

## "OVERCOMER": A STUDY IN THE MACRODYNAMIC OF THEME DEVELOPMENT IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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Modalities by which and in which the book of Revelation develops its symbolizations, conceptualizations, and thematic portrayals have been illustrated by a variety of studies appearing in *AUSS* and elsewhere in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Such studies embrace a broadened perspective concerning the nature and usage of Revelation's apocalyptic symbolism, the book's remarkable literary patterns, and the like. For the most part, however, studies of this sort, as well as other types of studies, tend to focus on specific passages and limited materials in Revelation, rather than treating what might be called "macrodynamic"—that is, the book's development of themes in a progressive and integrated fashion throughout its entire scope.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Among such are, e.g., the series of nine studies by Paul S. Minear included in his *I Saw a New Earth: An Introduction to the Visions of the Apocalypse* (Washington, DC, 1968), pp. 201-298 (in Part II, entitled "Issues in Interpretation"); some of the chapter topics in D. T. Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible: A Study of the Book of Revelation* (New York, 1961); and the general thrust of John Wick Bowman's commentary-outline overview as expressed in his *The Drama of the Book of Revelation* (Philadelphia, 1955) and repeated in *IDB* (1962) 4:64-65.

In *AUSS* the following articles by William H. Shea may be noted: "Chiasm in Theme and by Form in Revelation 18," 20 (1982): 249-256; "The Covenantal Form of the Letters to the Seven Churches," 21 (1983): 71-84; "Revelation 5 and 19 as Literary Reciprocals," 22 (1984): 249-257; and "The Parallel Literary Structure of Revelation 12 and 20," 23 (1985): 37-54.

Further *AUSS* articles that may be noted in this connection are the following by Kenneth A. Strand: "The Two Witnesses of Rev 11:3-12," 19 (1981): 127-135; "Two Aspects of Babylon's Judgment Portrayed in Revelation 18," 20 (1982): 53-60; "The Two Olive Trees of Zechariah 4 and Revelation 11," 20 (1982): 257-261; "An Overlooked Old-Testament Background to Revelation 11:1," 22 (1984): 317-325; "The 'Victorious-Introduction' Scenes in the Visions in the Book of Revelation," 25 (1987): 267-288; "The 'Spotlight-on-Last-Events' Sections in the Book of Revelation," 27 (1989): 201-221; and the studies cited in nn. 2 and 22, below.

<sup>2</sup>Exceptions in that they treat to at least some extent a dynamic throughout the book of Revelation are the titles by Bowman and Niles mentioned in n. 1, and by Kenneth A. Strand, "A Further Note on the Covenantal Form in the Book of Revelation," *AUSS* 21 (1983): 251-264; and idem, "The Eight Basic Visions in the Book of

A topic which lends itself well to this kind of study of macrodynamic in thematic development in Revelation is that of "overcomer" or "conqueror" (*ho nikōn*; lit., "the overcoming one" or "the conquering one").<sup>3</sup> The purpose of the present brief study is to provide an overview of the dynamic that is involved in the book of Revelation's development of this theme.

### 1. "Overcomer" in Relationship to Revelation's Major Literary Chiasm

Elsewhere I have called attention to Revelation's major chiastic literary structure, as well as to other of its significant literary patterns.<sup>4</sup> This structure is illustrated on the next page in diagrammatic fashion in **Figure 1**.

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Revelation," *AUSS* 25 (1987): 107-121. Minear's commentary mentioned in n. 1 gives an excellent framework in its chapter titles for a study of Revelation's macrodynamic theme development, but Minear has not followed through to deal with the implications of these titles nor to analyze the relationships and theme development that are involved. The titles for his six main chapters (aside from the prologue and the epilogue) are sufficiently noteworthy to mention here: "The Promise of Victory (1:9-3:22)" (p. 27), "The Lamb as Victor (4:1-8:1)" (p. 63), "The Prophets as Victors (8:2-11:18)" (p. 85), "The Faithful as Victors (11:19-15:4)" (p. 105), "Victory over Babylon (15:5-19:10)" (p. 130), and "Victory over the Devil (19:11-22:7)" (p. 158). These titles triggered my own thinking as to the thrust of the messages of Revelation and to relationships which Minear himself has not elucidated. I see in some cases, however, a slightly different emphasis from what his chapter titles project, and also I treat the material as falling into eight main visions, not six. These are matters that will become clear as we proceed.

<sup>3</sup>"He that overcometh" and "he who conquers" are the standard renditions of the KJV and RSV, respectively, for the Greek nominative singular masculine present participle *ho nikōn* that appears in Rev 2:11, 26; 3:5, 12, 21 within the letters to the seven churches. In 2:7, 17 the dative *tō nikōnti* occurs instead. In this essay I have chosen to use (interchangeably so) the singular terms "overcomer" and "conqueror." The terminology for overcoming or being an overcomer is especially characteristic of the Johannine literature; cf., in addition to the foregoing references, John 16:33; 1 John 2:13, 14; 4:4; 5:4, 5; Rev 5:5; 12:11; 15:2; 17:14; 21:7. With regard to Revelation, H. B. Swete aptly states, "The book is a record and a prophecy of victories won by Christ and the Church" (*The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices*, 3d ed. [New York, 1908], p. 29, col. 1).

