An Audience-Oriented Approach to Revelation 21: 5–8

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Abstract

This article applies the so-called audience-oriented approach (a literary exegesis which focuses on how the implied audience understands and responds to the narrative on the basis of its presupposed knowledge and what the audience has heard so far in the narrative) to the reading of Revelation 21: 5–8. It will show that this passage, which stands as the last in the series of visions concerning the last judgment and in which God himself is said to have spoken, functions as the fulfillment of the promise made earlier to the faithful ones (to the conquerors in chapters 2 and 3, to the souls under the altar (6: 9–11), to the thirsty (7: 16), etc). At the same time, the pairing of the promise of eternal blessing with the final damnation of the unfaithful helps to heighten the audience’s experience of the “not yet” and the “already” here of the new creation. For the audience, infidelity and all sorts of sin remain possible. To be a conqueror or a coward depends on how one responds to God’s words in his or her deeds here and now. For after all, everyone is judged based on one’s own deeds (20: 12–13).

I. State of Research

The pronouncement in Rev 21: 5–8, as Leon Morris have pointed out, “is noteworthy as one of the very few occasions in the book of Revelation on which God himself is said to speak.”¹ Scholars and commentators to various degrees are aware of the significance of this passage within the book of Revelation. Yet there has not been any study so far which focuses on the text of Rev 21: 5–8—apart from general treatment in various commentaries on the book of Revelation and a number of articles which treat Rev 21: 5–8 as a part of a larger section.² Among these works a few are worth mentioning here to show how scholars have approached this passage.³

¹ Leon Morris, Revelation (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Revised Edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 239. Other passages in Revelation where God himself is said to speak are 1: 8, and perhaps 16: 1, 17.
² See, for example, a short article by Carol J. Dempsey “Revelation 21: 1–8” Interpretation 65, Issue 4 (October 2011) 400–02.
³ For overview of various methods used by modern scholars to interpret the Book of Revelation, see Russell S. Morton, Recent Research on Revelation (Recent Research in Biblical Studies, 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014)
J. Lambrecht treats Rev 20: 11–15 and 21: 1–8 as the last two visions in a series of seven visions concerning the final judgment (19: 11–21: 8). He thinks that these two visions are parallel to each other. He reads 20: 11–15 as a vision concerning God’s final judgment of Death and Hades, as well as of those whose names are not found written in the book of life. Rev 21: 1–8 is read by him as a vision concerning the new heaven and the new earth in which God proclaims his final blessings on the faithful and final damnation on the unfaithful. Lambrecht thinks that God’s promise to the conquerors in verse 7—that they will take part in his divine filial relationship—is the climax of this section of the narrative.

In contrast with Lambrecht, who sees Rev 21: 1–8 in relation to the previous narrative (19: 11–15), J. A. du Rand regards Rev 21: 1–8 as a transition passage to the narrative of the new Jerusalem that follows it (21: 9–22: 5). Thus, he takes 21: 1–22: 5 together as a unit belonging to the section which speaks about the new Jerusalem. Within Rev 21: 1–8, du Rand sees a chiastic structure in vv. 3–8. According to his structure, verse 5a, in which God declares that he will make everything new, is the pivotal point of this section.

As with du Rand, David Mathewson also sees Rev 21: 5–8 as an integral part of the narrative concerning the new heaven and the new earth (21: 1–22: 5). Focusing his study on the meaning and function of the OT in this section of the narrative, Mathewson suggests that Rev 21: 5b–8 contains quotations and allusions in particular to Second Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and the Psalms. In his view, John employs various OT allusions through the voice of the one who sits on the throne in order to make legitimate and give divine validity to the prophetic words in the previous passage (21: 1–5a). Furthermore, he asserts that this passage functions rhetorically as an exhortation to the audience to take a course of action based on the prophetic pronouncement of salvation and judgment which is guaranteed by the one who sits on the throne.

David E. Aune regards Rev 21: 5–8 as the second sub-unit within Rev 21: 1–8, which is the third and last sub-section within Rev 19: 11–21: 8. He holds that Rev 21: 5–8 consists of seven sayings which make a 3 + 4 pattern; the first three are introduced with verbs of saying, while the last four are not. These sayings “succinctly summarize the central message of Revelation,” which includes the promise of eternal blessedness for the faithful and of eternal punishment for the unfaithful.

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9 Mathewson, A New Heaven and a New Earth, 93–94.
Thus, while scholars and commentators appreciate the significance of the pronouncement in 21: 5–8 within the book of Revelation, attention has been focused particularly on how this passage functions within the larger unit of the narrative. Whatever be the literary place of the section, if one agrees that through his written prophecy John the Seer, the writer of the book of Revelation, is “aiming to strengthen the threatened identity of his churches and to orient it by this new symbolic universe,”\textsuperscript{11} then an analysis on how the readers or the audience understand and respond to such a significant pronouncement of salvation and judgment narrated in this passage deserves more attention.

