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Recommended Citation

Boone, N. S. (2013). The Five Armageddons of Revelation. *Restoration Quarterly*, 55 (2), 107-115.

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THE FIVE ARMAGEDDONS OF REVELATION

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The term Armageddon has been used so often in popular culture—from hit movies, to heavy metal songs, to wrestling matches—that biblical scholars seem to get nervous at the mention of the word. Of course, there is some reason for such nervousness. Evangelical groups have, over the years, brought the idea and imagery of Armageddon into the political arena and have suggested foreign policy based on how they read end-time events as described in Revelation, including the battle of Armageddon. Because of the popularized notions of the term and the more serious religio-political dimensions the term is involved with, commentators on Revelation sometimes downplay the term and its associated concepts. For example, Mitchell G. Reddish says, “The popular intrigue with Armageddon has grown totally out of proportion to the importance John places on this term.”¹ Reddish argues that those who read Revelation as literal political reality of the near future turn it, “and indeed the rest of the Scriptures, into a deck of Tarot cards whereby the ‘spiritually enlightened’ can ‘predict’ specific events that will occur in the world.”² While I generally agree with Reddish’s non-literal approach to the symbolism of Revelation I also think responsible readers should not be so hasty to dismiss the Armageddon concept or its imagery. Perhaps there is a reason, beyond our society’s typically hyperactive bloodlust, that the idea of Armageddon has had such a strong hold on our collective imagination and, indeed, why Armageddon, far from being seen as a sort of minor footnote of the Apocalypse, seems to be so integrally linked to our basic image of the book as a whole.

This essay, however, does not deal with Armageddon as Armageddon. That is, it does not deal with whether the term should refer to “the mountain of Megiddo” or the “mount of assembly.” It does not deal with what location John may have had in mind or with the exact identity of “the kings of the East” (Rev 16:12).³ It most certainly is not interested in using Revelation to predict the immediate future or to nail down particular events of the past and claim that John intended to predict such-and-such event of the first or second

¹ Mitchell G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2001), 312.

² *Ibid.*, 319.

³ Quotations from biblical texts are from the NIV.

century. Instead this essay views Revelation as a whole in much the same way M. Eugene Boring does when he claims that John presents “a verbal/visual Sistine chapel panorama”⁴ as he attempts to make “a lasting impression on the imagination of his hearer-readers by building into it many aids to their memory.”⁵ Just as one might enter an artist’s gallery in which many paintings represent the same landscape or scene but approach that scene from a variety of angles or perspectives, so John, according to Reddish, presents readers with “a kaleidoscope in which one sees the colors and shapes arranged in a certain pattern, presenting the viewer with a different perspective on the same objects.”⁶ Reddish goes on to say that “Reading Revelation is also like listening to a musical composition in which certain themes of the piece are repeated, but with variations and interpretations, each variation moving the piece forward.”⁷ Revelation seems to make more sense when it is viewed as a complex web of interrelated cycles of images that John intentionally pieces together for particular purposes and effects.

John’s immediate purpose, of course, is to encourage already persecuted Christian churches to remain steadfast in their faith and to prepare them not only for impending persecution at the hands of Roman authorities, but also for their great reward from the hands of God. Though Revelation may, in a large-scale sense, predict certain future persecutions, it is not primarily intended as an exact or detailed timeline of specific events or rulers/persecutors. John’s heavy use of symbolism and his structure of recurrent images would seem to undermine the view that he is trying to provide specific names and dates.

The recurring images also suggest that Revelation should not be read chronologically. Repetition is an important aspect of any literature as it aids writers in developing and emphasizing key themes, relationships, or ideas; however, repetition is particularly important to oral storytelling cultures. One must remember that John’s immediate audience was mostly illiterate and that his work would have been read aloud, probably in full, to its first-generation hearer-readers. Listeners, more than textual readers, require repetition to grasp key thematic ideas.⁸ Many mainline Protestant commentators, such as Boring and Reddish, claim that Revelation should be viewed as a kind of spiraling of image clusters wherein certain events are repeated for emphasis while aspects

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 150.

⁵ Boring, *Revelation*, 33.