<sup>4</sup>See esp. my treatments as given in *Interpreting the Book of Revelation: Hermeneutical Guidelines, with Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis*, 2d ed. (Naples, FL, 1979), pp. 43-52; and in my article "The Eight Basic Visions in the Book of Revelation" (see n. 2, above).

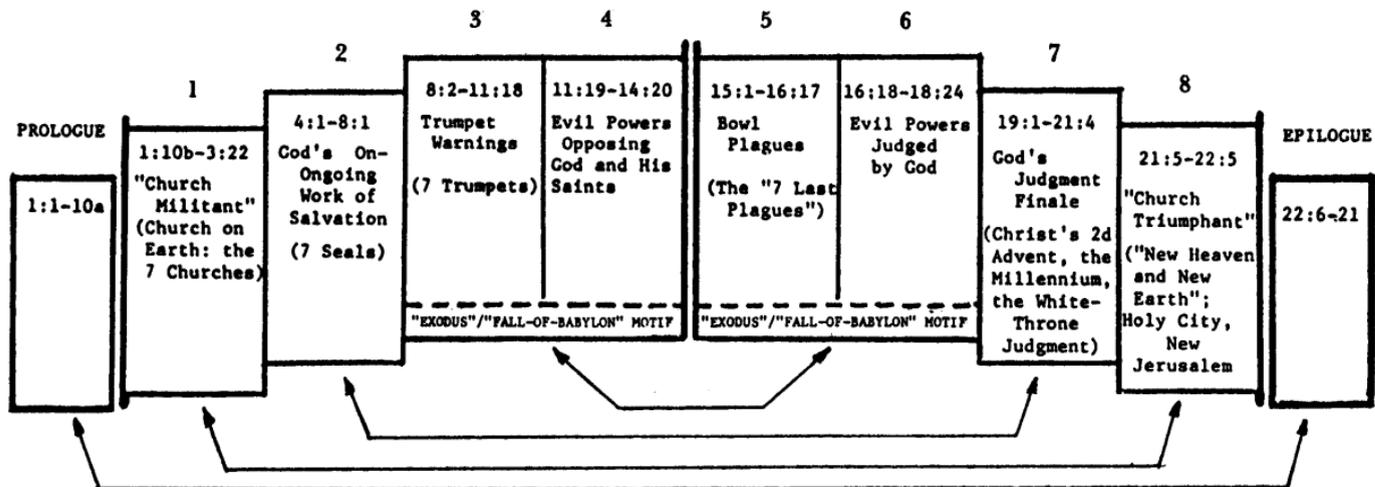
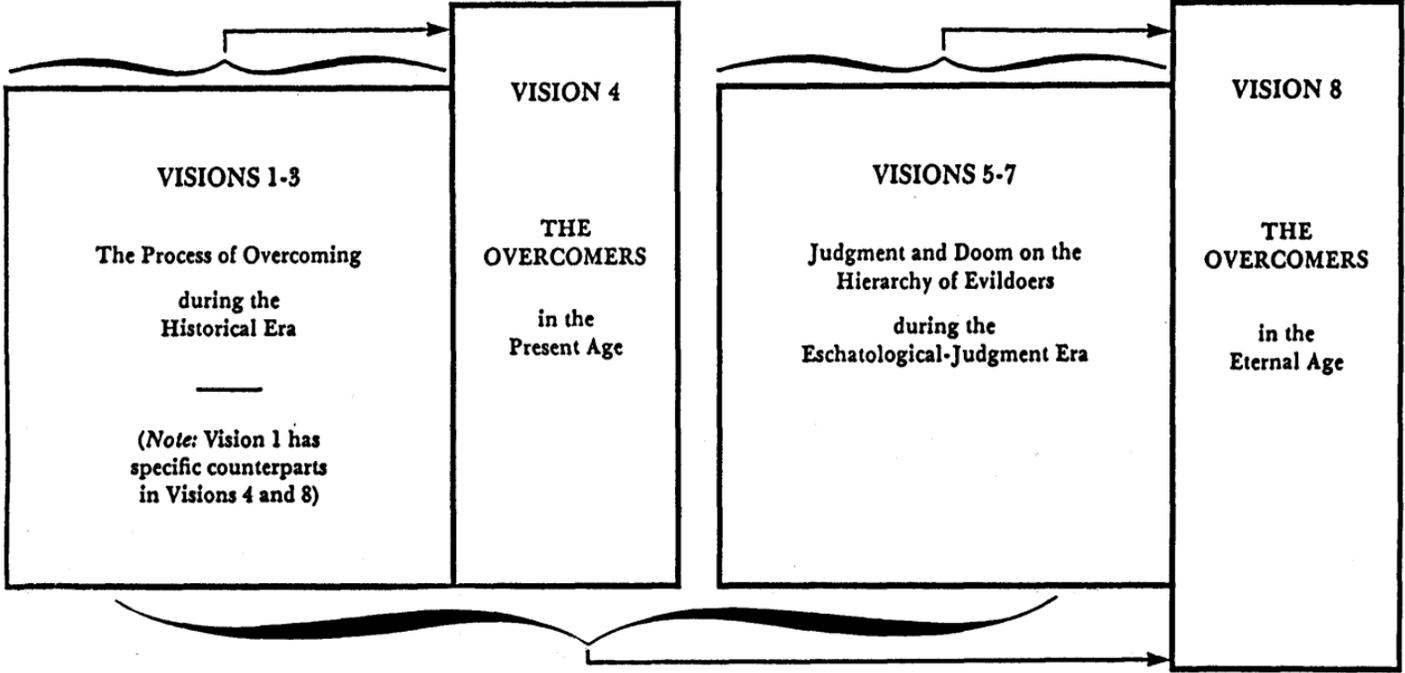