This article, which takes an audience-oriented approach,\textsuperscript{12} will focus on how the implied audience of the book of Revelation, based on the memory of what they have heard up to this point of the narrative, and based on their presupposed knowledge of the OT,\textsuperscript{13} understand and respond to the text of Rev 21: 5–8 as they hear John finally tells them about the voice of the one who sits on the throne, God’s voice, who pronounces the words of blessing and judgment.

## II. Literary Context

First, I will offer an overview of the narrative that was previously heard by the audience. This is crucial for the understanding of the literary context of the passage. Then, this will be followed by an analysis on the structure of Rev 21: 5–8, which will serve as a guideline for my exegesis to this passage.

From the very beginning of the book of Revelation, the audience hear John introduce various characters within the book. John introduces himself as a “servant” who bears witness to the “servants”\textsuperscript{14} of Jesus Christ (1: 1). John introduces also other characters: the seven

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\textsuperscript{13} Although Gregory K. Beale (The Book of Revelation [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999] 81–86) suggests that the readers of Revelation probably came from an illiterate pagan Greek background and would have been unable to understand the OT context, the text itself indicates that the implied audience of Revelation have a good knowledge of the OT and its background.

\textsuperscript{14} Thus, the audience of the book of Revelation identify themselves as the “servants” to whom John, the servant, bears witness. This is another reason why “audience,” which is a collective noun, is used here in the plural sense.
churches, the one like the son of man, the angels, and the spirit before “his throne” (1: 4). Above all these characters, John gives a privileged place for the audience to hear the central character, God, speak for himself. God introduces himself as “the Alpha and the Omega, the one who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (1: 8). This introduction confirms God’s sovereignty over all and his everlasting power. The audience, therefore, are assured that the “throne” before which the angels and the spirits are present, is the throne of the Almighty, God’s throne.

In the letters to the seven churches John reveals to the audience the antagonist: Satan, who also sits on a throne. Satan’s throne is found in the dwelling place of the people of Pergamum (2: 13). Moreover, as God has supporting characters (angels, spirits, etc.), Satan’s evil force is also supported by the OT figures of Jezebel (2: 20) and Balaam (2: 14), whose evil deeds are known to the audience. It raises the tense question: Who has the right to sit on the throne? Who is the true ruler?

John does not give the answer immediately. Instead, by repeating the command to write to the churches (2: 1, 8, 12, 18; 3: 1, 7, 14), John underlines the importance of the message he is writing. The letters repeatedly encourage the churches to remain faithful and to become the conquerors (2: 11, 26; 3: 5, 12, 21) in order to receive the promises, including the promise to be saved from the second death (2: 11) and to have their name remain in the book of life (3: 5). At the end of the seventh letter, the audience are given the answer to their question, “who is the ruler?” and “to whom does the throne belong?” They are told that not only the Son of Man, the one who conquers, who sits on the throne with his father, but also all those who conquer are promised a place on the throne (3: 21). The throne ultimately and always belongs to God and to Christ, the Son of Man, but the conquerors will enjoy a share of the throne because—as the audience will hear in God’s own pronouncement in our passage—they will become sons of God (21: 7).15

The audience then hear about the vision of the heavenly temple (chaps. 4–5), which is dominated by the reign of the enthroned God and the Lamb. The Lamb is the only one who is able to open the scroll which is held by the one who sits on the throne (5: 1–5). Then the audience are told about the opening of the seven seals (6: 1–7: 17). When the fifth seal was opened, the souls of the holy ones under the altar appear and make the prayer of supplication, asking for vengeance of their blood (6: 9–11).16 But these holy ones are asked to wait until the number of witnesses is filled. The promise to the souls under the altar gives the audience hope for the vindication of the faithful ones. Then the audience are told about the 144,000 people from the twelve tribes of Israel who receive the seal (7: 1–8) as the mark of salvation. The one who sits on the throne will protect these people (7: 15), and the Lamb will be their shepherd to guide them to the spring of living water (7: 17).

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16 It is the only example of prayer of supplication found in Revelation. About the significance to this passage for the understanding of the whole book of Revelation, see, John Paul Heil, “The Fifth Seal (Rev 6, 9–11) as a Key to the Book of Revelation,” Bib 74 (1993) 220–43.
Then a series of confrontations with the evil power is presented in the narrative of the two witnesses (11: 3–12), the woman and her child (12: 1–18), and the confrontation between the beast and God’s people (13: 6–7). The evil power appears as a dragon, and beasts from the sea and land. This series of confrontations culminates in the victory over the beast (15: 2–4). The narrative of the seven trumpets (8: 6–9; 21; 11: 15–19) and the seven bowls (16: 1–21), which are characterized by the growing intensity of confrontation with the evil power, help the audience to realize the intensity and significance of God’s inevitable judgment over the evil power and the salvation of the faithful ones.

