

The Seven Blessings of the Book of Revelation – a Brief Exegetical Note

David Field

Introduction

All who believe in the divine, plenary, and verbal inspiration of Scripture are committed to the notion that nothing in Scripture is casual or accidental and that close, repeated and utterly attentive reading always pays dividends. But nothing confirms this view more thoroughly than the study of the book of Revelation. It is a "meticulous literary composition"¹ with an array of patterns, repetitions, structuring devices and sequences which will never cease to amaze the careful reader. For this reason, it is to be expected that the order of the seven beatitudes which are to be found in the book will have some purpose in it. The point of this exegetical note is to describe and explain the sequence of the seven beatitudes and to draw some tentative conclusions from that sequence.

Detail is deliberate in the book of Revelation

Richard Bauckham draws attention to several of the features which make the book of Revelation the "extraordinarily complex literary composition" that it is.² The following word counts are surely beyond chance:

- seven times the word "Christ" is used³
- seven times Christ announces his coming⁴
- seven times the form "the Lord God Almighty" appears⁵
- there are seven "amens" in the book⁶
- "prophets" are referred to seven times⁷
- the form "the one who sits on the throne" is used seven times⁸
- the Spirit is referred to fourteen times⁹
- the name of Jesus occurs fourteen times¹⁰
- the "Lamb" is mentioned twenty-eight times¹¹

¹ The phrase is Richard Bauckham's from his superb collection of essays, *The Climax of Prophecy*, (Edinburgh, 1993), p.2

² Bauckham, *Climax*, chapter 1, "Structure and Composition", pp.1-38

³ 1.1, 1.2, 1.5, 11.15, 12.10, 20.4, 20.6

⁴ 2.5, 2.16, 3.21, 16.15, 22.6, 22.12, 22.20

⁵ 1.8, 4.8, 11.17, 15.3, 16.7, 19.6, 21.22

⁶ (excepting 3.14) (1.6, 1.7, 5.14, 7.12^{bis}, 19.4, 22.20

⁷ 10.7, 11.18, 16.6, 18.20, 18.24, 22.6, 22.9

⁸ 4.9, 5.1, 5.7, 5.13, 6.16, 7.15, 21.5

⁹ 1.10, 4.2, 14.13, 17.3, 19.10, 21.10, 22.17 and at the conclusion of each of the seven letters

¹⁰ 1.1, 1.2, 1.5, 1.9^{bis}, 12.17, 14.12, 17.6, 19.10^{bis}, 20.4, 22.16, 22.20, 22.21

- there are twenty-eight products in the list of Babylon's cargo¹²

Further proofs of the deliberateness of the book's construction are to be found in the use of gematria; in the echoes of successive periods of Israel's history in the imagery of the seven letters; in the carefully expanding formula of judgment phenomena in 4.5 and then with the seventh seal, trumpet and bowl in 8.5, 11.19, 16.18-21; in the astonishing care and creativity with which Old Testament allusions are woven into the book; in the newness of the eighth (and last) appearance of the "kings of the earth"¹³ and – of considerable doctrinal importance – in the choice of singular pronoun for God and the Lamb in 22.3: "the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him." Examples could be further multiplied.¹⁴

Things come in sevens in the book of Revelation

In addition to the particular words which occur seven times in the book, all readers of Revelation are aware of other uses of the number seven. There are seven churches, spirits, features of the Son of Man in 1.14-16, seven letters, seals, eyes, horns, trumpets, bowls, thunders and so on. It is widely observed that seven in the book of Revelation and elsewhere is a number which signifies completeness or perfection and this is rightly associated with the fact that three is a number associated with God and four a number associated with the created order. The two combine in God's creative activity of the seven days in Genesis 1-2.¹⁵

The seven blessings of the book of Revelation

It is altogether unsurprising then that when we count up the beatitudes (blessings, makarisms) of the book of Revelation we find that there are seven. It will be helpful to lay them out here before proceeding any further:

¹¹ 5.6, 5.8, 5.12, 5.13, 6.1, 6.16, 7.9, 7.10, 7.14, 7.17, 12.11, 13.8, 14.1, 14.4^{bis}, 14.10, 15.3, 17.14^{bis}, 19.7, 19.9, 21.9, 21.14, 21.22, 21.23, 21.27, 22.1, 22.3. The word "lamb" is used once more, in 13.11, in relation to the land-beast

¹² 18.11-13

¹³ The kings of the earth (hoi basileis tēs gēs) appear either as the enemy or as defeated/subjected in 1.5, 6.15, 17.2, 17.18, 18.3, 18.9, and 19.19. Then their eighth appearance (21.24) is one of newness and life – a resurrection appearance. It should be noted that while EVV often translate 16.14 as "kings of the earth", in fact the phrasing is different: hoi basileis tēs oikoumnēs). In a book in which word counts are so precise, this alternate wording is no accident.

