

# **The Vision Promised to Nathanael (John 1:51): The Seven Last Angels of the Apocalypse (Rev 17:1- 22:6)**

## ***Study No. 5 on the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation***

Our Lord's promise to Nathanael<sup>1</sup> that he should see the great vision described in John 1:51 is part of an elaborate Jacobite typology. Nathanael, the "Israelite" unlike Jacob (i.e. one who is "guileless"), is promised that he shall see a climactic vision<sup>2</sup> that recalls the Bethel vision granted to Jacob in his dream recorded in Genesis 28:10-22. The vision will be recognized, we are told, when he 1) "**sees heaven opened,**" 2) and the "**angels of God ascending and descending,**" 3) upon *the Son of Man* (John 1:51).

### **The Climactic Vision of Revelation**

This study focuses on the climactic vision of the Apocalypse. The vision opens with a lurid depiction of human depravity in the portrait of the abominable whore, Babylon the Great. It concludes with a beautiful expression of all the hopes of the redeemed in the vision of the virginal bride, the New Jerusalem. The center of the vision consists of a glorious depiction of the exalted Christ, seated on a white horse of victory. With its vivid contrasts of Babylon and Jerusalem, whore and bride, and beast and Lamb, no passage in the Bible portrays more clearly both the desperation and the aspiration of all mankind.

In our attempt to understand the vision of this most allusive and elusive of books, we will appeal to the conventional literary controls of structure and pattern. We begin by observing the structure of the vision itself, a literary architecture defined by references to seven angels carrying seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues. The first and most salient observation is the correspondences between 17:1-3,8 and 21:9-10, the introductions of the first and the last angels in the series of seven angels introduced in 16:1. The following boxes compare the text introducing the first (17:1) and the last (21:9) angels in the vision.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The promise is actually broader in compass than the one disciple named Nathanael, a fact indicated by the plural pronoun in the phrase "you shall see" (John 1:51). As we shall argue, the vision is actually "seen" by John on Patmos.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word for "ladder" in the LXX account of Bethel is "climax." A "ladder" metaphor is thus a remarkable chiasmic response to the promise to Nathanael at the opening of the Gospel for the concluding ecphrastic vision of Revelation.

<sup>3</sup> This study will provide an English translation for the Greek NT in all charting. Words that contain the same Greek root will be presented in bold text. Words that are not derived from the same Greek root but that appear to be related thematically will be

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| <p>17:1-3, 8 “<b>Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls spoke with me, saying, ‘Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot...and he led me away in the Spirit into the wilderness...’</b> The angel speaks of the beast “<b>ascending.</b>”</p> | <p>21:9-10 “<b>Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues spoke with me, saying, ‘Come and I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife.’ And he led me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain...’</b> The angel shows the holy city “<b>descending.</b>”</p> |
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In his excellent study on the Book of Revelation, Richard Bauckham notes the “clearly parallel openings” of the two angels, claiming that they “are so clear that it is astonishing that so many attempts to discern the structure of Revelation have ignored them.”<sup>4</sup> Bauckham further observes that several thematic correspondences between the two angels circumscribe the material between them, bracketing a single section of the book. He notes that the two angels deal respectively with Babylon and Jerusalem, the two cities that John depicts under the figure of two women. Bauckham continues, “In 17:1-19:10 he (John) sees the harlot Babylon and her fall; in 21:9-22:9 he sees the bride of the Lamb, the New Jerusalem, which comes down from heaven. Together these two sections form the climax towards which the whole book has aimed: the destruction of Babylon and her replacement by the New Jerusalem.”<sup>5</sup>

There are, in fact, a number of contrasting parallels between the visions of Lady Babylon and Lady Zion that secure the observation that the visions interpret one another.<sup>6</sup>

The following chart lists several of these contrasts between Babylon and Jerusalem:

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| 17:1 “ I will show you the judgment of the great <b>harlot.</b> ”       | 22:15 “outside are... <b>fornicators.</b> ”  |
| 17:1 “the great harlot sitting on many <b>waters.</b> ”                 | 22:1 “and he showed me a river of the <b>water</b> of life.”   |
| 17:3 “And I saw a woman...being filled with <b>names</b> of blasphemy.” | 21:12,14 “And her gates were inscribed with the <b>names</b> of twelve tribes...and the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve <b>names</b> of the apostles.” |

presented in italic text.

