion over the

25 Cf. George B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (n.p.: Harper & Row, 1966; repr., Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 28. Some point to the lack of agreement among those who favor a chronological application, e.g., Robert L. Thomas, "The Chronological Interpretation of Revelation 2-3" *BSac* 124 (1967): 321–31 (included as Excursus 1 in Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 505–15).

26 G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 220–21; idem, *The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of St. John* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 174–76.

27 The parallels between the vision of Jesus and the self-descriptions in the letters to the seven churches are widely recognized (see, e.g., Michaels, *Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, 39–40).

28 As George R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (rev. ed.; NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 94–95, points out, the Judaism of the time considered the two chief works of the Spirit to be the inspiration of prophecy and the giving of life to the dead (cf. John 6:63; Rom 8:11; Gal 6:8; 1 Pet 3:18; Rev 11:11).

church on earth (3:7; cf. 1:18) and they are encouraged to remain faithful.[29] Finally, concerning Laodicea, Jesus stands as the faithful witness to their true condition (3:14; cf. 1:5, 18) and offers help to them.

Equally clear are the parallels between the promises for the victor and the concluding chapters of the book. The victors in Ephesus are promised access to the tree of life. This tree is vividly described in connection with the New Jerusalem as available to those from among the nations who wash their robes (22:2, 14, 19). The victors in Smyrna will not be harmed by the second death, a promise which, according to 20:6, applies to all who share in the first resurrection (cf. 20:14; 21:8). The victors in Pergamum will receive hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name, all of which are echoed in the final chapters in some way (19:8–9, 12; 21:7; 22:4, 14).[30] The victors in Thyatira will receive authority similar to that of Christ, to rule the nations with a rod of iron (2:26–28) as He is pictured doing in Rev 19:15. The victors in Sardis will be clothed in white robes and their names will be retained in the book of life. Likewise, those in the New Jerusalem will have washed their robes (22:14; cf. 7:14) and will have been mercifully passed over in the final judgment (20:12, 15; 21:27). The victors in Philadelphia will receive a new name (3:12), including that of the New Jerusalem and of Jesus which again looks forward to the life to come (21:2, 10; cf. 19:12). The victors in Laodicea will sit with Jesus on his throne, a privilege given to those who are victorious over the beast and his image in the final climactic test (20:4). The final promise to victors occurs in the climactic vision of the earth made new, combining the previous promises into one grand, final assurance of inheriting all "these things" and enjoying a perfect covenant relationship with God (21:7).

The possibility that the letters should be understood prophetically is reinforced also by structural clues. First, John's use of the number *seven* is significant. As with the seals, trumpets, and bowls, it points to comprehensiveness, not just geographically but also temporally.[31] There were other

[29] "The key of David" in Rev 3:7 clearly alludes to Isa 22:22; cf. *Tg. Isa.*: "And I will place the key *of the sanctuary and the authority* of the House of David *in his hand*; and he will open, and none shall shut; and he will shut, and none shall open," quoted in Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 235; cf. Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John* (trans. Wendy Pradels; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 202.

[30] Jewish expectations of the future kingdom included feeding on manna that had been hidden away (cf. John 6:58).

[31] So Beale, *John's Use*, 302; Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 14; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, 131; Mitchell Glenn Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 40. Adela Y. Collins, "Numerical Symbolism in Jewish and Early Christian Apocalyptic Literature," *ANRW* 21.2:1221–87, argues that the

churches and more important ones in the Asia Minor of John's time.[32] And yet even among these seven, it is striking that lowly Thyatira has a letter far longer than any of the others. In addition, the observation that the seven letters are arranged chiastically lends further credence to the notion that these messages are intended for a broader application.[33]

Viewing the letters to the seven churches as prophetic messages, applicable until the end, opens up the possibility of their being understood in symbolic and even prophetic terms like the rest of the book. Many Christian interpreters through the centuries have understood these messages as prophetic of the condition of the church in successive ages from the first century to the end. And some today continue to do so.[34] Within the limited confines of this study it is possible only to sketch in broad strokes certain features of these letters which appear to be prophetic. But perhaps it can suggest a way forward and provide some impetus for future study along similar lines.

The letters begin with the description of a "first love" experience, fitting of the apostolic age but already waning by the time John wrote. And they conclude with a view of materialistic abundance so characteristic of the church in the modern age. Interestingly, only in the letter to Ephesus which heads the list do we find the mention of people claiming to be apostles (2:2), a problem of the first century church evident from references elsewhere in

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number seven (along with four and twelve) signify cosmic order but cof. Beale, *Revelation*, 63–64.

32 Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, 131, points to Miletus, Troas, Colossae, Hierapolis, Tralles, and Magnesia, which are known from NT references (Col 1:2; 2:1; 4:13; Acts 20:5, 17) and the *Letters* of Ignatius.

33 Beale, *John's Use*, 303 sees the condition of the churches described in an "a b c c c b a" pattern. The call to repentance in the letters conforms to a chiasm (Sabuin, "Repentance in the Book of Revelation," 112) in the form "r x r r r x r" (where "r" indicates the occurrence of μετανοέω in a given letter). In a critical analysis of the literary form of the seven letters, Muse ("Revelation 2–3," 158–60) describes a pattern, which we could summarize as "a b a a a b a" (where "a" corresponds to "warning of judgment" and "b" corresponds to "promise of salvation").