FIGURE 1. THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION (From *AUSS* 25/1 [Spring 1987]: 108)



**FIGURE 2. DIAGRAM SHOWING REVELATION'S DEVELOPMENT OF THE "OVERCOMER" THEME**

Briefly, the book of Revelation is divided into two major parts, each containing four visions. These visions are here numbered consecutively 1 through 8 for convenience. The chiasmic counterparts are not of prime interest to us in the present study, but what is important is the fact that the two major parts of Revelation exist and have distinctive emphases. The first of them depicts “historical-era visions,” and the second depicts “eschatological-judgment-era visions.”

The question we raise here is this: How is the theme of “overcomer” developed both within each of these two major divisions of Revelation and also in totality within the book? As we shall notice below, the introductory vision (vision 1) sets the stage for the theme by pointing out the requisites for becoming an “overcomer.” Vision 8, the chiasmic counterpart to vision 1, indicates the final result of overcoming. However, the last vision in Revelation’s Part I (namely, vision 4) also indicates results of overcoming, albeit in a different way and context.

At the outset, it should be noted that these two portrayals of the results of overcoming match the thematic portrayal developed within each of the book’s two major parts, respectively. And the fact that vision 8 is also a counterpart to vision 1, as noted above, gives that final vision a special relationship to Revelation’s Part I as well as serving as the conclusion to the book’s Part II. In short, we may state that just as vision 1 is an introduction to the entire book of Revelation, not only to the “historical-era visions,” so vision 8 is a conclusion to all that goes before, not simply to the “eschatological-judgment-era visions.” These phenomena are illustrated diagrammatically in **Figure 2**, and their broad features are discussed below.

## 2. “Overcomer” in the Historical-Era Visions

As indicated above and in **Figure 2**, vision 4 is a sort of conclusion to what is introduced in vision 1. It is this particular facet of thematic development that will demand our attention in this section of the present essay.

### “Overcomer” in Vision 1

The theme of “overcomer” appears early in vision 1, as the risen and glorified Christ appears to John in vision as the one who was dead, is alive forever, and holds the keys of the grave and of death (Rev 1:17-18; RSV wording, “keys of Death and Hades”). The implicit suggestion here—made more explicit as the book of Revelation

progresses in its thematic development—is that this victory is a victory also for Jesus' followers.

In the seven letters themselves, the divine Lord points out strengths and weaknesses, indicates needs and counsels, etc. In each letter there is reference to the "overcomer," with a promise in each instance (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).

It should be kept in mind that the divine Christ here addresses his "churches"—that is, people already in covenant relationship with him.<sup>5</sup> They are living in an era during which there is fierce attack on them by powers of evil. As we look at the message to each of the seven churches, we find a variety of ways in which Satan's two major attributes mentioned in John 8:44—lying and murdering—are used as attack principles against God's saints. There are 1) efforts at deception from without<sup>6</sup> and from within,<sup>7</sup> and also self-deception;<sup>8</sup> and 2) persecution that often leads to imprisonment and even to death in martyrdom.<sup>9</sup> In circumstances of this sort, what does it mean to be an "overcomer"?

#### *Vision 4 and the Nature of Overcoming*

As in Rev 12 and 13 the great antidivine trinity launches fierce attacks against Christ and his saints, we find use of the same principles of deception and coercion noted in the messages to the seven churches. The earth-beast with lamblike horns does the ultimate in an effort to deceive (13:11-13), and both he and the sea-beast use coercive methods, even to the death penalty for God's faithful people (vv. 7, 10, 15). The theme of conquering occurs repeatedly throughout vision 4, but the term is used explicitly just once in connection with the saints, in this key statement: "And they have conquered

<sup>5</sup>Shea, "Covenantal Form," and Strand, "A Further Note on the Covenantal Form" (see nn. 1 and 2 above), have demonstrated this by means of an analysis of the conjunction of structural and thematic elements in Revelation. The purpose statement given in the book's own introduction in 1:1-3 is, of course, explicit on the matter right at the outset.

<sup>6</sup>By Nicolaitans (2:6, 15) and Balaam (2:14). The church affected was Pergamum. (Nicolaitans were repelled by the Ephesus church.)