⁶ Reddish, *Revelation*, 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ David L. Barr seems to be the first modern scholar to link the orality of the book of Revelation with a particular hermeneutic. See “The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment,” *Int* 40:3 (1986): 243–56. Richard Bauckham makes the oral nature of Revelation a key aspect of his commentary (*The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993]). See esp. ch. 1, “Structure and Composition.”

of the narrative, or the plot (i.e., God's redemption of his church and his punishment of the wicked), are moved forward.⁹

While I generally agree with mainline scholars who tend to view Revelation's structure as mostly non-literal and non-linear, these commentators have, I believe, missed an important structural feature of Revelation that causes them not only to unnecessarily downplay the idea of Armageddon, but also to downplay the very important millennial scene in Rev 20. In this essay, I hope to reveal what I see as five key image cycles, each involving an Armageddon scene, that occur in the heart of John's vision—chapters 4–20. Each cycle begins with a scene of victory, moves into a vision of terror for earth's inhabitants, usually in the form of plagues, and ends with an "Armageddon" scene, in which the entire earth and its people, who stand in opposition to God and his people, are judged by God.¹⁰

The first of these image cycles spans chapters 4–6. Chapters 4–5 contain beautiful scenes of worship and praise. Chapter 4 centers on the image of God the Father while chapter 5 puts the focus of praise upon Jesus, the Lamb that has been slain. After these extensive scenes of praise, which involve strange heavenly creatures, elders, saints, and "ten thousand times ten thousand" angels, the plagues of the seven seals begin in chapter 6. This chapter provides the famous image of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, and each one carries out his judgment upon the earth. After the cataclysmic events of the sixth seal (earthquake, sun turning black, stars falling from heaven), the final part of the image cycle takes place. Verses 15–17 say, "Then the kings of the earth . . . hid in caves . . . They called to the mountains and the rocks, . . .

⁹ I focus my attention in this article on Boring's and Reddish's commentaries because they seem to be recent representatives of mainline Protestant interpretation of Revelation. Of course, many scholars have endorsed similar ideas of the book's structure, which is often labeled "recapitulation," or, better, "progressive recapitulation." A few representative scholars are Adela Yarbro Collins (*The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* [Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976]), Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza ("Composition and Structure of the Book of Revelation," *CBQ* 39:3 [1977]: 344–66), and G. K. Beale (*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999]). Arthur Wainwright traces the beginnings of the theory of recapitulation back to the third-century writer Victorinus (*Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1993]).

¹⁰ Yarbro Collins, in *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, 32–44, detects cycles of images with the same basic content I suggest. Her mapping of the book, however, is different from mine. She suggests that within the book's two main divisions (chs. 1–11 and 12–22) there are three sets of seven cycles. The first eleven chapters involve the seven letters, seals, and trumpets. Chapters 12–22 involve seven unnumbered visions, seven bowls, and another set of seven unnumbered visions. Within each cycle of seven, Collins sees three structural elements: persecution, punishment of the persecutors, and salvation of the persecuted. I see the same elements, but I suggest that there are five major cycles over the whole of chs. 4–20 and that the cycles are not determined by the overlay of the numerical marker seven (seven seals, trumpets, etc.), but are an integral structuring pattern underneath the overarching structure John presents with his ordering of the septets.

‘and who can stand?’” These last three verses of chapter 6 make up what I have defined as an Armageddon scene. In it we see all the people of the earth aligned against God in rebellion. Then we see a statement of judgment in verse 17.

The next image cycle spans chapters 7–11. It begins with another scene of victory for the people of God and of worship to God and his Christ. First, the sealing of the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel takes place. Then “a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language” (7:9) stands before the throne in robes of white and worships God in powerful songs of praise. The chapter concludes with a staggering promise to the white-robed throng that “never again” will they suffer for anything, and that “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (7:16–17). This scene of victory is followed by the plague scenes brought about by the trumpet blasts of the angels. These plagues are even more horrific than those of the seven seals in chapter 6. The Armageddon scene that follows the sixth trumpet blast is much more complex than the first. The key features of such scenes are (1) the earth’s inhabitants standing together in rebellion against God and (2) God’s judgment upon those people. Chapter 11 provides such a scene. God has sent two witnesses to prophesy to the world and, presumably, spur the people to repentance. However, “the beast” attacks and kills them, and as their bodies lie unburied “in the street of the great city, . . . men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial” (vv. 8–9). They even “gloat” and “celebrate” their deaths by gift-giving (v. 10). Here, then, is the first part of the Armageddon formula: the whole world has aligned itself against God in rebellion by celebrating the death of his prophets. After this, God judges these rebellious people in three ways: he raises up the two prophets, “and they went up to heaven in a cloud while their enemies looked on” (v. 12); he sends an earthquake that kills seven thousand inhabitants of “the great city” (v. 13); finally, he judges the entire earth (v. 18):

The nations were angry;
and your wrath has come.
The time has come for judging the dead,
and for rewarding your servants the prophets
and your saints and those who reverence your name,
both small and great—
and for destroying those who destroy the earth.

