

The Book of Revelation in Jewish Context

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[Rev. 1:3](#) Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

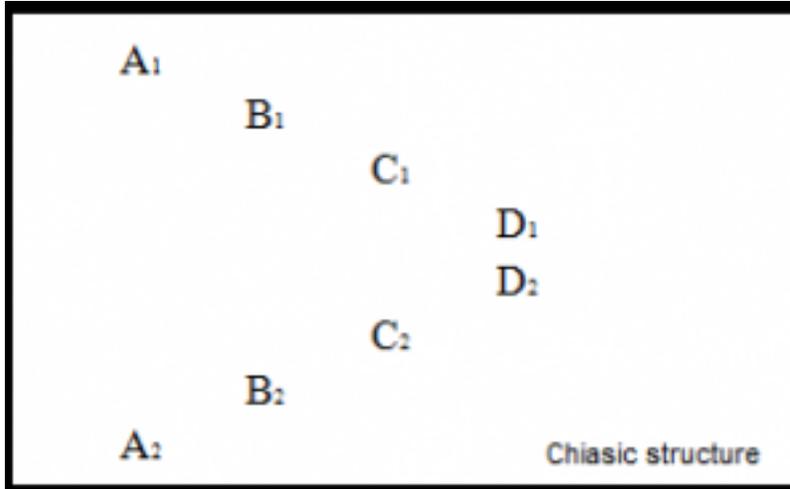
As we continue to slowly walk through the book of Revelation, we will repeatedly see that the book is not a sporadically and feverishly written version of what John saw happening in heaven. Instead, the Book of Revelation has a very carefully nuanced literary structure characteristic of biblical literary traditions in general, and of the Jewish apocalyptic genre/tradition in particular, mixed together with epistolary (letter-writing) and prophetic genres.

When we come to verse 3, we are introduced for the first time to a carefully written series of seven blessings that are interspersed throughout the book. It is too early in our exploration to see the rhythmic pattern of John's presentation and how these seven blessings serve as literary devices that help to organize and communicate John's vision. However, a part of the pattern can be discerned even now.

It is clear that the number seven is a crucial number throughout the book and constitutes the base numeric structure of the book's composition. The word Messiah (anointed one) or "Christ" is used seven times (1:1, 1:2, 1:5, 11:15, 12:10, 20:4, 20:6), John announces Messiah's coming seven times (2:5, 2:16, 3:21, 16:15, 22:6, 22:12, 22:20), seven times the form "Lord God Almighty/Lord of Hosts" is used (1:8, 4:8, 11:17, 15:3, 16:7, 19:6, 21:22). Moreover, there are seven "amens" in the book (1:6, 1:7, 3:14, 5:14, 7:12, 19:4, 22:20), the word "prophets" is referred to seven times (10:7, 11:18, 16:6, 18:20, 18:24, 22:6, 22:9) and the phrase "the one who sits on the throne" is used seven times (4:9, 5:1, 5:7, 5:13, 6:16, 7:15, 21:5). (1)

It, therefore, becomes obvious to any reader that John is very fond of the number seven and uses it intentionally. There are other ways that the number seven is used, usually in multiples (the name of Jesus is used fourteen times and the Lamb is mentioned twenty four times.) At this point in our study it is important that we survey all the seven blessings and see how the first one ([Rev.1:3](#)) is related to the other six blessings. Please, allow us to give a brief explanation about the literary method that ancient Jewish (Biblical and non-biblical) authors frequently used as they composed their works.

In modern biblical studies, this literary structure is called chiasmic, after the Greek Letter Chi (X). Essentially this is the way Semitic thought patterns came to be represented in literary studies. In addition, Jewish poetic style is based on parallelism, on repetition, on analogy as typically the second line or idea repeats the content of the first line, sometimes taking it further, sometimes elaborating or clarifying it. It is easier to first show a diagram of how chiasmic structure looks before I attempt to explain it. The literary unit when analyzed has the following structure:



The sentence, either word-by-word, or at the very least, thought-by-thought is repeated in the beginning and at the end of the literary unit. It is as if the original author goes from **A1** to **B1**, from **B1** to **C1**, from **C1** to **D1**. Then he suddenly switches gears and moves backwards in the same order (**D2**, **C2**, **B2**, **A2**).

We suggest that the first blessing ([Rev.1:3](#)) stands outside of the chiasmic structure that follows it. Its purpose is to summarize or set the stage for the rest of the 6 blessings that are in fact organized in the chiasmic form. Once one looks at the entire set, the parallelism of meaning is very hard to deny. Here is how we see it.

Summary statement: “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things, which are written in it; for the time is near.” ([Rev. 1:3](#)) Each summary statement is connected to [Rev. 1:1-2](#) where we are told that this apocalypse/unveiling concerns events that are soon to come (in vs.3 “for the time is near”).

Chiasmic structure

A1. ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ “Yes,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them.” ([Rev. 14:13](#))

B1. “Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame.” ([Rev. 14:13](#))

C1. Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb! ([Rev. 16:15](#))

C2. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. ([Rev. 20:6](#))

B2. “Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.” ([Rev. 22:7](#))

A2. ‘Blessed are those who obey His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city.’ ([Rev. 22:14](#))

Notice that **A1** and **A2** speak of the death of the believer and one’s eternal destiny (dying in the Lord, having the right to the tree of life, and entering through the gate into the city of the New Jerusalem). John paints a picture for his readers and hearers of the gates of the city with the names of tribes inscribed on them.

Both **B1** and **B2** are without a doubt connected by the desperate need for vigilance (I am coming as a thief and I am coming quickly). Moreover, the idea of keeping is also a connecting factor (keeping the garments from being stolen, keeping the words of the prophecy). (2)

The blessings of **C1** and **C2** are no exception – both speak of the blessed future for the believers (being called to the wedding (3) of the Lamb and deserving of taking part in the first resurrection).

The idea of being “blessed” sometimes gets lost in translation. The Greek word translated as “blessed” is μακάριος (makarios) which is an equivalent of the Hebrew word אֲשֵׁרִי (ashrey) which means happy, joyful, blessed, and found in a favorable circumstance. This noun expresses a passive idea of being on the receiving end of favor and is most often found in the book of Psalms. In fact the book opens with this word, “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked (Ps 1:1).

As we continue to move from verse to verse, and from chapter to chapter we can already see early glimpses of the level of authorial design in the composition of the Book of Revelation within the traditional contours of the genre of Jewish apocalyptic literature.

1 Bauckham Richard, *The Climax of Prophecy*, (Bloomsbury Publishing Edinburgh, 1993), pp.1-38.

2 Jesus spoke of coming as a thief in the night in his apocalyptic discourse in [Mat. 24](#). In his parables, he also used wedding imagery of expectation of God’s Kingdom – as the bride waits for the groom. Weddings are accompanied by a grand feast and one needs “wedding garments” to enter feasts ([Mat 22:11-14](#)).

3 In the first century, Jewish wedding feasts presented two opportunities to join the celebration. One was a general admission as one simply was ready and followed the bridal processional in the courtyard of the groom’s house. The other was by individual invitation, which was dispatched well ahead of time to family and friends.