<sup>7</sup>By Jezebel (2:20-23). The church affected was Thyatira.

<sup>8</sup>Particularly true of Sardis (3:1-6) and Laodicea (3:14-22), but was also somewhat the case with Ephesus having left its "first love" (2:4, KJV; cf. v. 5).

<sup>9</sup>Particularly the case for Smyrna (2:8-11), Pergamum (2:12-13), and Philadelphia (3:8-10). John himself was, of course, an exile on the island of Patmos (1:9).

him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Rev 12:11).<sup>10</sup> According to this statement, martyrdom of the saints is victory.

The saints also have overcome through their refusal to be deceived. They are not included with "the whole earth" that "followed the beast with wonder" (13:3); and, moreover, when it is said that "all who dwell on earth will worship it [the sea-beast]," there is exclusion of those whose names are written in the Lamb's "book of life" (v. 8).

As we near the end of vision 4, just before the description of Christ's second advent in 14:14-20, the character of the saints and the meaning of their being "overcomers" are set forth again in the statement, "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!'" (Rev 14:12-13).

### *Visions 2 and 3 in Relationship to the Theme of "Overcomer"*

We must now take a look at visions 2 and 3, the seals and trumpets septets. A review of the contents of these visions is not necessary for our purposes, but what we need to do is to take note of the central thrust and function of each.

The central element for the seals vision is obviously the Lamb's worthiness and ability to break the seven seals so that the great scroll of destiny can be opened. A seven-sealed document of this sort was in ancient Roman law one form of a will or testament, whether the document was a scroll or a codex.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the eternal inheritance of the saints is what is at stake in the opening of this seven-sealed scroll.

<sup>10</sup>English translation of Bible passages herein are from the RSV, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>11</sup>The *biblion* to which reference is made in Rev 5 was probably a scroll (so is the opinion, at least, of most commentators). Contrary to what is sometimes said, this seven-sealed document in ancient Rome could be in a codex format. An example of this sort of ancient Roman will, sealed with the seven seals of the witnesses, has been given in English translation in Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, *Roman Civilization*, vol. 2, *The Empire* (New York, 1955), pp. 279-280. This particular will is that of a Roman cavalryman who executed the document in Egypt in A.D. 142. It was in the form of a "book" of five waxed tablets (see *ibid.*, p. 280, n. 138).

In a dramatic scene John weeps bitterly when he discovers that no one can break the seals and open the scroll that is held by the one who is seated on the throne (i.e., God). But his grief is assuaged as he learns that there is, after all, someone who "has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals"—namely, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David" (Rev 5:1-5). But when he looks, he sees, not a Lion, but "a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain," and this Lamb takes the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne (vv. 6-8). At that point an anthem of praise breaks out. It is a song that signals and emphasizes this victory of the Lamb: "Worthy art thou [the Lamb] to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth" (vv. 9-10).

Thus, the basis for breaking the seals and opening the scroll lies in the victory of Christ the Lamb through his death and his ransoming of human beings by virtue of that death. In turn, the breaking of the seals represents, as stated by David Brown, "the successive steps by which God in Christ clears the way for the final reading of the book [this scroll of destiny] at the visible setting up of Christ's kingdom."<sup>12</sup>

As we move to the trumpets vision, we find that the central theme is prophetic warning. In ancient Israel the trumpet was used, among other things, to sound a warning of approaching danger. It required the word declared by prophets, however, to elucidate the nature of the danger in relationship to the purposes of God. This was true, for instance, of Jeremiah when he announced, "Flee for safety, O people of Benjamin, from the midst of Jerusalem! Blow the trumpet in Tekoa . . . for evil looms out of the north, and great destruction" (6:1; compare 4:5-6). In Amos 3, shortly after the query, "Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid?" (v. 6), the conclusion to this question (and to a whole series of related questions) is given thus: "Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" (v. 7).

As I have indicated elsewhere, the trumpet series itself in the book of Revelation, as well as the interlude in chapters 10 and 11,

<sup>12</sup>Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids, MI, 1948), 6:674, col. 2.

places a focus on the victory of the prophetic word.<sup>13</sup> (The reader must be referred to that discussion for the details, which are too lengthy to repeat here.)

### *Synthesis*

We have found that the seals septet emphasizes victory through the blood of the Lamb and that the trumpets septet places its emphasis upon victory through the prophetic word. These are not unrelated emphases, for the word is attributed divine power in a number of Scriptures (see, e.g., John 17:17, Heb 4:12, and 1 Pet 1:23-25), and is the very instrument by which Christ as Savior is brought to his followers through the Holy Spirit (see, e.g., John 14:26 and 16:12-15; cf. also 17:20). Indeed, the Fourth Gospel quotes Jesus as saying that "the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (6:63).

The significant point for us to notice here, however, is the relationship that these two basic elements in visions 2 and 3—namely, the blood of the Lamb and the word of God—have to the twofold means by which God's saints overcome the dragon in vision 4. To ascertain this, we once again look at the key text mentioned earlier, Rev 12:11: "And they have conquered him [the dragon] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." The "blood of the Lamb" and the "word of their testimony" are the two elements set forth here in vision 4 as basic to the process of overcoming, and thus a connection is made with the central elements in visions 2 and 3, respectively.

