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**AN ESCHATOLOGICAL OR HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION
OF THE VISION OF THE FOUR RIDERS (REV 6,1-8):
A SURVEY OF RECENT LITERATURE**

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SUMMARY

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The present study analyses a famous motif of the book of Revelation – the vision of the four riders (Rev 6,1-8). The riders appear when the first four seals of the sealed book transmitted from God to the Lamb are broken (Rev 5). The dissertation presents a survey of the scholarly arguments on the status of the four riders and the message they are supposed to bring, with particular attention to the interpretation of the first rider, which is one of the most disputed images in Revelation.

The first chapter discusses three major approaches to the interpretation of Revelation: “futurist” (the emphasis is on the eschatology), “contemporary-historical” (the emphasis is on the response of John to the challenges contemporary for his addressees) and “idealist” (the emphasis is on general theological ideas relevant for Christians of all times). The value of the idealist approach consists in appreciating the metaphoric language of the book; it is often applied in combination with the other two. The contemporary-historical and the futurist approach are also linked: John sees an eschatological dimension in the historical events. This is why one motif can combine several possible backgrounds. The complex character of the book is reflected in the variety of the proposed structural models, which express different views on the linear progression or repetition in the narrative. The vision of the seven seals is more naturally to be understood as a separate unit, a preparation for the end, rather than a parallel to the septet of the trumpets and bowls, the eschatological Exodus-like plagues.

The second chapter examines Rev 4-5, which provides the setting for Rev 6,1-8. In the vision of the heavenly throne the focus is on God as the Creator and Lamb as the redeemer, who alone is worthy to open the sealed book because it has achieved victory in its death and resurrection. The book serves as a symbol of authority that Christ receives from God; it also symbolizes God's salvific plan for the history of mankind till its eschatological end. The content of the book is likely to be shown in the following visions, so its disclosure starts with the vision of the four riders.

The third chapter evaluates the interpretations of that vision. The futurist approach sees the riders either as agents of divine judgment or as eschatological disasters heralding the end, with the first rider as the Antichrist. However, since the septet of seals probably refers to the time *preceding* the parousia, the contemporary and idealist approach are also applicable. Still, few historical correlations are found persuasive enough to provide a primary background. It is plausible that the last three riders are negative and represent wars, famines and pestilence in a metaphorical way, also expressing a critical view on the cruel and expansionist nature of the Roman empire. The first rider is also mostly viewed negatively, being associated with the Parthians and Apollo. The idealist approach helps to elucidate the general theological meaning of the riders: assuring that God is in control over human history, and that the disasters will be interwoven in His salvific plan. I argue that the riders are to be interpreted primarily in an idealist perspective, as referring not only to the contemporary context of John, but to history in general. This view does not exclude the eschatological connotations of the riders because the idealist approach allows to emphasize a sense of realized eschatology in Revelation: eschatological salvation is already present since the victory of the Lamb.

FOREWORD

My interest in the book of Revelation began in 2007, when I was on my fourth year at the Theological Faculty of the Saint Tikhon Orthodox University in Moscow. In 2007 I took a course on Revelation, and I was deeply impressed by this fascinating book, where theology is expressed by means of colorful images, derived from scriptural and contemporary backgrounds and creatively combined together. My interest was encouraged by my Russian promoter Anton Nebolsin, who provided me with literature and support, thus facilitating my research. In January 2013 I defended a “candidate” dissertation (a Russian equivalent to a doctoral) at my Orthodox University on the topic “Heavenly Books in the Revelation of John”. Since then, together with my promoter and another post-graduate student we founded a research project on the imagery and theology of Revelation (www.apocalypse-st.ru). The comprehensive study of Revelation is relevant in the current Russian context, when the theological science is gradually developing after the communist atheistic period, and theme of eschatology attracts a special attention. Since in Russia now there are still little resources for a biblical research, I wanted to continue my studies on Revelation in the international academic environment, having access to recent literature, and the Catholic University of Leuven appeared the best place to pursue this goal.

All my expectations of the study period in Leuven were justified. While completing this Research master thesis, my knowledge of the literature and general understanding of the imagery of Revelation has certainly advanced. I wish to express my deep sincere gratitude to my promoter, Prof. Dr. Joseph Verheyden, who has guided my research through his insightful questions, sharpened my academic skills, deepened my knowledge in the book of Revelation and in the area of the New Testament studies, and with patience helped me to improve the quality of my text both in content and in style.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- BZNW Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
 HTS Harvard Theological Studies
 HBS Herders Biblische Studien
 HNT Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
 JSNT Journal for the Study of the New Testament
 NTS New Testament Studies
 RNT Regensburger Neues Testament
 SBL Society of Biblical Literature
 SNTU Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt
 ThWNT Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament
 WBC World Biblical Commentary
 WUNT Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
 ZNW Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
 ZTK Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche

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INTRODUCTION

THE TOPIC

The interpretation of the book of Revelation represents a challenge. To many Christians it remains an esoteric “sealed book”, full of mysteries, where many colorful images quickly come one after another as in a kaleidoscope, so that an unprepared reader can hardly disentangle them and detect an order behind them. Scholars point out that for understanding the symbols of Revelation it is indispensable to be acquainted with the characteristic features of its genre, which is defined as an apocalyptic prophecy written in the form of a letter to seven communities of Asia Minor. The reader of Revelation should possess a solid knowledge of Hebrew Scripture, especially of the prophetic books, as well as of the contemporary Greco-Roman background. However, since many images and motifs of Revelation are multifaceted and multidimensional, they can be understood in a variety of ways, and up to now scholarship has not been able to establish a universally valid interpretation of the composition and the theology of Revelation.