After the destruction of Babylon, the city which is full of uncleanness and abominations (chaps. 17–18), the audience are told about seven visions involving final judgment. These are the final confrontations of the Lamb and his armies, with Satan, the beasts, and their followers. They hear the last scene of God’s victory over his enemies and are told about the great white judgment seat and the one who sits on it. The earth and heaven flee from his presence (20: 11). All the dead, the small and the great, stand before the throne and are judged according to their deeds (20: 12–13). The enemy of God, Death and Hades, are thrown into the lake of fire, which is the second death (20: 14). So also are those whose names are not found in the book of life (20: 15). When the audience hear the descriptions of this final judgment, they know that the time of vengeance for the blood of the holy ones has come. But, suspense is aroused concerning what happens to the faithful and concerning the reward for those whose name is written in the book of life (3: 5) and the souls under the altar (6: 9).

When the last vision involving the judgment is unfolded, the audience finally hear what they have expected. As the former heaven and earth have passed away, John introduces to them the vision of the new heaven and the new earth (21: 1). However, there is no description of the reward for the faithful ones. What they hear is a description of the holy city, the new Jerusalem, which is described as a bride prepared for her husband (21: 2). Only in 21: 3 do the audience hear about the “men” and “people.” Nonetheless, the suspense remains because these people are not called by any of the names with which the audience are already familiar, such as: “those with the seal on their forehead” (7: 4), “the holy ones” (11: 8), “the conquerors” (chaps. 2–3). The suspense is finally answered when the audience hear again the voice of the one who sits on the throne announcing the eternal reward for the faithful and the unfaithful: the second death for the unfaithful, and, for the faithful, the promise to be sons of God.

This review shows that, within the book of Revelation, Rev 21: 5–8 stands at the very end of the series of visions concerning the final judgment. Since the beginning of Revelation the audience hear the narrative that leads them to expect the ultimate victory of God who sits on the throne, the Lamb and the faithful witnesses. Now when the final judgment on evil comes, the audience are ready to hear about the rewards which are promised to the conquerors (chaps. 2–3) and the holy ones under the altar (6: 9–11). The conquerors will not only inherit the new Jerusalem, they will also come into a special relationship with God: becoming God’s own sons. Such an attractive promise, however, is followed immediately by a stern warning to those who do evil. The final destiny of these unfaithful ones is in the lake which burns with fire and sulfur.
Concerning the structure of this passage, the text of Rev 21: 5–8 can be divided into three parallel sub-units according to the occurrences of verbs of “saying,” which introduce the direct speech of the one who is sitting on the throne: καὶ εἶπεν (5a), καὶ λέγει (5c), καὶ εἶπέν μοι (6a). In the first speech, the one sitting on the throne says that he will make all things new (v. 5ab). In the second, he commands to write because these words are faithful and true (v. 5cd). In the third, which is much longer, the voice affirms that “they have come to be” (v. 6ab), then confirms his sovereign identity as the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (v. 6c), which is followed by the promise of life-giving water (v. 6d) and the promise to the conqueror to inherit “these things” and to become God’s son (v. 7). The last statement of the third speech speaks about the eternal punishment to those who do evil (v. 8). The passage, therefore, can be outlined as follows:

καὶ εἶπεν: I make all things new (5ab)
καὶ λέγει: Write, for these words are trustworthy and true (5cd)
καὶ εἶπέν μοι: a. They have come to be (6ab)
b. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (6c)
c. I will give living water without charge (6d)
d. The conqueror will inherit these things and I will make him my son (7)
e. There is eternal punishment for the unfaithful (8)

As can be seen in this outline, the passage contains attractive promises beginning with God’s assurance to make all things new, and culminating in the promise to the conqueror to be the son of God. However, the voice of the one sitting on the throne ends with a stern warning to the unfaithful. The exegesis, which is based on this outline, will show how the audience, based on what they have heard and what the narrator presumes they know, respond to the narrative as it unfolds.