The terminology here indicates, of course, that it is the word of "their" (the saints') testimony that is one of the two elements leading to their conquering of the dragon. However, by a comparison with other references in Revelation where the theme of "the word" occurs, we can conclude that what is really involved is the saints' absolute faithfulness in testimony to the divine word in its twofold aspect of "word of God and testimony of Jesus." John himself, for instance, was in exile on Patmos for his faithfulness in this regard (Rev 1:9); and martyrs had been beheaded because of "the testimony of Jesus"

<sup>13</sup>Strand, "The Two Witnesses of Rev 11:3-12," pp. 127-135. My emphasis on the prophetic word parallels somewhat Minear's emphasis on the prophets (see n. 2, above), but the difference is nonetheless significant enough to warrant making a contrast. The distinction is important in relationship to the conclusion reached in my aforementioned article (pp. 134-135), but is also important to the discussion that follows next in the present essay.

and “the word of God” (20:4, literal rendering). Moreover, it is interesting to observe that in Christ’s great “prayer for unity” in John 17, there is a stress on the importance of the word of God in *the lives* of the disciples: “They have kept thy [God’s] word” (v. 6; cf. v. 17 and also 6:58-63).

In short, the first major part of the book of Revelation sets forth not only the conditions and requisites for overcoming in vision 1, but in its second and third visions identifies the two central elements that are involved in reaching this kind of experience, and then in vision 4 comes to a conclusion by describing the outcome. That outcome is that Christ’s followers reach the status of “overcomers” by having withstood to the end the forces of evil. They have been completely victorious over every deception and over the severest persecution.

### 3. “Overcomer” in the Context of the Eschatological-Judgment-Era Visions

The second major part of the book of Revelation deals, as we have noted, with “eschatological-judgment-era visions.” We find that in the first major division of the book, God’s saints have proven that they are overcomers by being willing to be faithful unto death, even as their Lord was faithful unto death. In the introductory scene of vision 1, where Christ appears to John, the description which Christ gives of himself is not, however, simply of his being the one who died, but also as being the one who is now alive again and forevermore. The thrust of the second major part of Revelation leads in the direction of a similar ultimate everlasting-life victory for God’s saints.

On the way to that final victory, however, the eschatological-judgment era must accomplish certain things. The saints have been cruelly maligned, falsely convicted, and unjustly imprisoned and martyred. In this process they are, as we have seen, fully victorious. They have not succumbed to the deceptions and the coercions of the forces of evil. They have even willingly given up their lives. But is this the end? What about their own further destiny? And what about those forces of evil that have so unjustly abused and killed them?

#### *Visions 5-7 and the “Overcomer” Theme*

In the justice of God, there must be vindication of his faithful followers from the wrongful verdicts and punishments they have

suffered.<sup>14</sup> This concept is central to the book of Revelation and is directly related to its “overcoming” theme.<sup>15</sup> As part of the vindication theme, however, there is a reverse side to the saints being declared innocent: namely, the perpetrators and executors of the injustices must themselves be brought to justice.<sup>16</sup>

These guilty oppressors of God’s people are described in Revelation under several metaphors—earth-dwellers (6:10; 11:10 [twice]; 13:8, 12; et al.);<sup>17</sup> “Babylon” (chaps. 17 and 18; see also 14:8 and 16:19); and the great antidivine trinity of dragon, sea-beast, and earth-beast (introduced in chaps. 12-13 but with later appearances or references, as well, and with the earth-beast called the “false prophet”).<sup>18</sup> In visions 5, 6, and 7, we find in sequence the judgment on these various entities.

<sup>14</sup>Many commentators have failed to notice sufficiently what is entailed. G. B. Caird has been particularly perceptive in this regard. He points out that the cry of the souls under the altar in Rev 6:10 is not one representing “personal vindictiveness,” but involves “public justice” based on Hebrew-lawcourt procedure. The “martyrs have been condemned in a human court of law, and that decision stands against them unless it is reversed in a higher court” (*A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries [New York, 1966], p. 85).

<sup>15</sup>For a careful analysis of the theme, see Joel Nobel Musvosvi, “The Concept of Vengeance in the Book of Revelation in Its Old Testament and Near Eastern Context” (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 1986).

<sup>16</sup>This feature has been noted by George E. Mendenhall in a careful and thoroughgoing discussion of the concept of *nqm* in the OT and other ancient Near Eastern materials (*The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* [Baltimore, MD, 1973], pp. 69-104; notice esp. p. 83 regarding Yahweh’s “defensive” and “punitive” actions being “merely two sides of the same coin”).