¹⁴ It is also worth noting that these features constitute an extremely strong argument for the unity and integrity of the book of Revelation.

¹⁵ James B Jordan makes the point that if seven stands for God and the world "side by side" then twelve (the number which dominates in chapters 21-22) stands for God and the world "united".

1. 1.3 Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.
2. 14.13 And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, "Write, `Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!" "Yes," says the Spirit, "so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them."
3. 16.15 "Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame."
4. 19.9 Then he said to me, "Write, `Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'" And he said to me, "These are true words of God."
5. 20.6 Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.
6. 22.7 "And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book."
7. 22.14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city.

1. 1.3 Μακάριος ὁ ἀναγινώσκων καὶ οἱ ἀκούοντες τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας καὶ τηροῦντες τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ γεγραμμένα, ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς ἐγγύς.
2. 14.13 Καὶ ἤκουσα φωνῆς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ λεγούσης· γράψον· μακάριοι οἱ νεκροὶ οἱ ἐν κυρίῳ ἀποθνήσκοντες ἀπ' ἄρτι. ναί, λέγει τὸ πνεῦμα, ἵνα ἀναπαήσονται ἐκ τῶν κόπων αὐτῶν, τὰ γὰρ ἔργα αὐτῶν ἀκολουθεῖ μετ' αὐτῶν.
3. 16.15 Ἴδου ἔρχομαι ὡς κλέπτης. μακάριος ὁ γρηγορῶν καὶ τηρῶν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ, ἵνα μὴ γυμνὸς περιπατῆ καὶ βλέπωσιν τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην αὐτοῦ.
4. 19.9 Καὶ λέγει μοι· γράψον· μακάριοι οἱ εἰς τὸ δεῖπνον τοῦ γάμου τοῦ ἀρνίου κεκλημένοι. καὶ λέγει μοι· οὗτοι οἱ λόγοι ἀληθινοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ εἰσιν.
5. 20.6 μακάριος καὶ ἅγιος ὁ ἔχων μέρος ἐν τῇ ἀναστάσει τῇ πρώτῃ· ἐπὶ τούτων ὁ δεύτερος θάνατος οὐκ ἔχει ἐξουσίαν, ἀλλ' ἔσονται ἱερεῖς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ βασιλεύσουσιν μετ' αὐτοῦ [τὰ] χίλια ἔτη.
6. 22.7 καὶ ἰδοὺ ἔρχομαι ταχύ. μακάριος ὁ τηρῶν τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας τοῦ βιβλίου τούτου.
7. 22.14 Μακάριοι οἱ πλύνοντες τὰς στολὰς αὐτῶν, ἵνα ἔσται ἡ ἐξουσία αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τὸ ξύλον τῆς ζωῆς καὶ τοῖς πυλῶσιν εἰσέλθωσιν εἰς τὴν πόλιν.

Many commentators remark upon the fact that there are seven beatitudes but make no further comment.¹⁶ Others make only general points. Osborne, for example comments on 1.3:

This is the first of seven beatitudes in Revelation. These are linked to the ethical purpose of the book, with some exhorting the saints to persevere and live exemplary lives in the light of these prophecies (1.3, 16.15, 22.7), and others promising them future rewards for doing so (14.13, 19.9, 20.6, 22.14).¹⁷

Aune tells us that the number is "hardly accidental".¹⁸ Boring comments that this shows that the author regarded the "form itself [as] important".¹⁹ Witherington and Stefanovic claim that the number simply shows the fullness or perfection of promised blessing.²⁰ Charles, riding his "multiple recensions" hobby-horse, takes the occasion to observe that 22.7 should be regarded as the last beatitude "for the present text of xx.4 – xxii is in disorder".²¹

Two commentators make slightly more forceful claims and their remarks are brief enough to be cited in full. On 1.3 Roloff says, "This is the first of seven such pronouncements. Together they develop the message of the book in solemn, comprehensive formulations that address the situation of the readers".²² And Bauckham, with characteristic acuity and thoroughness states that,