III. Meaning

1st speech: I make all things new (v. 5ab)

After John introduces the last vision (in the series of seven visions concerning the final judgment) with καὶ εἶδον, saying that he saw a new heaven and a new earth (21: 1), a heavenly voice was heard (21: 3–4) proclaiming God’s presence among his people. Then in verse 5a John finally reveals to the audience that now it is the one who is sitting on the throne himself who is going to speak. The audience readily identify “the one sitting on the throne.” Although they have heard about the throne of Satan and the beast (2: 13; 13: 2; 16: 10), they know now that the voice from the throne must be that of God, not only because “the one sitting on the

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17 Scholar have proposed different outlines of this passage. Aune (Revelation 17–22, 1113–14) thinks that it is a collection of seven sayings, so he divides it into seven sub-units. Du Rand (“The New Jerusalem,” 290) reads vv.5–8 together with vv. 3–4 and places it in a chiastic structure.
“Behold, I make all things new.” These words are a clear allusion to Isa 43: 19. In its original context, Isa 43: 18–19 contains an exhortation for Israel to no longer dwell on the “former things” but to consider God’s promise of a new creation where he will restore his people from exile to their homeland. In 21: 1 the audience have already heard the allusion to Isa 65: 17 and 66: 22 when they were told about the passing away of the
former heaven and the former earth and the coming of the new heaven and the new earth. Just previously, in 21: 4b, they have also heard another allusion to Isa 65: 17 and 43: 18 when a heavenly voice declared that the former things have passed away. The “cumulative effect” of these allusions and the audience’s knowledge of the judgment of Babylon (in chaps. 17–18) brings about a more complete picture in their minds concerning the new exodus. Following the deliverance from Babylon, the holy ones in the book of Revelation are restored to their homeland, a new heaven and new earth, in a new exodus.

The audience can notice two changes to the LXX text which John makes here. In Isa 43: 19 God says, “ἰδοὺ ποιῶ καινά,” while here he says, “ἰδοὺ καινὰ ποιῶ πάντα.” The first change is that πάντα is added into the text of Isa 43: 19. God does not say that “I am making a new thing,” but that, “I am making all things new.” Since the audience just heard about the new heaven, the new earth, and the new Jerusalem (21: 1–2), they readily understand that the statement summarizes the visions they heard in vv. 1–4. The newness of all is emphasized by the change of place of καινά toward the beginning of the phrase. However, a question arises whether καινός means “renovation of the old order” or “replacement with entirely new order.”

The word καινός basically has the nuance of newness in nature or quality. Although God’s new creation is radically new in quality or nature, it stands in continuity with the present one. But the audience have just heard that the former heaven and the former earth have passed away (21: 1, 4b). The completely new order replaces the old one. The audience have to face the tension between the continuity and discontinuity of the old and the new.

Moreover, the verb ποιέω, which is in the present tense, is used here with a future meaning. The two previous verses that contain the future promises are in the future tense (vv. 3–4). The present ποιέω is used here in order to enforce “the certainty that the future new creation will occur. It is… foreseeing the time when God will be creating all things new.” It is something that the audience expect will be fulfilled in the future. But at the same time, the audience also

23 Mathewson, A New Heaven and a New Earth, 63.
24 Wilfrid J. Harrington (Revelation [SP 26; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993] 208) and Ben Witherington III (Revelation [NCBC; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003] 255) emphasize the difference in meaning in the two sentences. That scholars are divided concerning the nuance of the word καινός, see Osborne, Revelation, 736–37.
25 J. Behm, “καινός,” TDNT 3.447–49. The two most common words for “new” are νέος and καινός. νέος signifies “what was not there before,” “what has only just arisen or appeared.” καινός signifies “what is new and distinctive” as compared to other things. νέος is new in time and origin, καινός is what is new in nature, different from the usual, impressive, better than the old, superior in value or attraction.
27 So Beale, The Book of Revelation, 1052–53, and others. Beale asserts that this usage of the present is called “prophetic present.” It functions as the Hebrew prophetic perfect, namely to express the certainty of something that will happen in the future.
28 Beale, The Book of Revelation, 1053; Blount (Revelation, 380) also notes, “This general promise, though given in the present tense, is surely about the future.”
know that the new creation is already present because, as God has made (ποιήσαντι) heaven and earth (14: 7), Christ—who washed away “our” sins (including those of the audience) in his own blood—has made (ἐποίησεν) “us” (including the audience) into a kingdom to serve God (1: 6). For the audience, God’s creation and redemption, therefore, must have begun.

Thus, this authoritative and promising statement from the enthroned God confirms the sovereignty of God the creator who makes all things new. It gives the audience an unwavering certainty of the new creation. On the other hand, it brings the audience into a paradoxical situation, a situation in-between: between “continuity” and “discontinuity” of the old and the new, between “already” begun and “not yet here” of the new creation.