<sup>17</sup>The term earth-dwellers, *hoi katoikountes epi tēs gēs*, is in the RSV translated “those who dwell upon the earth” or “those who dwell on the earth” (Rev 3:10, 6:10, 8:13, 11:10 [twice], 13:8 [with the word “those” understood], and 13:14; in 17:8 it is translated “the dwellers on earth,” and in 17:2 the same English rendition is given in the RSV but is based on somewhat different Greek phraseology). They are a group in utter opposition to God and his people. Minear, p. 261, points out that “these dwellers are to be known by their dependence on the beast [the sea-beast]: earth-dwellers is synonymous with beast-worshippers (13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8).” It should be noted that the phrase “those who dwell on earth” in 14:6 derives from different Greek terminology: *tous kathēmenous epi tēs gēs*. The gospel is preached to, and presumably can be effective for, this group who “sit” on the earth, in contrast to being settled in it (“cemented down,” as it were).

<sup>18</sup>The “false prophet” in this trio (mentioned by this designation in Rev 16:13, 19:20, and 20:10) is the same as the “false prophetic spirit” in contrast to the Holy Spirit, who is the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:26). In the antidivine trinity of Rev 12-13, the dragon is the evil counterpart to God the Father, the sea-beast is the evil counterpart to Jesus Christ, and the earth-beast is the evil counterpart to the Holy Spirit. Just

The first plague in Rev 16 strikes the earth-dwellers, those who have the "mark of the beast" (see 16:2 in comparison with 13:8, 11-18, and also see 14:9-11).<sup>19</sup> These persons are evidently still in view in connection with the fifth plague, where they are pictured as cursing "the God of heaven for their pain and sores" (v. 10). The justice of what they encounter is announced in conjunction with the third plague, the plague wherein drinking water is turned to blood: "Just art thou [God] in these thy judgments, thou who art and wast, O Holy One. For men have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink. It is their duel!" (vv. 5-6; cf. also v. 7).

Next in the sequence comes the judgment on Babylon. This begins with the drying up of the Euphrates under the sixth plague in 16:12-16 and continues in the seventh plague and throughout the next two chapters of Revelation.<sup>20</sup> In the declaration against Babylon, an entity described as drunk with the blood of saints (Rev 17:6; 18:24), there is a decree to reward her according to her deeds—and even doubly so (Rev 18:6-7). We also find an acclamation of praise to God for having declared against Babylon the judgment she had brought against the saints (v. 20). What is involved is an outworking of the law of "malicious witness" as stated in Deut 19:18-19: The judges "shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother."

Finally, in vision 7, we find the antidivine trinity thrown into the lake of fire—first the beast and false prophet (Rev 19:20) and then

as that "Spirit of truth" bears witness to Jesus (John 14:26; 16:12-15), so this "false-prophet" earth-beast bears witness to, and calls upon human beings to worship, the sea-beast (Rev 13:11-12). For reference to the earth-beast's parody of Pentecost and possible other parodies of the true Holy Spirit, see, e.g., Minear, pp. 124-126, and the article to which he attributes indebtedness: E. Watson and B. Hamilton, "Lumen Christi—Lumen Antichristi: The Exegesis of Apoc. 11:5 and 13:13 in the Mediaeval Latin Fathers," *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa*, 2 (1966): 84-92.

<sup>19</sup>See n. 17, above.

<sup>20</sup>Both the trumpets septet and plagues septet begin their series with imagery pointing back to the plagues on ancient Egypt at the time of the Israelite Exodus. With the sixth item in each series, however, the background shifts to Babylon through mention of the "Euphrates," the river of Babylon (9:14 and 16:12). Thus these two septets carry what I have elsewhere referred to as the "Exodus-from-Egypt"/"Fall-of-Babylon" motif (see, e.g., my "The Two Witnesses," pp. 128-129, including the diagram on p. 129). In both instances, the theme actually carries into the next vision beyond the septet itself. Cf. **Figure 1** in the present essay.

the great dragon (20:10). A picture is given, as well, of the great "white-throne" judgment, after which all vestiges of evil will be gone forever (20:11-15). The outcome is that there will be "a new heaven and a new earth" (21:1), with the "former things" passed away (v. 4).

### *Vision 8 and the "Overcomer" Theme*

Vision 8 is devoted to describing the eternal inheritance of the saints—the glorious holy city and the new earth. During the historical era, the true followers of God and of the Lamb were faithful unto death and thus were "overcomers." In the eschatological-judgment-era visions, the malicious oppressors of the saints have received their due sentence and doom. No longer are they to plague God's saints. And thus in vision 8, Revelation's "overcomer" theme reaches its ultimate climax and conclusion in the granting to the overcomers all the things promised to them in the letters to the churches in the introductory vision of the book.<sup>21</sup>

## 4. *Conclusions and Implications*

### *General Summary*

In the preceding discussion we have noticed how the entire book of Revelation develops the theme of "overcomer." The requisites for becoming an overcomer are first indicated in vision 1. Next, in the succeeding visions of the first major part of the book there is development of this theme. As the saints appropriate what is described as their needs in vision 1, they are able to do so by means of the blood of the Lamb and the divine word. Visions 2 and 3 treat these elements, respectively. Vision 4 then describes the results: As the antidivine trinity attacks God's saints through the utmost of deception and coercion, these saints are victorious; they do not