The present study analyses one of the most famous motives of the book of Revelation – the vision of the four riders (Rev 6,1-8), corresponding to the opening of the first four seals of the book (Rev 5,1). While the general meaning of the last three riders is clear from the context, the first rider is one of the most disputed characters of the whole book. Belonging to the group of four, he at the same time differs from the others and possesses features that appear to be positive. He is most likely related to the glorious Christ of Rev 19,11, also riding on a white horse, but the nature of this relation is not clear. Accordingly, scholars propose a number of positive as well as negative interpretations of this rider.

The present study will examine what scholars say about the point the seals are thought to be “opened” and whether the vision of the riders refers to the *eschatological* time or to some *historical* context, or to both. Commentators have drawn different conclusions on the main reference points of the vision of the riders because of differences in methodology. Three main hermeneutical approaches are to be mentioned: the futurist approach (the emphasis is on the eschatology), the contemporary-historical (the emphasis is on the response of John to the realities and questions relevant to his first readers), and the idealist (the emphasis is on the theological ideas relevant for Christians of all times). In modern scholarship these approaches are mostly employed in a complementary way, which correlates with the complex character of the narrative of Revelation.

The goal of this dissertation is to critically assess the scholarly argument about the status of the four riders and what message they bring, with particular attention to the interpretation of the first rider. At this point no formal exegetical analysis of Rev 6,1-8 has yet been undertaken; this study presents above all a survey of recent literature.

THE RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The meaning of the four riders is not limited to the “eschatological plagues”, as are the septets of the trumpets and the bowls. Rev 6,1-8 is to be interpreted not in a futurist, but primarily in an idealist perspective. The riders are metaphors, representing events in the history of mankind. The riders can also have historical associations of past or present events of John’s addressees, though not in a specific but only in a general way. This view does not exclude the eschatological connotations of the riders since the idealist approach allows to emphasize the realized eschatology in Revelation.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

The study is divided into three parts.

The first chapter evaluates the scholarly discussion on the relationship of the eschatological and historical layers in Revelation. The first section examines three major approaches to the interpretation of the book of Revelation, the “futurist”, “contemporary-historical” and “idealist”. The second section investigates the alleged belief of John in the imminence of the eschatological coming of Christ. The third section discusses the need to employ the idealist approach in combination with the other two, on the assumption that John possessed a “trans-historical” view of reality, according to which the historical events have an eschatological dimension and these two perspectives are inseparable. This view enables John to combine several backgrounds into one motif, which is also the case with the four riders. The fourth section presents the main models of structuring the book of Revelation, especially focusing on the place of the vision of the seven seals.

The second chapter situates the vision of the seven seals within the narrative of Revelation. It examines the vision in Rev 4-5 which provides the setting for Rev 6,1-8. While Rev 4 lacks any specific chronological indications, Rev 5 contains a reference to the past: the “victory” of Jesus Christ, achieved in His death and resurrection (Rev 5,5-10). According to the most widespread interpretation, the book with the seven seals symbolizes God’s salvific plan, which is in essence eschatological. The sealed book can be defined as a “narrative anchor” of the further septets, and it is plausible to suppose that the content of the book is thought to be made explicit in the further visions; thus, the interpretation of the riders is closely related to the meaning of the sealed book. The question remains whether the content of the book reveals God’s plan for the “eschatological” period (Rev 4,1), or symbolically shows the development of human history after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The third chapter deals with the application of the three approaches in the case of the vision of the four riders. The first section presents the literary structure of Rev 6,1-8. The second section provides common general interpretations of the last three riders and discusses the OT background and New Testament parallels. The three next sections present the interpretation of the riders within the futurist, contemporary-historical and idealist approach. Each of these three sections examines whether the riders represent evil powers or agents of God, against whom they are acting, and what may be the meaning of the first rider. The chapter discusses the arguments and gives an evaluation.

I. ESCHATOLOGY AND HISTORY IN REVELATION: GENERAL APPROACHES

1. THREE MAJOR APPROACHES TO THE INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION

In the present section will be briefly discussed the three major hermeneutical approaches - futurist, contemporary-historical, and idealist. Modern exegetes usually apply these three main approaches in combination with one another. However, scholars remain divided on what might be the primary perspective or approach. The clarification of the methodological principles will provide a basis for the analysis of interpretations of the pericope Rev 6,1-8.

1.1 THE FUTURIST APPROACH

A futurist approach sees the book as a revelation about the eschatological period, or, in a more “strict” form, a prophetic description of future events which are thought to occur shortly before the end of the world. A futurist approach is consistent with the fact that Revelation deals extensively with matters of eschatology, above all in the latter part of the text: chapters 14-22 describe the final stage of world history in several scenes¹.

Still, there are different opinions as to what extent chapters 4-13 refer to the eschatological time. Those futurists who see Rev 1,19 as a chronological marker of the book and refer the words “what must take place after these things” to the whole visionary section Rev 4-22, will conclude that *all* these visions relate to the future.