2nd speech: Write, for my words are trustworthy and true (v. 5cd)

The audience hear John introducing the second speech saying, “And he says.” In the first speech John introduces the voice of the one who is sitting on the throne by saying καὶ εἶπεν (in the aorist). Here he introduces again the voice by employing a parallel expression καὶ λέγει (in the present) to emphasize the vividness of his vision. John does not mention the speaker. The audience, therefore, conclude that the words which follow come from God.30 The repetition of the narrator’s (John’s) introduction to God’s voice draws the audience’s attention to what God is going to say further.

The content of the second speech is, “Write, for these words are faithful and true.” So far the audience have heard John commanded to write to the seven churches by the Son of Man (1: 11, 19; 2: 1, etc.), by a divine voice (14: 13), and by an angel (19: 9). Here the command to write comes from God himself. The audience, therefore, understand the importance of the message.

John is commanded to write because “these words are faithful and true.” This statement brings a great assurance to the audience. God now becomes the witness for the truth of his own words. The word faithful (πιστός) reminds the audience of Christ, who is called the witness, the faithful (1: 5; 19: 11), and the faithful witness (3: 14). They also recall the people of Smyrna, who are encouraged to remain faithful (2: 10), and Antipas, who is called “my faithful witness” (2: 13). The audience have also heard the word true (ἀληθινός) used as an attribute of Christ (3: 7, 14; 19: 11) and of God (6: 10; 15: 3; 16: 7; 19: 2). Here “faithful” and “true” are the attributes of “these words,” the words of God. As God is ἀληθινός (6: 10), and Christ, the word of God (19: 13), is ὁ ἀληθινός (19: 11), the words of God are also ἀληθινοί. In 19: 9 John has been commanded by a divine being to write “the true words of God” (19: 13). Now, it is God himself who gives the command to write because he guarantees the faithfulness and the truthfulness of his words. The audience easily understand “these words” as referring to the words just uttered in 21: 1–5b.31 However, they also understand the command to write, which now comes from the most authoritative figure in the book of Revelation—and, in fact, this is the

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30 Some scholars suggest that the shift from εἶπεν to λέγει might indicate the change of speaker. It might be the voice of an angel. However, it is not necessarily so for the audience. As Harrington (Revelation, 208) suggests, it is easier to suppose that God is the speaker throughout. See also, Robert H. Mounce, The Book of Revelation (NICNT 17; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 373.

31 Beale, The Book of Revelation, 1053.
final command! —as referring also to the entire vision of John.\textsuperscript{32} Thus the audience know that the whole book is faithful (trustworthy) and true.

The audience recall that the content of the last two commands to write both concern beatitude (14: 13; 19: 9). Meanwhile, they also realize that the last four uses of the word ἀληθινός are placed in the context of the judgment of God. God’s judgments are ἀληθιναί (16: 7; 19: 2) and ὁ ἀληθινός judges with justice (19: 11). Thus, the command to John to write the true words of God reminds the audience to maintain or to initiate a way of life which is worthy in the presence of God’s judgment, so that they may be declared “blessed.” In other words, the audience are encouraged to be witnesses like Christ, the faithful witness (3: 14), and like Antipas, Christ’s faithful witness (2: 13), in order to be able to take part in the new creation as promised and guaranteed by God the truth (τὸν θεὸν τὸν ἀληθινόν; Isa 65: 16–17).

3rd speech:

John introduces the third speech using the aorist εἶπεν, which he used to introduce the first speech. As in the second speech, the subject is not mentioned, but instead the one to whom it was said is identified as “me”—John himself. The repetition of the narrator’s introductory phrase draws the audience’s attention even more to what God, who is sitting on the throne, is about to say to John. The third speech consists of five sentences.

3.a. They have come to be (v. 6b)

The first sentence consists of a single word, γέγοναν (they have come to be). The way this word is used here reminds the audience of the same expression used by the angel in 16: 17 when he poured out the seventh bowl. In 16: 17, it is used in the perfect singular γέγονεν to point to the fulfilment of the judgment of the great Babylon. The plural γέγοναν in this verse informs the audience that they understand this statement as referring to all the words of prophecy that have been said previously and have reached their climax in God’s own words concerning the new creation (v. 5ab).\textsuperscript{33} The audience either take the perfect tense as consummative, indicating that revelation has now come to its end, or intensive, emphasizing that the results of revelation continue, or both.\textsuperscript{34} In any case this short statement assures the audience that God’s words not only are true but also that they come to pass.\textsuperscript{35} As the judgment of Babylon has come to pass (16: 17) and the new creation has been assured (21: 5ab), what remains is for the faithful ones to receive their reward.