34 E.g., James L. Boyer, "Are the Seven Letters of Revelation 2-3 Prophetic?," *GTJ* 6 (1985): 267–73, argues for "the remarkable correspondence in fact with the course of history and the realization that the characteristics of these seven churches have appeared in succession in the historical development of the church age" (270). The apostolic age, begun with the zeal of "first love," showed the diminishing of it; the second age was of persecution and martyrdom when the Roman Empire tried to destroy the Christian faith. The "open door" of Philadelphia corresponds to evangelistic and missionary movements of the nineteenth century. And lukewarmness and materialistic self-sufficiency well describes the church of the present day (pp. 270–71).

the NT.[35] The persecution described in connection with Smyrna fits well Rome's persecution of Christians in the early centuries[36] which was followed by the assimilation of the pagan Roman culture into Christianity[37] evidently reflected in the syncretistic tendencies plaguing Pergamum and Thyatira. As we have seen, the letter to Thyatira is notable for its length, which fits well the long period of church dominance during the Middle Ages. As a counterpoint to this dominance, the victor in Thyatira is specifically promised *rule over the nations*. Significantly, it is in this letter that we first hear of "faith" and "love" and that Thyatira's *last* works are said to exceed the first ones—a description that fits well the onset of the Reformation (2:19). It is also at this point in the series of letters that we see a remnant (λοιποί) beginning to form (2:24). By the time of Sardis, reforms have stalled and appear near death.[38] Finally, the appellations with which Jesus describes himself to the Philadelphian and Laodicean churches, rather than pointing backward to chapter one, point forward to judgment and the second advent.[39] Still, the first-century perspective of the imminent return of Jesus continues to figure throughout the letters in some way.[40]

35 See 2 Cor 11:5, 13; 12:11–12; cf. Matt 7:15; Gal 2:4; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 John 4:1.

36 Though there were periods of greater and lesser intensity, persecution was persistent in the second and third centuries, culminating in the "severest of persecutions under Diocletian, from 303 for a decade." See Henry Chadwick, "The Early Christian Community," in *The Oxford History of Christianity* (ed. John McManners; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 21–69, esp. 47–48.

37 Robert A. Markus, "From Rome to the Barbarian Kingdoms," in *The Oxford History of Christianity* (ed. John McManners; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 70–100, esp. 73–74; cf. p. 79: "The fourth and fifth centuries saw the wholesale Romanization of Christianity and Christianization of Roman society."

38 The period surrounding the Reformation period is extremely complicated, as Patrick Collinson's carefully-nuanced treatment makes clear ("The Late Medieval Church and Its Reformation" in *The Oxford History of Christianity* [ed. John McManners; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993], 243–76). Use of the secular sword "proved expedient to compel people to go to church and to punish deviants and heretics, even to kill them" (ibid., 271) but it cut both ways. Protestantism quickly became "l'Établissement," complete with its own confessions which served to bring coherence and consensus out of confusion but also to crush theological deviance and dissent (ibid., 273).

39 In connection with the letter to Philadelphia, the description of Jesus as "holy" and "true" compares closely to that of the one to whom the martyrs under the altar cry out under the fifth seal for vindication (6:10). The "key" and "open door" are apparent references to the intercessory ministry of Jesus (cf. n. 29 above), suggested also by the description of Jesus in priestly attire walking among the λυχνίαι (1:13), a word that in biblical literature almost always refers to sanctuary lampstands (e.g. Exod 25:31–35; Lev 24:4; 1 Kgs 7:49; Heb 9:2). The description of Jesus as "faithful and true" (both of

5. Conclusion

In summary, the use of apocalyptic imagery in chapters two and three is significant, suggesting that the letters constitute more than first-century epistles to particular churches. Much of the imagery in the vision of Jesus of 1:9–20 is repeated in these letters, linking their message with its divine source and suggesting in turn the divine nature of the messages themselves. The promises to the victors are, in the closing chapters of the book, echoed, broadened, and expanded to include the saved of all ages.[41] Other structural clues in the book and the pervasive use of apocalyptic language in the letters themselves reinforce the possibility that these letters may have been intended not only as universally applicable to all ages but as a prophetic portrayal of the checkered progress of the church.[42]

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which are connoted by the Hebrew word "Amen") is similar to the description of the one coming on a white horse to judge righteously and make war (19:11).

40 The emphasis on the nearness of the second advent is prepared for already in the inaugural vision. In 1:17 Jesus says, "I am the first and last." And likewise in 22:12–13, "See, I am coming soon .... I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." The letters themselves refer several times to the "coming" of Christ and yet give no clue as to *when* that coming might be or even *how soon* it might be (2:5, 16, 22–23; 3:3, 11). The Revelation quite definitely maintains that it is in a little while (1:1; 22:6), near (1:3; 22:10), and soon (2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). At the same time, the end is only contemplated in connection with the *parousia*, not before.

41 This may help to account for the often distinct imagery found in these letters compared with the rest of the book, which becomes increasingly eschatological after 11:19 (already hinted at in 4:1, on which see pp. 147–48 above to the effect that the seven letters by contrast explicitly concern *both* the present and the future).

42 I would like to thank the organizers of the Second International Bible Conference for the opportunity to present this paper in Izmir, Turkey, on July 8, 2006, and those present for the helpful discussion which followed.