<sup>4</sup> *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993) 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 4-5

<sup>6</sup> See G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 1117-21.

17:4 “And the woman was clothed in...**gold** and **precious stones** and **pearls**.”

21:11,18,21 “and she had... a radiance like a **precious stone**... and the city was of **gold**...and her gates were twelve **pearls**.”

17:5 “And on her **forehead** a **name** was written”

22:4 “And His **name** shall be on their **foreheads**”

17:5 “Babylon... mother of...the **abominations** of the earth.”

21:27 “But there shall by no means enter...an **abomination**.”

17:8 “And those who dwell on the earth will marvel, those whose names are not **written** in the **Book of Life**.”

21:27 “But only those (may enter) who are **written** in the Lamb’s **Book of Life**.”

Bauckham noted the inclusive correspondences between the first and the last angels of the last vision. But *inclusio* patterns often alert the reader to chiasmic correspondence as well.<sup>7</sup> Nils Lund has undertaken an elaborate comparison of the angels in a study that arranges them in a chiasmic pattern.<sup>8</sup> According to Lund’s arrangement, the first angel corresponds to the seventh, as Bauckham also observes. But Lund likewise corresponds the second to the sixth, and the third to the fifth angels, with the vision of Christ in heaven taking the central place of the fourth “angel.”<sup>9</sup>

Our own study substantiates this chiasmic correspondence through the observation that John arranges the angels according to a spatial pattern that conforms to the chiasmic pattern. The first and seventh angels are stationed upon the earth (“in a wilderness”, 17:3 and “upon a mountain”, 21:10). The second and the sixth angels descend to midheaven (“descending from heaven” in 18:1 and 20:1), and the third and fifth occupy a place in heaven (“throwing a millstone into the sea,” 18:21 and “standing in the sun,” 19:17).<sup>10</sup> The central scene of the fourth

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<sup>7</sup> See John Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language: Chiasmus in the Scriptures and Beyond* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1994) 335.

<sup>8</sup> Lund’s work first suggested the chiasmic structure of the angels of this vision to the author. Lund’s otherwise interesting study is seriously marred, however, by his occasional transposition of the text, without any manuscriptural warrant, in order to satisfy his chiasmic arrangement. See Lund, *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, 182. His chiasmic arrangement of these seven angels, however, is confirmed by this analysis.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 177-178.

<sup>10</sup> There is a further clue to the position of the fifth angel, who is described as “standing in the sun” (R 19:17). The angel calls out to the fowl in the “midheaven” (R 19:17). Clearly John’s vision has heaven (R 19:11), midheaven (R 19:17) and the earth in view (R 17:3 and 21:10). This tripartite understanding of the cosmos recalls the Genesis creation account. The sun was created in “the expanse of the heaven” (1:14)

“angel” is the vision of Christ in heaven (19:11). The spatial location markers accompanying the seven angels suggest an elaborate ecphrasis depicting a stairway reaching from earth to heaven, with the vision of Christ at the top of the stairway, described by the Seer as he beheld “the heaven opened” (19:11).

The base of the stairway was indicated by the first and seventh angels. If we “ascend the stairway” with John, we may compare the second and the sixth angels in the vision, both deployed for battle in midheaven (18:1 and 20:1).