[T]he number of beatitudes is the number symbolic of completeness, seven. Moreover, the discovery gives the beatitudes greater meaning. Together they spell out the adequate response to John's prophecy (reading/hearing and keeping: 1:3; 22:7; faithfulness as far as death: 14:13; 22:14; readiness for the Lord's coming: 16:15) and the fullness of divine blessing that attends that response (rest from labours: 14:13; invitation to the Lamb's marriage supper: 19:9; participation in the first resurrection: 20:6; the tree of life and entry into the New Jerusalem: 22:14; but these are only *representative* of the complete blessing indicated by the number seven). The seven beatitudes comprise a kind of summary of Revelation's message.²³

¹⁶ A quick survey of available commentaries showed that the following either made no comment at all upon the number of blessings in the book or simply remarked upon the fact that there are seven of them: Ramsey 1873; Milligan 1898; Swete 1906; Kiddle 1940; Hendriksen 1940; Lenski 1943; Farrer 1964; Caird 1966; Hoeksema 1969; Ladd 1972; Beasley-Murray 1974; Massyngberde Ford 1975; Sweet 1979; Wilcock 1979; Chilton 1987; Morris 1987; Barnett 1989; Hughes 1990; Mounce 1998; Thompson 1998; Beale 1999; LaHaye 1999; Keener 2000; Poythress 2000; Kistemaker 2001; Johnson 2001; Reddish 2001; Gardner 2001

¹⁷ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, (Grand Rapids, 2002), p.57

¹⁸ David E. Aune, *Revelation*, WBC (Dallas, 1997), pp.22-3

¹⁹ M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, (Louisville, 1989), p.67

²⁰ Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation*, (Berrien Springs, Michigan, 2002), p.59; Ben Witherington III, *Revelation*, (Cambridge, 2003), p.71

²¹ R. H. Charles, *Revelation*, ICC, (Edinburgh, 1920), p.7

²² Jürgen Roloff, *Revelation*, (Minneapolis, 1993), p.21

²³ Bauckham, *Climax*, pp.29-30

The sequence of the seven blessings

One matter, however, which goes almost entirely unaddressed in comments upon the seven beatitudes is that of the sequence of the seven blessings. James Jordan is one of very few to have given attention to the matter and writes "I have attempted to discern a structure in these seven, to correlate them with other sets of seven in the book or with creation days, but have seen no particular pattern".²⁴ Yet the attempt is not to be abandoned. In Revelation, of all books, the probability that such a set of seven beatitudes has been purposefully ordered is very high indeed.²⁵

It is straightforward enough to produce a large bunch of explanatory keys which *might* open this particular exegetical locked door. Each of them needs to be tested against the simple list of passages above.

- Do the seven beatitudes tell the story of redemptive history?
- Is there a significance (in respect of their sequence) in who speaks each beatitude and to whom?
- Is there a pattern in the grammatical form of the beatitudes?
- Is their position in the book important?
- Do the beatitudes break into smaller groups of four and three or three and four?
- Is there a noticeable progress in the content of these seven blessings?
- Does each beatitude summarize the material that has preceded it?
- Or the material that follows it or surrounds it?
- Do the seven blessings map onto the seven churches or the seven seals or the seven trumpets or the seven bowls in the book of Revelation?
- Do they relate to the seven days of creation or other significant sevens in the Bible?
- Is the reverse order of any of these proposals the answer?

Attention to the beatitudes in the light of these questions yields only one conclusion: the door remains firmly locked.

Chiasm in the book of Revelation

There is, however, one literary device which is receiving increasing attention in biblical studies and which has yet to be mentioned. It is that of chiasm. Chiasm, also known as introversion, crossing over,

²⁴ James B Jordan, *Revelation: a Preliminary Commentary*, (Biblical Horizons, Niceville FL, 1994), p.11

²⁵ In a delightful instance of simultaneous discovery, a friend of mine and fellow student of the book of Revelation, the Revd Jamie Murray, arrived independently at the conclusions outlined here. Email the author of this article for further details of Jamie Murray's work: davidf@oakhill.ac.uk

or concentric form, involves the statement of words or elements and then their repetition in reverse order: A-B-B-A. In Amos 5.4-6, for example, we read,

A Seek Me that you may live.
B But do not resort to Bethel
C And do not come to Gilgal,
D Nor cross over to Beersheba;
C' For Gilgal will certainly go into captivity
B' And Bethel will come to trouble.
A' Seek the Lord that you may live.