<sup>21</sup>Almost without exception, the items promised in chaps. 2 and 3 are reiterated quite explicitly in chaps. 21 and 22. Thus, e.g., "eat of the tree of life" (2:7 and 22:2), "not be hurt by the second death" (2:11 and 21:7-8), "power over the nations" or "reign for ever and ever" (2:26 and 22:5; cf. ref. to "the nations" in 21:24), names not blotted out of the "book of life" (3:5 and 21:27), God's name written on the saints (3:12 and 22:4), etc. The glories set forth in chaps. 21 and 22, moreover, go even beyond the promises noted in the letters to the seven churches, both in vastness and grandeur. Vision 8 in Revelation makes it crystal clear that every need of the redeemed saints will be abundantly met, including food, water, light, a safe and comfortable dwelling place, direct fellowship with God, and the privilege of rulership.

succumb to the antidivine trinity, but steadfastly refuse to worship the dragon, the beast, and the image to the beast. In this process, they may yield their lives, but death for Christ is victory. And thus they are indeed conquerors.

In the second major part of Revelation, the reverse side of the coin is first described. This entails a succession of steps in the condemnation and punishment of the various opponents of God's people—those who have unjustly condemned, imprisoned, and killed them. These now meet their own fate in a reversal of doom as the just reward for their nefarious work. Then finally, in vision 8, comes the climactic conclusion to the book of Revelation and to its "overcomer" theme—the description of the saints of God, now forever free from deceivers and persecutors, in possession of their eternal inheritance.

### *Some Significant Aspects of the "Overcomer" Motif in Revelation*

In conclusion, several significant elements in Revelation's development of the "overcomer" theme deserve special notice:

1. The theme is integral to the entire book. Vision 1 reveals the need for, and importance of, overcoming, as well as pointing out the remedies. The final vision depicts the final reward for overcoming. And the second to seventh visions indicate the *means* for overcoming and the *steps* on the way to the final victorious outcome.

2. During the historical era, the saints overcome both deception and coercion. As they do this by "the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony," they prove their fitness for a home in God's New Jerusalem and new earth, wherein enters nothing that defiles and where there is no one who practices falsehood (see Rev 21:27). But this is only part of the picture—the positive part. Those who in any way defile and destroy (referred to in Rev 11:18 as "destroyers of the earth") must themselves be destroyed, and the eschatological-judgment-era visions describe this procedure—the negative part of the process. Obviously, such persons and entities cannot be allowed entrance to the New Jerusalem and the new earth to perpetuate there throughout eternity the evils so characteristic of their existence during this "historical era" of earth's history.

Thus, there is a twofold aspect to the saints' eternal reward as "overcomers": 1) It is their deserved outcome for having demonstrated what it means to be a true "overcomer" in the present life,

and 2) it entails for them a well-deserved release from being any longer the prey of deceptive and persecuting forces.

3. The statement in Rev 21:7 that the conqueror “shall have this heritage” (KJV, “shall inherit all things”), is followed immediately in verse 8 by a categorization of those who, by way of contrast, find “their lot” to be “in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.” When we compare the characteristics listed for these sufferers of “the second death” with the problems enumerated in the messages to the seven churches in Rev 2 and 3, it is apparent that these categories of non-inheritors in Rev 21 reflect the very same characteristics as the non-overcomers in the churches. Since it is clear that finally only the two classes, overcomers and non-overcomers, exist (i.e., only those who do not worship the beast and those who do so, those who are not in Babylon and those who are in her), it is also clear that all members of the seven churches have eventually and with finality decided whether or not to meet the requirements for overcoming.

4. The “overcomer” theme as applied to God’s saints is not to be separated from that same theme in relationship to Christ as the Overcomer *par excellence*. This basic fact is highlighted as the very keynote with which the first vision begins—the Lord Jesus victorious in death, in resurrection, and in eternal life (1:18). Revelation makes clear that the same series of victories (or “conquerings”) are what lie before Christ’s faithful followers.

Moreover, the Lamb’s victories are made manifest throughout the entire book of Revelation: in Christ’s breaking the seals to open the seven-sealed scroll, in the efficacy of the prophetic word, in Christ’s sustaining power for the saints in their trials, in his defeating all the forces of evil and bringing them to their eventual doom, and in his providing for his saints a new heaven and new earth wherein dwells only righteousness. All this series of Christ’s victories becomes, of course, the saints’ victories too.

5. Christ’s victories summarized above may be classified into two basic kinds in relationship to the statement in Rev 22:12-13 (cf. 1:7-8) that Christ is the “Alpha and Omega” (i.e., ever-present with and for his followers in the “here-and-now”) and that he is coming to reward all according to their deeds (i.e., his second advent, which relates to the disenfranchisement, dethronement, and destruction of the evil forces and to the saints’ own eternal reward).<sup>22</sup> The

<sup>22</sup>See Kenneth A. Strand, “Chiastic Structure and Some Motifs in the Book of Revelation,” *AUSS* 16 (1978): 407-408; also cf. *Interpreting*, pp. 43-44.

first is the victory in and through suffering, and the second is the vindication process that will bring an end to suffering.