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| <p>18:1-3 “After these things <b>I saw</b> another <b>angel descending from heaven, having great authority.</b>” Fallen Babylon is made a “dwelling place for demons and a prison for every unclean spirit...because all <b>the nations</b> have drunk the wine of her wrath.”</p> | <p>20:1-3 “And <b>I saw</b> an <b>angel descending from heaven having</b> the key of the abyss and a <b>great chain...the devil...(is) bound...and thrown into the abyss, and locked in...so that he should not deceive the nations.</b>”<sup>11</sup></p> |
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John describes both the second and the sixth angels as “descending” from heaven. The second has “great authority,” and the sixth has a “great chain” and a “key,” the symbols of authority. Just as we observed with the first and last angels, the second and the sixth angels in the series execute comparable missions of judgment. Each acts by incarcerating evil spirits in order to restrain the deception of the nations (figuratively, their “intoxication”). Further correspondences are set forth in the following chart:

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| <p>18:4 The people of God, <i>who did not participate in Babylon’s sin</i>, are called out of the city devoted to double judgment.</p> | <p>20:4 The people of God, <i>who did not receive the mark of the beast</i>, are delivered from the second death.</p> |
| <p>18:7 Babylon is taunted because she “sits as a <b>queen.</b>”</p>   | <p>20:6 The people of God will “<b>reign</b>” with Jesus.</p>   |
| <p>18:8 Babylon will be “<b>devoured with fire.</b>”</p>   | <p>20:9 The wicked surround Jerusalem, but are “<b>devoured with fire.</b>”</p>                                       |
| <p>18:10 The kings of the earth stand</p>  | <p>20:10 The devil, beast and false</p>   |

and the fowl were placed in midheaven, “above the earth in the expanse of the heaven” (1:20).

<sup>11</sup> Satan is retained in “prison” (R 20:7), the same word as the “prison” of the unclean of Babylon (R 18:2).

afar from Babylon's "**torment.**"

prophet are "**tormented.**"

18:11 The merchants of the earth will "*weep and **mourn***" for Babylon.

21:4 And "He shall *wipe away every tear...*and there shall be no more **mourning**" in Jerusalem.

If we "ascend the stairway" with John once again, we move from the second and sixth angels in the midheaven to the third and the fifth angels, who are situated in heaven on either side of the central vision of the exalted Lord Christ (19:11).

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| 18:21 "And <b>one mighty angel</b> took up a stone like a <b>great millstone</b> and <b>hurled</b> it <i>into the sea</i> , saying, 'Thus with violence shall <i>Babylon the great city</i> <b>be hurled down...</b> '" <sup>12</sup> | 19:17-18,20 "And I saw <b>one angel</b> standing in the sun," who speaks in a " <b>great</b> " voice of judgment upon " <b>mighty</b> " men. "And <i>the beast and the false prophet</i> <b>were hurled down</b> <i>into the lake of fire</i> " |
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In the last pairing of angels, the adjective "one" introduces each angel and each is associated with natural imagery, the sea or the sun. Moreover, one angel is described as "mighty," and the other speaks a taunt against "mighty" men. The metaphoric hurling of the millstone into the sea by the third angel foreshadows the hurling of the beast and the false prophet into the lake of fire under the authority of the fifth angel. Just as we have observed with the first two pair of angels, this third pair of angels shares a further correspondence in their missions of judgment:

18:23 "for by your (Babylon's) sorcery *all the nations* were **deceived.**"

19:20 "the false prophet who worked signs by which he **deceived those who received the mark.**"

As we pass the third and the fifth angels, we have "ascended" to the highest stage of John's stairway connecting earth to heaven. The Seer now describes a truly remarkable vision. Consider the central apex of the grand vision spanning Rev 17:1-22:6:

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| 19:11, 13, 16 "Now I <b>saw heaven opened</b> , and behold, a white horse. And he who sat on it was called <b>Faithful and True</b> , and in righteousness He judges and makes war...and His name is called <b>The Word of God...</b> and <i>on His thigh</i> He has <b>a name written, 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords.'</b> " |
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<sup>12</sup> The figure of a millstone being cast into the sea as a metaphor for severe and inescapable judgment is familiar from Matt 18:6 and Luke 17:2.

At the summit of the stairway set on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, John beholds the Lord astride a white horse and dressed in battle array at the head of the heavenly army. The full description of the Lord Jesus is so central to the vision we are considering that we will discuss it in detail.<sup>13</sup> Before we proceed, however, we should step back from the detail of the text and observe the structure of the vision as a whole. The following diagram displays the pyramidal or “stairway” structure of John’s climactic vision in Revelation 17:1-22:6.