One of the best arguments for understanding Revelation as a cycle of recurring images rather than a chronological unfolding of prophecy (besides the fact that some OT prophecies also do not fit into a neatly chronological scheme) is that chapter 12 seems to be John’s re-telling of the birth of Christ from a cosmic perspective. This third of Revelation’s five cycles of images, spanning chapters 12–14, is the most complex of all the victory scenes. It begins with “a great and wondrous sign” that involves “a woman clothed with the sun” who is about to give birth; however, a great dragon, later identified as Satan, stands ready to devour the child “who will rule all nations with an iron

scepter" (12:5). The child is "snatched up to God" and a war takes place in heaven in which Michael and his angels are victorious and Satan is cast down to the earth. The dragon continues to pursue the woman who gave birth to the child and the rest of her offspring, but she is miraculously protected. Despite the lack of total victory—the section ends with the dragon still in pursuit of the woman's many offspring—there is no doubt that the primary message of the chapter is a victorious one. Satan has been defeated, and it is revealed that he has only a short time left on earth (12:12). The victory song of 12:10–12 is reminiscent of previous songs of praise and triumph from earlier chapters:

Now have come the salvation and the power
 and the kingdom of our God
 and the authority of his Messiah.
 For the accuser of our brothers and sisters,
 who accuses them before our God day and night,
 has been hurled down.
 They has triumphed over him
 by the blood of the Lamb
 and by the word of their testimony;
 they did not love their lives so much
 as to shrink from death.
 Therefore rejoice, you heavens
 and you who dwell in them!

This cycle moves smoothly from victory into a vision of terror as Satan wreaks havoc upon the world through his agents, the beast and the false prophet, in chapter 13. After another image of the 144,000 (14:1–5) and after three angels preach a gospel of repentance (14:6–12), the entire earth is harvested by angels. One angel's harvest is particularly gory: "The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia" (14:19–20). These final verses of chapter 14 can constitute the third Armageddon scene since the entire earth is judged by God for its rebellion in following the beast and false prophet in chapter 13 and for not heeding the angels' calls to repentance in chapter 14. All the earth stood in opposition to God, and he judged them.

The fourth image cycle spans chapters 15–19, and it contains the book's only actual reference to Armageddon (ch. 16). This Armageddon scene is the most complex of any in the book, but the cycle begins, as the others do, with a scene of victory. The saints, who have been "victorious over the beast and his image," sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb (15:2–3), and the temple of the Lord is filled with smoke from the glory of his presence (15:8). Scenes of terror follow the song of victory in keeping with the pattern as the seven bowls of wrath are poured upon the earth. The sixth bowl involves the preparation for the battle often referred to as Armageddon. After the sixth angel pours out his bowl "on the great river Euphrates," three evil spirits come

out of the mouths of the beast, the false prophet, and the great dragon, and these spirits are instrumental in gathering “the kings of the whole world . . . for the battle on the great day of God Almighty” (16:12–14). John goes on to reveal that the kings gathered “in the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon” (16:16). Ironically, though this is John’s only use of the term “Armageddon,” these verses should not be classified as part of the “Armageddon” section of this image cycle since this deceiving of the kings of the earth is part of the plagues God has sent. The actual “battle” in which the people of the earth stand in rebellious opposition to God and are judged by him takes place at the end of chapter 19. The plague section continues through chapters 17–18. After the seventh bowl of wrath splits Babylon the Great into three parts by a massive earthquake at the end of chapter 16, an angel provides John with a detailed picture of the fall of Babylon that takes up the majority of the next two chapters. A celebration scene follows the destruction of Babylon before Christ is pictured as a victorious general, the King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16), who leads his army against “the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies,” who are still gathered, presumably, at Armageddon (19:19). The beast and false prophet are then captured and thrown “into the fiery lake of burning sulphur” (19:20). The scene concludes with more of God’s judgment against the rebellious kings of the earth as “the rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse [i.e., they are judged by Christ’s words], and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh” (19:21).