There are two forms of the futurist approach, sometimes called “modified” and “dispensational” futurism². The advocates of “modified” futurism see the main message of Revelation in announcing “breaking-in of God’s kingdom and destruction of the hostile godless powers”³, and interpret the imagery in a more general metaphorical way. Among scholars who argue that this form of the futurist approach should be the primary one for the interpretation of Revelation are Charles, Lohmeyer, Schüssler-Fiorenza, Giesen. The advocates of “dispensational” futurism claim that the visions provide literal and sequential descriptions of what is going to happen at the end of time⁴. With regard to Rev 6,1-8 this form is employed by Thomas and Wong.

The obvious strength of the futurist approach consists in doing justice to the overall perspective of the narrative: aspiration to the future eschatological consummation, to the fulfillment of the promises of the coming of God’s kingdom after the parousia (cf. Rev 22,20). A first weakness is that it narrows the meaning of the book, not taking into account the relevance of the social and political context of the first readers, and also says little about the relevance of Revelation for later readers. Second and third weaknesses refer specifically to the “dispensationalist” form of the futurist approach. A second weakness consists in the employment of the method of “deciphering” the images and identifying them with historical persons

¹ In the vision of the harvest and vintage the judgment is announced (Rev 14); the judgment over the followers of the beast is brought about by the seven bowls of the “wrath of God” (Rev 15-16); then there is a description of the judgment over “the great city of Babylon” (Rev 17-18); the coming of Christ in heavenly glory and his victory over the beast (Rev 19); the thousand year reign and the Last Judgment (Rev 20); and finally the union of the faithful with God and Christ in the eschatological holy city Heavenly Jerusalem (Rev 21,1-22,5).

² Cf. G.K. BEALE, *Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary), Grand Rapids - Cambridge, 1999, p. 152.

³ E. SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation. Justice and Judgment*, Minneapolis, 1985, p. 46. According to Schüssler-Fiorenza, the main theme of the book of Revelation is expressed in Rev 11,15-19.

⁴ See references in BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 152. In this case the images of Revelation can be adequately understood only by those people who will live at the end-time.

and events of the future; this method is said not to be adequate enough to appreciate the complexity and richness of the imagery⁵. A third problem is the strict sequential understanding of Rev 4-22, which was proved to be highly questionable⁶. The majority of exegetes no longer regard Rev 1,19 as an indication of the chronological divide, and point to a number of references to the past events (cf. Rev 5,5; 12,1-9), and the use of past and present tenses in the visionary section⁷. Consequently, the futurist approach needs to be complemented by other approaches.

1.2 THE CONTEMPORARY-HISTORICAL APPROACH

A contemporary-historical approach emphasizes the correlation of the narrative with contemporary realities. This approach underlines that the book of Revelation is addressed to specific Christian communities of Asia Minor at the end of the first century (Rev 1,4; 1,11)⁸. Rev 2-3 mention specific problems and challenges of the life of Christians of that time: the appearance of pseudo-apostles, the martyrdom of Antipas, a member of the Pergamon community, the slander and persecutions from Jews, compromising with pagan society. Scholars have compared this section with Paul's interest in and care for the pastoral needs of his communities⁹. Rev 4-22 is then understood as a pastoral exhortation, aiming at transforming the world view of the readers distorted by Roman imperial propaganda by providing a Christian perspective on history¹⁰. The purpose of the book is often seen in strengthening the Church in a situation of social tensions¹¹. The images offer encouragement to the faithful and also warn of the danger of refusing the Christian witness and of compromising with idolatry. The "beast" and "Babylon" are understood as references to imperial Rome.

The contemporary-historical approach is widespread in scholarship; in fact, every commentator employs it, at least to some extent. A classical example of the contemporary-historical approach is the commentary of Aune, providing numerous historical and philological data.

The strength of this approach consists in taking into account the numerous indications for historical evidence and in doing justice to the "Sitz im Leben" of the book. Therefore it seems to provide "solid ground" for interpreting Revelation. The weakness of the contemporary-historical approach is its tendency to underestimate the eschatological perspective of the book; thus Revelation can be simply turned into "the book about the past"¹², without any rele-

⁵ See further in E. SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, Edinburgh, 1993, p. 18-19.

⁶ The sequential understanding of the imagery is undermined by the repetitive use of certain elements and descriptions; the most remarkable example is the parallelism of the series of the seven trumpets and the seven bowls. There are also single "anticipatory" verses mentioning the characters or events that will be developed more extensively in subsequent chapters (Rev 11,7 and 13-14; Rev 14,8 and Rev 17-18). These literary techniques can indicate that the author did not intend the events in the narrative to be understood in a strictly sequential way.

⁷ Cf. BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 152-170.

⁸ For discussion on the date see G.H. VAN KOOTEN, *The Year of the Four Emperors*, in *JSNT* 30 (2007) 205-248; J.C. WILSON, *The Problem of the Domitianic Date of Revelation*, in *NTS* 39 (1993) 587-605; T.B. SLATER, *Dating the Apocalypse of John*, in *Biblica* 84 (2003) 252-258.

⁹ Cf. G. BIGUZZI, *In cerca di punti condivisibili per l'interpretazione dell'Apocalisse*, in *Biblical Exegesis in Progress: Old and New Testament Essays*, eds. J.-N. ALETTI, J. L. SKA, Roma, 2009, p. 501-527.

¹⁰ See, for instance, R. BAUCKHAM, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New Testament Theology), Cambridge, 1993, p. 15-19.