6. A further word is in order regarding the nature of the saints' overcoming experience. In the setting of the book of Revelation, the term "the blood of the Lamb" signifies far more than accepting Christ's sacrifice *per se* (though from a theological perspective this feature must be included as foundational). The saints' absolute willingness to *have their own blood shed* is at stake; they are willing to follow their Master in being, as it were, "sheep to be slaughtered" (see Rom 8:36 and the OT reference there cited, Ps 44:22; also cf. 2 Cor 4:1-10).

The term "word of their testimony," moreover, means utmost faithfulness to God's word in all circumstances. Like their Lord's giving before Pontius Pilate the "good confession" (1 Tim 6:13), so too must his faithful followers be ready to give the "good confession" before Roman or other judges, even though this might mean their death. In short, their lives must be fully imbued with Christ's character. His overcoming is not to be theirs merely by way of example; it is to be theirs experientially in every fiber of their being.

7. One further element in Revelation's "overcomer" theme deserves notice here: There is throughout Revelation a complete "lock-step" vision-by-vision *progression* in thematic development, much as is the case also regarding the "Victorious-Introduction" scenes to the eight visions.<sup>23</sup> Briefly, the statement of need comes first (vision 1); then follows the account of the work of the once-dead, but now living and powerful, Lamb—a work which is foundational for the salvation of humankind (vision 2); and next we meet the proclamation of the prophetic word that confronts human beings with the choice of accepting or rejecting the salvific work of Christ (vision 3). As we move to the next thematic section (vision 4), we discover a climax to the thematic development of the foregoing visions.

But precisely here, in vision 4, we find also another interesting motif introduced—that of the antagonistic forces comprising the anti-divine trinity, Babylon, and beast-worshippers. These enemies of God and his people are introduced in a ranking from the top of the hierarchy downward: the dragon (chap. 12), the sea-beast and earth-beast/"false prophet" duo (chap. 13), Babylon (14:8), and potential beast-worshippers (14:9-11; cf. also 13:8, 12, 14). Then, as we have noticed earlier, the subsequent three visions (5, 6, and 7)

<sup>23</sup>Strand, "The 'Victorious-Introduction' Scenes."

reveal in *reverse sequence* the judgments and doom against these same evil entities: first the recipients of the mark of the beast in 16:2, then Babylon in 16:19 and chapters 17 and 18, and next the “beast” (sea-beast) and “false prophet” (earth-beast) in 19:20, followed by the dragon himself in 20:10.<sup>24</sup> This brings the sequential developments finally to vision 8, which, as we have seen, describes the grand eternal culmination to which all the previous visions of this Apocalypse have pointed forward.

Thus, vision 4 serves a multiple role. For one thing, not only does it climax the previous three historical-era visions, but it introduces entities that are treated further in the ensuing three eschatological-judgment-era visions. In this particular sense it may be called a “swing” or “hinge” vision, even though it is itself set fully within the historical-era portion of Revelation (i.e., before the book’s major chiastic dividing line between chaps. 14 and 15). In addition to this feature of its double role within Revelation’s basic structure and conceptualization, vision 4 directly for the first time brings to light *specifically* the various antidivine parties (under the symbolic designations already mentioned above). In fact, this vision and the three following ones form a chiasm of their own—a chiasm which illuminates the rise and demise of these aggressor forces (as also indicated above in the immediately preceding paragraphs).<sup>25</sup> This chiasm may be illustrated diagrammatically, as is done in **Figure 3**.

### *In Conclusion*

The book of Revelation is indeed a beautifully crafted literary piece, one whose literary patterns and literary progressions highlight and illuminate various significant motifs in NT theology. In this essay one such vital motif has served to illustrate a macrodynamic in Revelation’s theme development—namely, that of “overcomer,” which is set forth most strikingly in its double aspect of prevailing against deception and coercion, even unto death itself (in the historical era), and of inheriting everlasting life and joy in the new earth and new Jerusalem (in the eschatological-judgment era).

<sup>24</sup>A diagram of this phenomenon is presented in Strand, “Chiastic Structure and Some Motifs,” p. 403. See also **Figure 3** in the present essay for a reprint of this diagram.

<sup>25</sup>Shea, “The Parallel Literary Structure of Revelation 12 and 20,” pp. 44-51, provides a fascinating and instructive analysis of various structural parallels and thematic correspondences between the chapters at each end of the chiasm.

**FIGURE 3. DIAGRAM OF THE RISE AND DEMISE OF THE  
EVIL HIERARCHY (From AUSS 16/2 [Autumn 1978]: 403)**

(only the first verse of multi-verse references is given)

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- A. Dragon (12:3)  
 B. Sea-Beast (13:1)  
 C. Earth-Beast = False Prophet (13:11)
- 
- D. Babylon (14:8)  
 E. Beast-Worshippers (14:9)
- 
- E' Beast-Worshippers (16:2)  
 D' Babylon (16:19)
- 
- C' Earth-Beast = False Prophet (19:20)  
 B' Sea-Beast (19:20)  
 A' Dragon (20:2)
-