This construction is used, however, not merely at the micro-level of words and phrases but also at the macro-level of whole sections of writing. This is demonstrated repeatedly in David A. Dorsey's fine work, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*.²⁶

And chiasm is certainly on display in the book of Revelation.²⁷ For example, the key "antitheocratic figures"²⁸ appear in a particular order: first, death and hades (1.18, 6.8), then, the devil-dragon (12.3-12), thirdly, the sea and land beasts (13.1-18), and finally, harlot Bablyon (14.8, 16.19). Their defeat is in the reverse order: first, harlot Babylon (17.16-19.3), then the sea and land beasts (19.19-20), thirdly, the devil-dragon (20.10), and finally, death and hades (20.14).

At a higher level, James Jordan has also shown that the broad structure of the book of Revelation can be approached chiastically.²⁹ His outline runs

The Man – Jesus – 1
 The Churches: True and False – Letters to Seven Churches – 2-3
 The Call to the Throne – Ascension of Christ – 4-5
 The Book – Seven Seals – 6-7
 The Call to Judgment – Seven Trumpets – 8-15
 The False Church and the True – Seven Bowls – 16-20
 The Bride – the City – 21-22

²⁶ Grand Rapids, 1999. See especially the discussion of chiasmus on pp.29-32 and the bibliographical leads given in fn.28 on p.19. In addition, see John Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language*, (Crestwood, NY, 1994). Of course, some of Dorsey's proposals are more convincing than others.

²⁷ Dan Liroy's recent work, *The Book of Revelation in Christological Focus*, (New York, 2003), summarizes the work of other scholars investigating chiasm in Revelation on pp.51-59

²⁸ The term is Beale's: *Revelation*, NICGNT, (Grand Rapids, 1999), p.111. His whole discussion of the structure of the book is most helpful, pp.108-51

²⁹ *A Brief Readers Guide to Revelation*, (Niceville, FL, 1999), pp.15-17. Jordan is at pains to stress, here and elsewhere, that there are several complementary ways of viewing the structure of the book.

Meredith Kline and B.W. Snyder also give chiastic outlines for the book as a whole, Snyder's being in the view of Greg Beale, "the most viable chiastic outline of the book so far attempted".³⁰ It is also the case that while the likely route for the messenger explains the order of the churches as they are addressed in chapters two and three, the spiritual health of the churches as described in the letters takes an A-B-C-C-C-B-A form. Ephesus and Laodicea are unified and compromised. Smyrna and Philadelphia are unified and faithful. Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis are spiritually mixed or divided churches with different groups within them being addressed.³¹

From all this it is clear that one of the possible arrangements for the seven beatitudes in Revelation which should be tested is that of chiasm. This key is the most promising so far. It fits into the lock smoothly. Yet, as even a brief look at the beatitudes will show, the key will not turn. Something still is sticking.

The "six plus one" pattern in the book of Revelation

One further repeated pattern in the book of Revelation may provide the necessary lubricant. It is that of "six plus one". Not only is seven "reduced" for the 666 of chapter thirteen, it is also "broken up" in the first two major series after the Lamb has taken the scroll. After the first six seals of the scroll have been opened in chapter six there is then what is often called an "interlude" during which John hears the number of the sealed and sees the great multitude before the throne. Only then is the seventh seal opened.

Similarly, the first six trumpets are blown in chapters eight and nine but before the seventh trumpet is blown there is another "interlude". John sees the mighty angel with a scroll which he, John, then eats and then measures the temple of God and hears about the two witnesses. Only then is the seventh trumpet blown. Of course, the reader is to notice the absence of such a break between the "sixth" and the "seventh" in the next major series of seven, the bowls poured out in chapter sixteen. By now, however, he knows that in the book of Revelation, though seven is often seven, sometimes seven is actually six plus one. In the light of the account of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis, this is unsurprising.

³⁰ See Beale, *Revelation*, pp.131, 142-3

³¹ This observation is also from James Jordan, *Preliminary Commentary*, p.29

A chiastic arrangement of seven beatitudes involving a "six plus one" structure

Finally, then, perhaps there is a way in which the seven beatitudes of Revelation combine these two patterns of chiasm and of "six plus one". The first would match or mirror the sixth; the second would match or mirror the fifth; the third would match or mirror the fourth. And the seventh would be in some special relationship with them all, either as a summary or as the centre or as a leap ahead and beyond them. Certainly, at first glance, such a proposal seems highly plausible. First, a look at the six arranged chiastically.

1.3 Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

14.13 And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, "Write, `Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!' " "Yes," says the Spirit, "so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them."

16.15 "Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame."

19.9 Then he said to me, "Write, `Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' " And he said to me, "These are true words of God."

20.6 Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

22.7 "And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book."