¹¹ Cf. A.Y. COLLINS, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1984.

¹² BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 44-45. In connection with this theme Campbell observes that while the historical-critical method strives to uncover a historical reality *behind* the text, the text itself can be neglected (W.G. CAMPBELL, *Reading Revelation: a Thematic Approach*, Cambridge, 2012, p. 25-26).

vance for the later readers. Moreover, the images are understood as having only *one* precise correlation in the historical context¹³.

1.3 THE IDEALIST APPROACH

The limitations of the previous approaches are overcome by the *idealist* approach (sometimes called “spiritual”). This approach emphasizes that Revelation bears an “eternal” message expressed by means of symbols derived especially from Hebrew Scripture. The main theme of the narrative is identified as a symbolic portrayal of the battle between good and evil, unfolding in the course of world history. According to this approach “the book gives us a theology of history or a philosophy of history by presenting the *principles* of human and satanic conduct and of divine moral government, as they are constantly revealing themselves”¹⁴. In every period appear specific manifestations of this on-going battle; the idealist approach, therefore, permits to broaden the perspective for understanding the images and to reveal their theological and moral relevance for readers of all ages.

An example of the primary use of the idealist approach with the accent on the theological and moral significance of the imagery is the commentary of Beale¹⁵, and also works of Caird and Prigent.

The first strength of the idealist approach consists in “building a bridge” between the eschatological future and the historical context of John’s addressees by providing general ideas uniting these two perspectives. The second strength consists in appreciating the intertextual links with Hebrew Scripture. In contrast to contemporary-historical and futurist approaches, the idealist approach is not concerned with particular historical events. This feature is both strength and a weakness, because it tends to deprive Revelation of its obvious historical and eschatological backgrounds¹⁶.

2. THE LANGUAGE OF IMMINENT ESCHATOLOGICAL EXPECTATIONS

An advocate of the futurist approach, Schüssler-Fiorenza, argues that in Revelation history “is completely subordinated to eschatology and receives its significance only from the future... The author of Revelation is, indeed, aware of time, but he knows only a short time before the eschaton”¹⁷. If John was convinced that the end was at hand and consequently envisaged no gap between his time and the coming of Christ, then the eschatological and contemporary-

¹³ Besides the three main approaches, there is also a *preterist* one. As the contemporary-historical approach, it emphasizes the role of the past events, but in contrast to it preterist approach sees Revelation as (pseudo-) prediction. Scholars adopting the preterist approach regard the visions of Revelation as predictions of the immediate historical events that already found their fulfillment in the first century CE or never were fulfilled. John is thought to offer to contemporary Christians of Asia Minor hope that they will soon be “delivered from their troubles of the hands of Rome” (G. E. LADD, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, Grand Rapids, 1972, p. 11). The example of the preterist approach see K.L. GENTRY, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*, Powder Springs: American Vision, 1999.

¹⁴ A.J. BANDSTRA, *History and Eschatology in the Apocalypse*, in *Calvin Theological Journal* (1970) 180-183, esp. 181.

¹⁵ As a reason for the importance of this approach Beale points out that in Rev 1,1 John employs the verb σημαίνω: “The revelation of Jesus Christ... he made it known (ἐσήμανεν) by sending his angel to his servant John”. The primary meaning of this verb is making known by a sign (“σημεῖον”); it is used in Dan 2,28, where it is applied to Nebuchadnezzar’s mysterious dream about the statue composed of gold, silver, bronze and iron. Beale argues that in Revelation this context is deliberately alluded to right at the beginning of the book, which presupposes that the book communicates meaning through revelatory symbolism, “showing by signs”. Therefore Beale claims that the majority of the material is not intended by the author to be understood in a literal way (BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 51-52).

¹⁶ See BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 48.

¹⁷ SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation. Justice and Judgment*, p. 46.

historical perspectives almost coincide. Thus there would be little reason for the idealist approach. This question will be examined in the present section.

2.1 THE EXPRESSIONS OF IMMINENT ESCHATOLOGICAL EXPECTATIONS

There are several passages in Revelation expressing imminent expectations of the eschatological End: “the time is near” (Rev 1,3); in the letters to the seven churches there are several references to the “coming” of Christ (Rev 2,16; 3,11.20); and in the epilogue Jesus Christ solemnly announces, “I am coming soon” (Rev 22,8.20). The verb ἔρχομαι is used seven times in the epilogue, almost as a refrain, and reflects the theological interest of the author. The whole book is framed by the expression “what must soon take place” (Rev 1,1; 22,6). This formula is an allusion to Dan 2,28.45, but “at the end of days” is changed into “soon”. Beale and Bauckham discern in this change a deliberate pattern, signifying that John sees himself in line with Daniel, whose prophecies have reached their climatic realization in John’s time¹⁸. In contrast to Daniel, who had not fully understood the prophecies pertaining to “the latter days” (Dan 8,26; 10,14) and was instructed to seal his book, John is commanded *not* to seal his book, in order that everybody can read its message (Rev 22,10)¹⁹. It is also noteworthy that the “first beast”, which in the futurist approach is quite commonly associated with the Antichrist, in Rev 17,9-11 is presented as contemporary to the readers²⁰. The period of 3,5 years in chapters 11-13 can be understood as a reference to the time before the end. It is typical for apocalyptic writings to see the eschatological deliverance as going to happen in the imminent future, and some argue that Revelation conforms to this widespread model²¹.