The final image cycle is the most compressed of the five as it all takes place within chapter 20. The chapter begins with an amazing scene of victory as Satan is bound by the chain of an angel and is thrown into the abyss to be imprisoned for a thousand years. Next, as part of this victorious scene, John reveals a heavenly throneroom in which saints and martyrs reign with Christ for a thousand years. As fits the pattern John has established, the victory scene is followed by a scene of terror for the people of earth when Satan is released and begins deceiving the nations. Just as in chapter 16, when Armageddon is mentioned, Satan gathers nations from all corners of the earth through his deception (“In number they are like the sand on the seashore,” v. 8), and surrounds “the camp of God’s people, the city he loves” (v. 9) as he prepares to battle God and his people. This “Armageddon” scene continues as God judges these people from all nations of the earth who stand in rebellion against him with fire from heaven that devours them (v. 9). The devil is sent to the lake of fire. At this point, the entire world, including all the dead, is judged by God. “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (v. 15). Thus with this scene of God’s judgment on the rebellious people of all the earth ends the fifth and final Armageddon scene and the last of the five image cycles that constitute the bulk of John’s vision in Revelation.

Some might argue against the notion that Revelation is structured in part by the five image cycles explained above by appealing to the idea that John

obviously wanted his hearer-readers to distinguish between sections of the book based on the four septets (letters, seals, trumpets, bowls) he so blatantly demarcates. Many commentators, including Boring, structure the book with the septets, especially the seals, trumpets, and bowls, as focal points. How, then, can one see these image cycles as a key structuring device since some of them overlap the septets (for example, the seventh seal is seen as the beginning of the second image cycle while the first six seals are seen as part of the first cycle)? There are two answers to that question. First, it is not uncommon for scholars to make a division between the sixth and seventh seal. In fact, the scribe who divided Revelation into chapters obviously saw the need to begin a new chapter exactly where I see the beginning of a new cycle. Scholars often see chapter seven as an interlude between the sixth and seventh seal,¹¹ but why can it not be seen as the beginning of a new cycle instead, especially when John obviously begins his vision in chapter 4 with a scene of victory? Scholars often fail to recognize this feature of John's structure, but he obviously emphasizes the victory of the saints by beginning with such a scene in chapter 4, then continuing the sequence, as I have outlined above, with victory scenes beginning each cycle.

The other answer to the question of how one can see the cycles as overlapping the septets is that there can be more than one structural device in a complex literary work such as Revelation. G. K. Beale, for example, compares the structure of Revelation to overhead transparency overlays: "each overlay fills in further essential aspects of the structure, but each by itself presents only a part of the intended structure"; thus Revelation can be said to have "multiple viable structures" or subdivisions within overarching structures of the book.¹² Thus one can see a broad outline of the septets, but within the septets also notice the cycles of victory, plague, and judgment I have described. Some scholars suggest that John used a chiasmic device to structure the book, and some of those diagrams are compelling.¹³ With Beale's metaphor of overlays in mind, broader divisions of the book, whether based on the septets or on a chiasmus, should not necessarily be seen to preclude the significance of substructures such as the image cycles as I have presented them above.

¹¹ Boring, *Revelation*, 120–21, and Reddish, *Revelation*, 23, are representative of those who see ch. 7 as an interlude. Resseguie (*The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009]) sees the same structural principle at work but terms it an "embedded narrative" (135). Resseguie states that embedded narrative, interlude, and intercalation are basically synonymous terms, but Schüssler Fiorenza ("Composition and Structure") attempts to distinguish the function of interlude and intercalation (360–62).

¹² Beale, 115.

¹³ One such scholar is Schüssler Fiorenza, "Composition and Structure," 364–66. Beale presents summaries and diagrams of a few other chiasmic structurings (130–31, 136, 143).

Perhaps understanding Revelation's literary structure in the way I have just described could yield many interpretive insights. As I close this essay, however, I will focus on two. First, and less important, interpreters should not downplay the notion of Armageddon. There is a reason, in the popular imagination, Armageddon and Revelation are nearly synonymous terms—the book is densely populated with Armageddon scenes, as long as Armageddon is defined as a situation in which all the earth stands in rebellion against God and in which God calls down judgment upon the rebellious. Second, and more important, some mainline Protestant commentators, represented here by Eugene Boring, do not offer very satisfactory interpretations of the millennium in Rev 20. However, if the millennium is viewed as part of the five image cycles of Revelation, it is much easier to deal with.

