

The Recapitulation of Revelation: Seals, Bowls, Trumpets Cover the Same Ground

Revelation follows a recapitulation scheme instead of a linear progression scheme. Revelation recycles the judgment theme on Israel. This is seen by comparing the **bowl plagues** (15:1–16:21) with the **trumpet plagues** (8:6–11:15). The first trumpet and bowl plagues affect the earth (cp. 8:7; 16:2); the second, the sea (cp. 8:8; 16:3); the third, rivers and springs (cp. 8:10; 16:4); the fourth, the sun (cp. 8:12; 16:8); the fifth, “the bottomless pit” causes “darkness” (9:2) = “the throne of the beast: becoming “darkened” (16:10); the sixth, the “river Euphrates” (cp. 9:14; 16:12); the seventh, results in completion: “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord” (11:15); “finished” (16:17).

John employs cycles of judgment to increase his rhetorical effect on his audience. “Like any good rhetorician, John hammers home his single message by rearticulating it in a variety of ways. John’s use of recapitulation with variation was a popular rhetorical convention in antiquity” (Ben Witherington Revelation, page 130). A first century Latin book called *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (4:42:54) is very revealing regarding the use of capitulation in writing: “*We do not repeat the same thing precisely — for that to be sure, would weary the hearer and not elaborate the idea — but with changes.*”

In John’s case he is not simply avoiding wearing out his audience as a writer seeking increased scroll sales. Rather he is earnestly ministering to Christ’s followers who are being hounded by the Jews through their continually stirring up of the secular authorities against them (2:9; 3:9; cp. Mt 10:17–19; Ac 16:20; 17:7; 18:2; 21:11; 24:1–9; 25:1–2). As John emphasizes the worsening judgments to befall Israel, he is urging Christians to continue in the faith, to endure to the end through it all (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:10; 14:12; 21:7; Mt 10:22; 24:13). At the same time he is warning unbelieving Israel about her coming judgment — as does Jesus in Luke 19:41–44, Peter in Ac 2:14–40, Stephen in Ac 6:12–14, Paul in 1Thess. 2:14–16, and the writer of Hebrews in Hebrews 8:13; 12:26–29.

Craig Koester, in *Revelation and the End of All Things*, writes “an outline of the book looks like a spiral, with each loop consisting of a series of visions” so that “with increasing intensity the visions at the bottom of the spiral threaten the readers’ sense of security.” He sees in this method a comforting rationale: “*each time the clamor of conflict becomes unbearable, listeners are transported into the presence of God, the Lamb, and the heavenly chorus*” in visions appearing “*at the top of the spiral.*”

It even seems that the three septets reflect a perspective from three aspects of Israel: **The seals emphasize the people**, as we see in their climax in the protective numbering of the 144,000 and the vision of the great multitude in heaven in Revelation 7 (these will be spared God’s judgments). **The trumpets emphasize the temple**, as we may discern from their beginning at the golden altar of incense in heaven (8:3–5) and in their climax in the trampling of the earthly temple (11:2) and the opening of the heavenly one in 11:19. **And the vials highlight Jerusalem**, as we note in their climax in the judgment of the great city in Revelation 16:19; 17–18. The seals, trumpets and bowls focus on first-century Israel and her judgment ... Revelation’s cycles do not simply restate prior judgments, but intensifies them. The progressive stepping-up of the severity of these plague sequences appears in their growing from one-fourth (seal’s; 6:8), to one-third (trumpets; 8:8–12), to the whole (bowls; 16:3). (Ken Gentry)