2.2 TWO MAJOR ARGUMENTS AGAINST TOO LITERAL INTERPRETATION

However, many scholars maintain that it would be too simplistic to affirm that the goal of the author was to convince his readers that the end is close and that the parousia will occur in the near future. Two major arguments and three additional ones can be listed against the view that the emphasis is on the proximity of the end *as such*.

Firstly, after the careful study of the “imminence” passages of Revelation, Rissi, Giesen and Gallusz come to the conclusion that “the employment of such language is above all exhortative”²². The primary function is to stress the urgent character of the prophetic message which should be heeded without delay. For instance, the comparison of the coming Christ with a thief (Rev 3,3; 16,15; Mt 24,43; 1 Thes 5,4) is above all intended to highlight the necessity of

¹⁸ BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 152-163; BAUCKHAM, *Theology*, p. 11-12. Beale also regards these expressions as structural markers, designating the sections within the text.

¹⁹ According to the comment of Bauckham on Rev 22,10, “John’s prophecy is of immediate relevance for his contemporaries. It relates not to a distant future but to the situation John himself shares with his contemporaries in the seven churches of Asia. It is their situation which is the eschatological situation on which the end of history immediately impinges” (*Theology*, p. 12).

²⁰ The seven heads of the beast are correlated by the *angelus interpretes* with seven kings, five of whom have fallen, the sixth “is”, and the seventh has not yet come; when he comes, he will reign only for a short time (Rev 17,9-11). For the analysis see BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 871.

²¹ See the references in L. GALLUSZ, *How Soon is Soon? Reading the Eschatological Imagery in the Book of Revelation*, in *Faith in Search for Depth and Relevancy: Festschrift in honour of Dr Bertil Wiklander*, St. Albans: Trans-European Division, 2014, p. 127-145, esp. 141-142.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 144, 127. Cf. another formulation of Gallusz: “Apocalyptic language of imminence is employed in Revelation not with the purpose to create an immature excitement, but to open the eyes of God’s people to see clearly the critical period of history they are living in (the post-Easter end-time in which the cosmic conflict between God and Satan is intensified; chaps. 12-19), and sense the urgency of acting in accordance with God’s plan in carrying out the task committed to them” (*ibid.*, p. 143-144).

watchfulness, as it is also the case in the Synoptic Gospels²³. In Revelation “the focus is not only on the eschatological reality, but also ethical responsibility... the only proper response to the nearness of time is the active participation on the part of the recipients – keeping what is written in the prophecies of the book (Rev 1,3; 22,7), worshipping God (Rev 22,9) and living a righteous life (Rev 22,11.14)”²⁴.

Analyzing the rhetorical strategy of the book, De Silva claims that the language of imminence was employed by John to serve his broader objectives. He points out that the chief purpose of John was to convince his readers to adhere to the witness of Christ and not to compromise with Roman society by participating in the imperial cult. To achieve this, rather than engaging in a lengthy discourse, John narrates the future that is awaiting the readers (Rev 1,1.19; cf. 4,1; 22,6). The genre of the apocalypse allows John to use this very powerful rhetorical tool which Aristotle refused because human beings cannot know the future (Rhet 3.16.11)²⁵. Still, John with an absolute certainty describes the future judgment of God on the unrepented sinners who worship “the beast” (e.g., Rev 16,1-11). In the whole visionary narrative John almost never gives admonitions or instructions to his readers because “he relies on persuasiveness of the future he presents”²⁶. According to De Silva, John considers his visionary narrative sufficient to confront the readers with the forthcoming crisis of the “Day of the Lord” so that their moral conduct and life attitudes could be transformed²⁷. Again, the language of imminence is interpreted not as an “end in itself”, generating a feeling of excitement, but as integrated into a broader picture and intended to have an important exhortatory function.

Secondly, another significant function of the language of imminence is to strengthen in the readers the assurance that God’s plan will be realized. The depicted imminence of the parousia underlines that nothing can prevent God from executing His plan, especially since it has entered its final stage after the death and resurrection of Jesus²⁸.

2.3 THREE ADDITIONAL ARGUMENTS

Firstly, scholars have pointed that Revelation has a more complex view on eschatology than purely a linear one in which the focus lies exclusively on the future. As other New Testament writings, Revelation contains elements of “realized” eschatology²⁹. Eschatological salvation is perceived as *already* present in the lives of the addressees: the Christians are granted the possibility to be part of God’s kingdom and priests already now (Rev 1,6; 5,9-10), on the basis of Christ’s victory (Rev 5,5); the Kingdom is defined as a present reality (Rev 1,9); the seer is characterized as a fellow of the two eschatological prophets/witnesses (Rev 11,1-13); the be-

²³ The parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants (Mt 24,45-51) makes the point that the conviction of the servant that the master is not coming for a long time can lead to wrong attitudes in moral conduct (PENLEY, *The Common Tradition*, p. 79-80).

²⁴ GALLUSZ, *How Soon is Soon*, p. 133. Garrow rightly points out that the assurance that the time is near “not simply gives information about the future, but is intended for the active response” (A. GARROW, *Revelation* (New Testament Readings), London & NY, 1997, p. 118, 112).

²⁵ D.A. DE SILVA, *The Rhetorical Functions of Intertexture in Rev 14,14-16,21*, in *The Intertexture of Apocalyptic Discourse in the New Testament* (SBL Symposium Series, 14), Leiden, 2002, p. 215-242, esp. 220.