3.b. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (v. 6c)

Then the audience hear God identify himself, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” The second phrase, “the beginning and the end,” interprets the first. God does

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  \item \textsuperscript{32} Aune, Revelation 17–22, 1126; Ian Boxall (The Revelation of Saint John [BNTC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006] 296) thinks that the command to write “these words” refers also to the whole book.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Osborne, Revelation, 738.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} John R. Yeatts, Revelation (BCBC; Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2003) 402.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Harrington, Revelation, 210.
\end{itemize}
not speak about the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet but about the beginning and the end of time. The first phrase, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” reminds the audience of God’s self introduction at the beginning of the book (1: 8). Now, as they come to the end of Revelation and as God has declared the coming of the new creation and its fulfillment, God certifies his right to make such a declaration because of his sovereignty.

For the audience it is not difficult to understand that the terms are a merism. In 1: 18, when they heard God introduce himself as “the Alpha and the Omega,” it was followed by further explanation that God is the one who is, who was and who is to come. The audience recall Isa 48: 12 which says that God is the first and the last. But, God is not merely at the beginning and end of things, God is also in control of everything in between. God is the source and goal of everything. The audience readily understand the titles as expressing God’s sovereignty over history, especially by bringing it to an end in salvation and judgment. God is in charge of everything. He lives and reigns forever and ever (1: 6; 4: 9, 10; 7: 12; 10: 6; 11: 15; 15: 7), while the beast and the power of evil are only on their throne for a very short while (17: 12). The audience—knowing that God, the Alpha and the Omega, is sovereign over the past, and the future of history—are assured that God is also sovereign in the audience’s present time of trouble. They are ready to place all their hope in God.

3.c. I will give living water without charge (v. 6d)

The third statement of God in the third speech contains a specific promise, “To the thirsty I will give without charge from the spring of the water of life.” The audience immediately recall the promise made to the multitude of witnesses who are wearing the white robes and stand before the heavenly throne in 7: 9–17. These people are described as those who are thirsty (7: 16). To them it was promised that the Lamb would shepherd them and lead them to the springs of life-giving water (7: 17). The term, ὕδωρ ζωῆς which literally means “water of life” has a double meaning. It can mean “flowing water” or it can be used in the religious sense of “living water,” as in the Gospel of John 4: 10, 11, 14. The audience know from the context that here God is not speaking about the movement of the water but its power to give life. Those who are thirsty in 7: 16 refer to those who survive the time of distress and have made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb (7: 14). They are thirsty for the eternal life-giving water, which can only be satisfied by the eternal life-giving relationship with God.

When the audience hear this promise, they recognize quite readily the allusion to Isa 55: 1 which says, “All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive

36 Merism is the figurative speech in which the opposite poles of an image are mentioned in order to emphasize the totality of all that lies between. (See, Beale, The Book of Revelation, 1055).
37 Resseguie, The Revelation of John, 253. See also, Smalley, The Revelation to John, 541; Mounce, The Book of Revelation, 374.
39 Osborne, Revelation, 738.
40 Aune, Revelation 17–22, 1128.
41 Blount, Revelation, 328.
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grain and eat; come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk.” At the end of the second exodus to the new promised land, God provides exactly what is needed for the thirsty pilgrims. Because God is the source of life, he offers freely the water of life for the thirsty to drink. But the audience know from 7: 9–17 that the promise is given to those who persevered and remained faithful, those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (7: 14). Thus, in order to be able to drink from the life-giving water, they are encouraged to remain the faithful witnesses of Christ.

3.d. The conqueror will inherit these things and I will make him my son (v. 7)

The assurance that the promise is given to the faithful witnesses is confirmed in the fourth statement when God continues his promise that “He who conquers will inherit these things, and I will be for him as God, and he will be for me as son.” The audience have heard about the one who conquers (ὁ νικῶν) in the letters to the seven churches (2: 11, 26; 3: 5, 12, 21). They have also heard that the conquerors are those who conquer (νικῶνται) the beast (15: 2). Ironically, as the beast “conquers” (νικήσει) them by taking their lives (11: 7), they “conquer” (ἐνίκησαν) him by giving their lives (12: 11). The audience know for sure that they have to remain faithful and to conquer, even by giving up their lives, in order to take part in the inheritance.