First of all, Boring's literary analysis of Revelation's structure is compelling. He sees, in a large scale, Revelation divided into three sections: 1–3 (God speaks to the church in the cities), 4–18 (God judges the "Great City"), 19–22 (God redeems the holy city). For the middle section, chapters 4–18, he emphasizes the three series of plagues (seals, trumpets, and bowls) and demonstrates well that each series of plagues has a similar structure of an initial unit of four catastrophes, followed by two woes that are even more intense than the first four, followed by the last seal, trumpet, or bowl, which in some way brings about "the end."¹⁴ While Boring's analysis of the "sevenfold pattern of woes," as he calls it, is perceptive and, I believe, legitimate on the large scale, his emphasis on the three series of plagues as central to the middle section of Revelation does not allow him to see the fivefold pattern I have described, which would include chapters 19–20 in the interpretive scheme of the middle section of the book. By divorcing 19–20 from the rest of the middle section of Revelation, Boring misses the victory, plague, judgment pattern that John initiates in chapter 4 and concludes in chapter 20.

In dealing with the millennium, Boring notes, correctly, that "It is an abuse of John's own structure to make 'the millennium' the interpretive key to his whole revelation."¹⁵ This essay has argued, as Boring does, that Revelation is best viewed as a non-linear set of image cycles that each depict the coming persecution of Christians before the end of time by emphasizing different features of these future events. Boring emphasizes that chapter 20 presents "one way" in which John views this future out of his "gallery of eschatological pictures."¹⁶ However, while Boring recognizes that interpreters' attempts to fit Revelation into a post-, pre-, or a-millennial scheme are spurious, he makes a stunning, and, I believe, mistaken statement. He says that John, in a literal sense, is working from a premillennial mindset, "since

¹⁴ Boring's outline and analysis of the Revelation's literary structure is, of course, referred to throughout his commentary. However, he provides an outline of the book's overall structure on pp. 30–31 and a chart of "the seven-fold pattern of woes" on pp. 120–21.

¹⁵ Boring, *Revelation*, 202–3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

the parousia occurs in 19:11–16 and the millennium not until 20:4–6.”¹⁷ He goes on to admit, though, that “If forced into this scheme” (i.e., a post-, pre-, or a-millennial interpretation), his own commentary would be classified as amillennial.¹⁸ In other words, Boring says that John expects there will be a millennial period after the return of Christ, but, in good postmodern fashion, he does not feel bound to believe the way John does.

Few members of the Restoration Movement would be comfortable with such a relativistic interpretive methodology. Thus they may be tempted to dismiss the whole effort of reading Revelation in a non-literal and/or non-linear way. But there are other options. Boring is almost right. The problem is that he sees 19–22 as a structural unit and thus reads the figure of Christ judging the world in chapter 19 as necessarily united with the coming of the millennium in chapter 20. However, as I have shown, Christ’s judgment in chapter 19 is actually the final part of an image cycle that began with a victory scene in chapter 15. Chapter 20 begins an entirely new cycle with the millennium verses acting as the victory part of the cycle.¹⁹ The structure of chapter 20 actually closely parallels the image cycle that begins in chapter 12 with the defeat of Satan by Michael. In both parts of the text, Satan is humiliated and cast down from a higher realm to a lower one. Viewing chapter 20 as its own self-contained cycle of images allows interpreters to more confidently assert a basically a-millennial stance (i.e., the view that the thousand years is a long period of time, that is, essentially, the period of the church’s reign, signifying, in fact, the period we are now a part of—after Christ’s death and ascension and before his second coming and last judgment). This view makes both the most sense for modern interpreters and fits best with John’s intentions if we are properly attuned to the complex literary structure of his great book.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ In “Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev. 20:1–10,” *WTJ* 51 (1984): 319–44. R. Fowler White makes a strong argument for seeing a new cycle beginning in ch. 20, which recapitulates a story that, ultimately, begins in ch. 15 and ends with the judgment scene of ch. 19 (see esp. 330–31). Thus he argues for a similar division as I do, at least from chs. 15 through 20. White does not, however, place his argument for recapitulation within the broader context of the pattern of victory, plague, and judgment throughout the visions of chs. 4–20, as I have.



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