²⁶ DE SILVA, *The Rhetorical Functions*, p. 223.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

²⁸ STEFANOVIĆ, *Revelation*, p. 57; GALLUSZ, *How Soon is Soon*, p. 142-143.

²⁹ Cf. the formulation of Giesen: “Der Verfasser des letzten Buches der Bibel ist mit den übrigen Autoren des Neuen Testaments davon überzeugt, dass die Endzeit mit dem Christusereignis begonnen hat und mit der Parusie zu ihrem Ende und zu ihrer Erfüllung kommt. Die eschatologische Periode hat somit einen datierbaren Anfang, ihre Erfüllung ist jedoch nicht zeitlich festgelegt. Anfang und Ende sind jedoch christologisch bestimmt” (H. GIESEN, *Kirche in der Endzeit. Ecclesiology und Eschatologie in der Johannesapokalypse*, in *SNTU* 19 (1994) 5-44, esp. 37).

lievers are called “living in heaven” (Rev 12,10-13; 13,6)³⁰; the promises to the “conqueror” in the letters to the seven churches (Rev 2-3)³¹ and the seven macarisms (Rev 1,3; 14,13; 16,15; 19,9; 20,6; 22,7.14)³² have obvious eschatological connotations.

Here should also be noted the opinion of those exegetes who argue that that “eschatological” period of 3,5 years is not to be understood literally³³. The majority of modern scholars understand this period as referring to the time span from the victory on the cross (cf. Rev 12,5-6) to the eschatological fulfillment (cf. Rev 11,3.7.13-15). This “Zwischenzeit” is characterized by the intensification of the battle between Satan and the people of God (Rev 12,9-17; 13,5-7)³⁴. Still, John assures the readers that God sets limits of the dominion of evil and watches over history, always providing His faithful people with spiritual support³⁵. Thus, chapters 11-13 are most commonly understood not in the futurist, but in the idealist perspective.

As noted by Rissi, the Christian perspective presented in Revelation is characterized by “ihre dialektische, eschatologische Sicht der Geschichte, die den Anbruch des eschatologischen Heils einerseits bereits in einem bestimmten Zeitabschnitt der geschichtlichen Vergangenheit eingetreten sieht und doch andererseits die Verwirklichung des eschatologischen Vollendungsreiches noch in der Zukunft erhofft”³⁶. The theology and the whole understanding of history in Revelation are shaped by the emphasis on the crucial role of the crucified and risen Christ (cf. Rev 5,5-13). This is why the eschatology of Revelation has *two* focuses – on the future as well as on the present, which is connected to the past through Christ³⁷. Even a convinced advocate of the futurist approach such as Schüssler-Fiorenza admits that in Revelation “the continuity of the present with the past and with the future is seen in the person of Jesus, who comes as one who had historically lived, and who is present now in the community through the Spirit and the prophetic word”³⁸. As Bandstra rightly points out in his response to Schüssler-Fiorenza, “here the future does not simply illuminate the present, but the future is itself illumined and conditioned by the past. The emphasis upon the future is important, but Christ is not only ‘the last’, he is also ‘the first’”³⁹. Holtz, Beale and Stefanović state that after the resurrection of Christ it is possible to always consider Parousia as “near”, no matter at

³⁰ The arguments that this expression may define not the deceased faithful, but the ones living on earth see in PRIGENT, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, p. 408-409.

³¹ See the analysis in G. BIGUZZI, “*Il Tempo È Vicino*”: *L’Escatologia nell’Apocalisse* in *Liber Annuus*, 54 (2004) 95-118, esp. 97-104.

³² See the analysis in GIESEN, *Kirche in der Endzeit*, p. 20-27.

³³ In the book of Daniel the period of 3,5 years has a literal as well as symbolical meaning – the time of the persecution of the people of God, after which God will establish His Kingdom (Dan 7,25).

³⁴ Cf. M. RISSI, *Zeit und Geschichte in der Offenbarung des Johannes*, Zürich, 1952, p. 72-73.

³⁵ Cf. G.R. OSBORNE, *Revelation* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament), Grand Rapids, 2002, p. 454.

³⁶ RISSI, *Zeit und Geschichte*, p. 40.

³⁷ Cf. the formulations of the other scholars: “The starting point of the seer’s ecclesial thinking is the cross-event. This alone seems to occupy his whole attention, set the notion of church apart, and defines for his churches both their destiny and the strategy for attaining it. To this end, only the pivotal vision of the slain Lamb in Rev 5,1-14 is discussed by the critics” (F. TAVO, *Woman, Mother and Bride: An Exegetical Investigation Into the “Ecclesial” Notions of the Apocalypse* (Biblical tools and studies, 3), Leuven, 2007, p. 22); “Revelation offers a sacred re-reading of holy history which is teleological, i.e. which takes its understanding from the end-point at which its decisive last step is reached, when Messiah-Jesus dies a redemptive death for Israel and the gentiles” (CAMPBELL, *Reading Revelation*, p. 34).

³⁸ SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation. Justice and Judgment*, p. 49.

³⁹ BANDSTRA, *History and Eschatology*, p. 183.

which exact chronological moment it will take place, since “it is the major next event to occur in the decretive order of God’s redemptive plan”⁴⁰.