The verb “to inherit” (κληρονομέω) is a hapax legomenon in the book of Revelation. The word relates to the concept of נֶחֶל in the OT, which primarily refers to the inheritance of a portion of land and other property by a son—and in special cases the daughters (Num 27: 1–11; 36: 2ff). God says that the conqueror will inherit “these things” without specifying what the things are. “These things” can refer to the eschatological promises to the conquerors in chapters 2–3, or it can refer to the vision in 21: 1–6. However, for the audience the fact that it is God who is now speaking at the end of the book of Revelation makes them recall not only the things they just heard in 21: 1–6, but also all the promises they have heard in the whole book, including the promises to the conquerors in chaps. 2–3. At the same time they know—based

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42 The language of “living water” in this verse shows similarity with the theme of the living water in the Gospel of John (4: 10–14; 7: 37ff). Prigent (Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John, 601) thinks that there must be some degree of literary relation between Revelation 21: 6b and the Gospel of John. However, the invitation to drink without charge, which is absent in the Gospel of John, suggests the allusion to Isa 55: 1. See further, Mathewson, A New Heaven and a New Earth, 81–85. Water is often regarded as a symbol of life and symbol of the coming of a messianic age. See Isa 12: 3; 41: 17–18; 44: 3–4; Ezek 47; Zech 13: 1; 14: 8.


44 K. E. Miller (“The Nuptial Eschatology of Revelation 19–22,” CBQ 60 [1998] 301–18, here 331) notes that the strong parallels between the messages to the seven churches indicate that each of the messages to the seven churches refers to the same victory, realized under diverse circumstances. Thus it is a single victory over a single enemy.

45 Osborne, Revelation, 739. Beale (The Book of Revelation, 1057) notes, “the conquerors ironically conquer when they maintain their faith even though they may appear defeated in the world’s eyes.”

46 J. Herrmann, “κληρονόμος,” TDNT 3.775–76.

47 Mounce (The Book of Revelation, 374) and Harrington (Revelation, 210) think that “these things” can refer to the
on their knowledge of the concept of inheritance in the OT—that in order to inherit “these things” the recipients of the promise have to be the valid heirs of the inheritance.

God’s words, “I will be for him as God, and he will be for me as son,” confirms the audience’s knowledge concerning the valid recipients of the inheritance. The audience immediately recall 2 Sam 7: 14 and Ps 2: 7. In 2 Sam 7: 14, God, through the prophet Nathan, made a promise to David concerning Solomon the king’s son, saying, “I will be his father, and he will be my son.” God adopted Solomon as his son, thus bringing him into a father-son relationship with God, and guaranteed him with his special protection. In this way God makes Solomon the valid heir of the covenant promise established through the lineage of David. Here God expands the promise of that relationship by giving it an eschatological horizon and extending it to everyone.48

The audience soon realize one key difference between the text which they recall from the OT and God’s current word. Instead of promising a father-son relationship, God speaks about the relationship of God and son. This difference, nonetheless, does not surprise the audience, because so far they only hear Jesus address God as father (1: 6; 2: 28; 3: 5, 21; 14: 1). Jesus is the true son of God (2: 18). However, for the audience, the promise here is not merely a metaphor which refers to God’s special protection and care for the conquerors, because the audience know that all holy ones, including the conquerors, are “in Christ” (1: 9) and follow the Lamb wherever he goes (14: 4). They also will inherit fully what Christ, the son of God, inherits. “Christ is still God’s unique divine son, but those whom he represents receive the privileges of his sonship.”49 Such an attractive and triumphant view of the eschatological future brings certain encouragement for the audience in their present struggle. After all, they also fully realize that becoming God’s son is not a matter of lineage but a matter of being faithful witnesses, as Christ the Son of God is the faithful witness (1: 5; 3: 14).

3.e. There is eternal punishment to the unfaithful (v. 8)

In the last sentence God says, “But to the cowards and the unfaithful and the detestable and the murderers and the prostitutes and the sorcerers and the idolaters, and all those who lie, their part is in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” This last statement contains a list of vices. Each item in the list, although most of them are only mentioned in such terms here, reflects either the sins the audience have heard elsewhere in the book promises of chapters 2–3. For Prigent (Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John, 602) they refer to the promises made in 21: 1–6. Osborne (Revelation, 739) maintains that it is better to take “these things” in its broadest possible reference, namely that it refers to all God’s promises since this is in effect a summary of the book.

48 Blount, Revelation, 382.
49 Beale, The Book of Revelation, 1058.
50 Osborne, Revelation, 741. Mathewson (A New Heaven and a New Earth, 91–92) sees a relation between the vice list in Rev 21: 8 with the ten commandments. He thinks that the list “probably reflects an early Christian use of the ten commandments for stipulating acceptable moral behavior for Christians.” Yeatts (Revelation, 403) asserts that in Greek culture lists like this were formulated to teach ethical formulas.