### **John’s Great Vision of the Seven Last Angels (Rev 17:1-22:6)**

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<sup>13</sup> We have suggested that this vision of the last septet of angels constitutes an elaborate ephrasis describing a “stairway” connecting the earth with heaven. This observation is based, first of all, upon the chiasmic correspondences between the three pair of angels arrayed around the central vision of Jesus, who takes the place of the central “angel” in the vision. Second, we noted the careful description of the spatial markers in the text which, following the chiasmic order, places the angels in corresponding pairs on earth, in midheaven, and in heaven. There is a third point that suggests a “stairway of angels,” which we only note now for reference, realizing that it raises a number of questions that we will address in detail below. John has described a vision wherein he **sees the heaven opens**, and **angels** tell of the beast **ascending** and the city **descending**, all in a context surrounding the One who is the **Word of God**, that is, the *Son of Man*. The vision in Revelation is strikingly similar to the one promised to Nathanael in the Gospel of John (1:51), but otherwise never fulfilled, wherein Jesus said, “you (pl.) shall see **the heaven open**, and the **angels** of God **ascending** and **descending** upon the *Son of Man*.” The only reference in the Johannine material to the heavens opening is found at the beginning of the Gospel and at the end of Revelation in these references. Both contexts further reference visions of Jesus within a context of angels ascending and descending. As early as Augustine (*Cont. Faust.* xii.26), the Nathanael passage in the Fourth Gospel was understood to allude to the stairway or ladder of Jacob’s dream described in Gen 28:12, with the angels of God ascending and descending between heaven and earth. In the Genesis account, Jacob beheld the LORD standing at the top of the ladder (Gen 28:13). In Revelation, John describes the Lord Jesus at the top of the stairway, calling Him the Word of God. Jesus is only given this divine name in one other place, the beginning of John’s Gospel. It is thus a striking Christological frame for Johannine theology. In addition to the ascending and descending angels, we note several other remarkable correspondences with the Gospel account, including the description of Jesus as the Word of God, as set forth below:

John 1:1 “the **Word** was **God**”

Rev 19:13 “His name was called the **Word of God**” John 1:45 “**Behold**, a **true** Israelite, *in whom there is no guile*,” that is, unlike Jacob (Gen 27:35 LXX) Rev 19:11 “**Behold**, ... One called *Faithful* and **True**” and on His “thigh” was the banner of His strength, that is, unlike Jacob (Gen 32)

John 1:49 “Rabbi, You are the...**King** of Israel”

Rev 19:16 “a name was written, **King of Kings**” John 1:52 “you (pl.) shall **see the heaven opened**” Rev 19:11 “ I **saw the heaven opened**”

19:11, 16 “Now I **saw heaven opened**; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it is called **Faithful and True**, and in righteousness He judges and makes war...and on *His thigh* He has a **name written, King of Kings** and Lord of Lords”

18:21 “And **one mighty angel** took up a stone like a **great millstone** and threw it *into the sea*, saying, ‘Thus with violence shall *Babylon the great city* be **hurled down...**’”

19:17-18, 20 “And I saw **one angel** standing in the sun” who speaks in a “**great**” voice of judgment upon “**mighty**” men. “And *the beast and the false prophet* were **hurled down into the lake of fire.**”

18:1-3 “After these things I **saw another angel descending from heaven, having great authority**” Fallen Babylon is made a “*dwelling place for demons and a prison for every unclean spirit...*because all **the nations have drunk** the wine of her wrath.”

20:1-3 “And I **saw an angel descending from heaven having** the *key* of the abyss and a **great chain...***the devil...(is) bound...and thrown into the abyss, and locked in...*so that he should not deceive **the nations.**”

17:1-3, 8 “**Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls spoke with me, saying, ‘Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot...and he led me away in the Spirit into the wilderness...**’” The angel speaks of the beast “**ascending.**”

21:9-10 “**Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues spoke with me, saying, ‘Come and I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife.’ And he led me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain...**” The angel shows the holy city “**descending.**”