There seems to be a strong case for linking up beatitudes one and six and, indeed, several commentators have noticed this and gone on to discuss possible relationships with Luke 11.28. When 22.7 is read in association with 22.9-10, the connection with the first beatitude is stronger still.

Similarly, it is clear that the second and fifth beatitudes are closely related. Death and resurrection, resting and reigning: the connections lie on the surface. Beyond this, however, the immediate contexts are strongly associated too. The second beatitude is announced immediately after a call has been issued for the saints, in contrast with worshippers of the beast, to endure, to keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. Parallel to this, the fifth beatitude is announced over those who came to

life and reigned with Christ: they are those who had been faithful to death for the testimony of Jesus and the word of God and who had not worshipped the beast or its image.

The relationship between the third and fourth beatitudes is equally strong as soon as it is noticed that those invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb parallel the blessed of 16.15 in two ways. Firstly, as seen in 19.7-8, those invited to the Lamb's supper are precisely those who "keep their clothes". Secondly, they are the city-bride of Jesus in contrast to the city-harlot of Babylon and it is the latter who has stripped naked that all should see her shame (17.16, 18.16-17).

The first pair (beatitudes one and six) is about reading, hearing and keeping the words of the prophecy. The second pair (beatitudes two and five) is about the death and rest, the martyrdom and resurrection of the faithful. The third pair (beatitudes three and four) is about the naked city-harlot and the finely-robed city-bride. The invitation and the demand are obvious: listen to and obey the words of Revelation, do so even unto death and you will come to the rest-reign of the faithful and, contrasted with and separated from the naked harlot, you will sit, in the fine robes of the city-bride, at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

And what will that be like? What and where and when and who? These are the questions which the seventh beatitude will answer. The first six are arranged so as to leave the reader thirsty for more detail and further affirmation ... and then the seventh comes to quench that thirst:

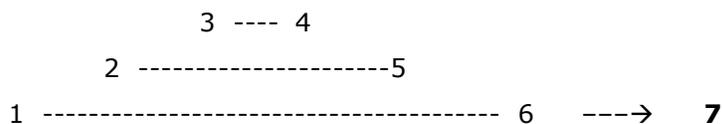
22.14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city.

In a six-plus-one arrangement, of course, the reader would, with Genesis 1-2 in mind, expect a sabbath dimension or element in the climactic "one". This is exactly what we have in 22.14. Cleansing, sanctuary access, feasting with God by participating in Christ, dwelling in the garden-city, the authority of victory-rest are themes of completed battle, God-given renewal and eschatological security which emphatically associate with biblical teaching on the sabbath. Fullness of blessing indeed!

Summary and Conclusions

The book of Revelation is a meticulous literary composition and it comes as no surprise that there are seven beatitudes in the book. A careful reading of the book leads us to expect some significance in the sequence of the beatitudes but, in fact, very few commentators have endeavoured to find such a sequence. All sorts of possible approaches prove fruitless. However, chiasm, an important rhetorical device in the Bible, is certainly used in Revelation and the book also has several examples of a "six plus one" pattern. When these are combined then the connections between the relevant pairs are too

strong to be mere chance. The lock is cleaned and the key fits and turns. In brief, the proposal is that the seven beatitudes of Revelation follow a “six plus one” sequence in which the first six elements are arranged chiastically. The seventh beatitude goes beyond the six and constitutes a sabbath statement of what lies at the end of all things for recipients of the other six blessings. The impact on the reader of this arrangement may be diagrammed³² thus:



Or with the Revelation references:



The identification of this sequence provides proper warrant for consideration of the seven beatitudes as a set and this has three main hermeneutical and homiletical implications. First, the deliberate arrangement of the seven in this way confirms that, far from being speculation without control, to look for and comment upon this sort of detailed and careful structuring and sequencing is wholly appropriate, certainly in the book of Revelation and possibly elsewhere in Scripture. Secondly, that these seven are purposefully organized means that it would be a legitimate treatment of Scripture to pay attention to the beatitudes of Revelation as a set either by preaching upon all seven or using them as a way in to the book as a whole. Thirdly, in stating the “message” of Revelation, whether by means of the beatitudes or in other ways, due emphasis must be given to the particular and climactic formulation of the saints’ final hope as expressed in the seventh beatitude: it is sabbath victory-rest enjoyed in the garden-city by redeemed and faithful followers of the Lamb.

David Field
Oak Hill College

³² See over for another diagrammatic presentation of the proposal

The Seven Blessings of Revelation