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The cowards, the first in the list, stand in contrast (marked by the adversative δέ) with “the conquerors.” The conquerors do not fear to suffer (2: 10) but conquer the beast by giving up their lives (12: 11; 15: 2). Christ and the faithful witnesses are the conquerors (chaps. 2–3; 5: 5; 6: 2; 12: 11; 15: 2; 17: 14). Meanwhile, the cowards, due to fear of suffering, succumb to the pressures of persecution. The unfaithful (ἀπίστοις) stand in contrast to the Christ, the faithful (πιστοῖς; 1: 5; 3: 14; 14: 17) witness, and Antipas, who is also Christ’s faithful witness. The unfaithful fail to keep the command to be faithful (2: 10; 14: 12). The detestable (βδελυγμένως) recall the woman, the great prostitute in 17: 4, who holds a cup filled with detestable things (βδελυγμάτων). The murderers (φονεῦσιν) recall particularly the people in 9: 21 who do not repent of their act of murdering (φόνων) the holy ones (6: 9; 13: 7; 17: 6; 20: 4). The prostitutes (πόρνοις) recall those who are involved in the act of fornication (πορνεύω) which is often associated with idol worship (2: 14; 17: 2; 18: 3, 9). The sorcerers (φαρμάκοις) and idolaters (εἰδωλολάτραις) recall the OT figure of Jezebel. In 2: 20–22, she is depicted as the one who promoted not only fornication but also idolatry (εἰδωλολάτρης). The audience recall also 2 Kgs 9: 22 in which the act of sorcery (φάρμακα) is explicitly attributed to Jezebel. Finally, the list ends with “all those who lie” (πᾶσιν τοῖς ψευδέσιν). The word ψευδής reminds the audience of the people of Ephesus who lie (ψευδάεις) because they “call themselves apostles” when they really are not (2: 2). The liars stand in contrast to Christ, who is the true one (3: 7, 14; 19: 11), and his followers, on whose lips no lie (ψεῦδος) is found (14: 5).

The final destiny of these people is in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death. This is the place where Satan, the beasts, and the false prophets are thrown (19: 20; 20: 10). This is the second death, the eternal punishment, where they will be tormented day and night, forever and ever (20: 10). There they will not drink the water of life (v. 6), for their lot is in the lake of fire (20: 15).

The last statement by the one who is sitting on the throne is rather surprising for the audience. The audience have heard that the unbelievers have already been cast into the lake of fire (20: 13–15), in which the Devil, the beasts, and the false prophets were thrown. They have also heard about the passing away of the old things and the coming of the new heaven, the new earth, and the new Jerusalem (21: 1–3), and that death will be no more (21: 4). God himself just now assures them that the coming of the new creation is certain, and God promises that the conquerors will partake in a filial relationship with God (21: 5–7). The last words of God, therefore, once again remind the audience of their in-between situation: between the “already” begun and the “not yet” here of the new creation. It now depends on the audience to choose to be “conquerors,” whose inheritance is to become sons of God, or to be “cowards” and the like, whose end lies in the lake of fire.

51 Beale, The Book of Revelation, 1095.
52 Beale, The Book of Revelation, 1060.
53 The fact that the list begins with cowards and ends with liars does not mean that it contains general statements against cowardice and falsehood. John probably has in view the failures of Christians under the pressure and threat of persecution. See, M. Eugene Boring, Revelation (Louisville: Knox, 1989) 217.
IV. Conclusion

Revelation 21: 5–8, which stands as the last in the series of visions concerning the last judgment, fulfils the audience’s expectation that they will hear about the final reward for the faithful ones. The promises to the conquerors in chapters 2 and 3, to the souls under the altar (6: 9–11), and to the thirsty (7: 16) finally come to their complete fulfillment, because they are guaranteed by the one who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. The fulfillment of these promises is not in the distant future since the audience know from the very beginning of the book of Revelation that the time is near (1: 3). In fact, the judgment of Death has taken place because the Lamb has conquered it (5: 5; 6: 2; 17: 14). Christ has become the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth (1: 5). They have been made into a kingdom and priests to serve God (1: 6). For the audience, salvation is already present to them. Therefore, they not only experience the “not yet” but, without doubt, also the “already” here of the new creation.

The very last statement of the one sitting on the throne, which reconfirms the final damnation of the unfaithful, reminds the audience of their in-between situation. Infidelity and all sorts of sin remain possible for them. They can be the conquerors or the cowards, the faithful or the unfaithful, the true ones or the liars, the ones who follow the Lamb or the ones who worship the beast. After all, it depends on how they respond to these words in their deeds here and now, because they know that everyone is judged based on their deeds (20: 12–13).

For the audience of the book of Revelation, wherever or whenever they be found, these words are far from being a threat, but are words of exhortation and encouragement to continue to be the faithful witnesses of Jesus and the word of God (20: 4). Only by doing so can they become the conquerors who may find themselves “under the altar” (6: 9) and share the throne of God (3: 21) with Christ, as God’s sons and daughters (21: 7).

Bibliography