Of course, the concept of the realized eschatology itself does not necessarily imply that John envisaged a considerable time span between the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the eschatological end. However, it does not exclude this possibility either, and can be regarded more as a witness for it than against it.

Secondly, scholars argue that Revelation is familiar with the tradition which formed the basis for the eschatological discourse in the Synoptic gospels⁴¹. In this discourse there are references to several signs and events which are to occur before the end: “These things must happen, but it is not the end yet” (Mk 13,7; Mt 24,6; Lk 21,9). The image of the “beginning of birth pangs” (Mt 24,8) points to the *process* of establishing a new eschatological order⁴². Revelation also knows the motif of delay⁴³. Some scholars claim that the lengthy descriptions of the cycles of seven seals, trumpets and bowls provide a balance to the contentions about the imminence of the end, equated with the notion of the “Day of the Lord”⁴⁴. The eschatological judgment over evil powers is depicted in *several* stages (the seven bowls in Rev 16, the fall of the Babylon in Rev 17-18, the battle of Christ with the beast in Rev 19, the battle with hosts of Gog and Magog and casting the Satan into the lake of fire in Rev 20)⁴⁵. Gallusz claims that the “elaborated end-time scenario” of Revelation presupposes that the end is not really expected to take place in the near future⁴⁶.

Thirdly, Giesen and Gallusz point out that not every passage mentioning the future “coming” necessarily refers to the actual eschatological coming of Christ. For instance, in several places in the letters of the seven churches (Rev 2,16; 3,11.20) it arguably means an “‘innergeschichtliche’ Kommen Christi”⁴⁷, the “spiritual” presence of Christ in the community⁴⁸. The visitation of the church by Christ emphasizes the idea of impending judgment, which serves to urge the members of the community to repentance. The most clear example is the message to the Laodicean community: it is criticized in a most severe way because of its compromise with pagan society, and Christ is depicted as already standing by the door (Rev 3,20). One can discern a pattern: the “nearness” of the coming of Christ is “proportional” to the transgressions of the community.

⁴⁰ BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 1135. Cf. HOLTZ, *Die Christologie*, p. 215; R. STEFANOVIĆ, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: a Commentary on Book of Revelation*, Berrien Springs, 2002, p. 57.

⁴¹ Cf. P.T. PENLEY, *The Common Tradition Behind Synoptic Sayings of Judgment and John's Apocalypse* (Library of New Testament Studies, 424), London, 2010. It is noteworthy that in the Apocalypse of Baruch “the idea of the imminence is counterbalanced by the emphasis that the end will come only when the sovereign God has appointed” (GALLUSZ, *How Soon is Soon*, p. 142).

⁴² PENLEY, *The Common Tradition*, p. 79-81; C.R. KOESTER, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries), Yale, 2014, p. 357.

⁴³ Explaining the delay, the apocalyptic literature often appeals to God’s patience. Cf. R. BAUCKHAM, *The Delay of the Parousia*, in *Tyndale Bulletin* 31 (1980) 3-36; see also the recent dissertation P. ALLET, *Revelation 6,9-11: an Exegesis of the Fifth Seal in the Light of the Problem of the Eschatological Delay*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Andrews University, 2015.

⁴⁴ M. JAUHAINEN, *Recapitulation and Chronological Progression in John's Apocalypse: Towards a New Perspective*, in *NTS* 49 (2003) 543-559.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 545-550.

⁴⁶ GALLUSZ, *How Soon is Soon*, p. 142.

⁴⁷ GIESEN, *Kirche in der Endzeit*, p. 31-32.

⁴⁸ Cf. Mt 18,20 as a parallel (GALLUSZ, *How Soon is Soon*, p. 138-139).

2.4 CONCLUSION

This brief presentation of the five arguments can be concluded with a statement of Giesen: “Das letzte Buch der Bibel kein chronologisch nahes Weltende ankündigt, sondern dazu auffordert, jeder Zeit für die Ankunft des Herrn bereit zu sein. Johannes vertritt eher eine Stets- als eine Naherwartung”⁴⁹.

At first sight one could think that the arguments seem to have some deliberate apologetic overtones, disclosing an agenda to “excuse” John of believing in the imminence of the parousia. In my opinion, these arguments have weight, because they do justice to the theological complexity of the book and its broader exhortative strategy. One could not deny the possibility that John along with the first Christian generations believed that the coming of Christ and the end of the present age would occur in his lifetime. However, his book definitely reflects more complex and rich concept of eschatology than simply a futurist one. This conclusion suggests that the idealist approach is to be applied. This approach proves that the theological and moral message of the book continues to be relevant for Christians in our time.

3. THE IDEALIST APPROACH AND THE NEED FOR COMBINING THE THREE APPROACHES

The present section discusses four points for the need for the application of the idealist approach in complementarity with contemporary-historical and futurist ones.

Firstly, it is argued that the idealist approach is valuable because it does justice to metaphoric language of the book and helps to appreciate rich symbolic associations of the motives. Schüssler-Fiorenza compares Revelation with poetry and claims that its language “is not referential but polyvalent – expressive and evocative”⁵⁰. In a number of passages there are allusions to *several* background motives; according to Beale, the author “may intend one metaphor to have more than one point of comparison”⁵¹. The city where the “two witnesses” were killed by the beast provides an example⁵². The bodies of the witnesses are said to be displayed “in the street of the great city that is prophetically (πνευματικῶς) called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified” (Rev 11,8). Here the allusions to *five* historical cities or countries can be detected. In particular, *Sodom*, which had become a symbol of sin and punishment (Is 1,10); *Egypt*, associated with Exodus oppressor of God’s people; *Jerusalem*, where Jesus was crucified; the “great city” in Revelation almost always signifies *Babylon*, which evokes the memories of the Babylonian tower, a symbol of human pride (Gen 11), and of the empire that destroyed Jerusalem and led the Jewish people into exile. In turn, Babylon in Revelation clearly hints to *Rome* (cf. Rev 17,9.18). Scholars argue that the author emphasized simultaneously the particularity of these five cities and their common destiny; still, the main intention of the author was to combine them together in order to create a multifaceted picture⁵³. Minear and Tavo maintain that this technique of John is more than just a literary

⁴⁹ GIESEN, *Kirche in der Endzeit*, p. 32.

⁵⁰ SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 19.

⁵¹ BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 55-56.

⁵² P.S. MINEAR, *Ontology and Ecclesiology of the Apocalypse*, in *NTS* 13 (1966) 89-105.

⁵³ In addition it should be mentioned that the narrative contains several depictions of the final judgment over Babylon which differ from one another and build on different scriptural backgrounds. Babylon is destroyed by an earthquake and hailstones (Rev 16,18-19; cf. Ex 9,24); then presented as a harlot stripped down naked by the ten kings-horns of the beast who were her former allies (Rev 17,16; cf. Ez 16,36-41); then as a city sieged and ruined, burned to the ground, the smoke of which will ascend forever in the sight of all (Rev 17,16; 18,8-9; cf. Gn 17,24-28); Babylon is also said to become the haunt of the desert animals (Rev 18,2, cf. Jr 25,11). All the motives recall several paradigmatic scriptural portrayals of God’s judgment of the past; brought together, these images contradict each other on the literary level, but on the theological level they are complementary, providing valuable insights into the reasons and meaning of divine judgment over “Babylon”. See BAUCKHAM, *Theology*, p. 21.

device (interweaving many stories in his own story); this can be rather defined as a way of perceiving reality. John “discerned behind a ‘trans-historical model’ which linked each story to the others”; it was possible since “God’s action in each epoch induced a recognizable pattern of reactions, and the prophet sought to discern that pattern for the sake of the readers”⁵⁴. Schüssler-Fiorenza also claims that the symbols of Revelation *transcend* history⁵⁵.

Secondly, the example of Rev 11,8 indicates that the idealist perspective is intertwined with a futurist one: John saw each of the mentioned scriptural stories not as limited to its particular original context, but possessing an *eschatological* dimension⁵⁶. Chapters 11-13, which are commonly understood in the *idealist* perspective, as presenting the witnessing of the Church in the world, also contain the *eschatological* perspective (Rev 11,15). Since eschatology is of a crucial importance in Revelation in general (cf. Rev 21,1-22,6), the idealist approach is supplemented by the eschatological component, underlining that the ultimate goal of history lies in the new creation when God will eliminate all evil and will live with His people.

Thirdly, the idealist approach needs to be combined with contemporary-historical one, because otherwise seeing the images of Revelation as “timeless” symbols can result in neglecting their original historical and cultural context, and thus their interpretation would be one-sided⁵⁷. Beale, being an advocate of the idealist approach, admits that along with Hebrew Scripture “the Greco-Roman world is also an important source of needed background” for the apocalyptic metaphorical language⁵⁸. As it is rightly pointed out by Rissi, the seer shows a deep interest in real history, because he recognizes God’s actions throughout history, especially in his own time⁵⁹. In turn, while contemporary-historical approach is focused on elements within the context of Roman empire that could inspire John to write his work, the idealist approach helps to uncover *general* ideas that John wanted to communicate to his audience in that particular situation, and consequently to make his message understandable and relevant for later readers.

Fourthly, the contemporary-historical approach appears to be intrinsically connected with the futurist one, because John perceives the actual historical situation of his addressees as eschatological. Numerous elements of the realized eschatology presented above justify this view. For John contemporary realities possess an eschatological dimension, so that the history and eschatology become almost inseparable.

In a concise and clear way the conclusions on the intertwining of the contemporary-historical, idealist and futurist perspectives in Revelation are formulated by Bauckham: “John is concerned with the world-wide tyranny of Rome and, even more broadly, with the cosmic conflict of God and evil and eschatological purpose of God for His whole creation. In this way he shows the Christians of each of the seven churches how the issues in their local context belong to, and must be understood in light of, God’s cosmic battle against evil and His eschato-

⁵⁴ MINEAR, *Ontology and Ecclesiology*, p. 96; cf. F. TAVO, *Woman, Mother and Bride: An Exegetical Investigation Into the "Ecclesial" Notions of the Apocalypse* (Biblical Tools and Studies, 3), Dudley, 2007, p. 18-22.

⁵⁵ SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation. Justice and Judgment*, p. 42.

⁵⁶ Cf. MINEAR, *Ontology and Ecclesiology*, p. 96. The futurist and the idealist approaches intersect in the extensive appeal to Hebrew Scripture.

⁵⁷ The character of the symbols “conforms to the contextuality of Revelation as a letter to the seven churches of Asia. Their resonances in the specific social, political, cultural and religious world of their first readers need to be understood if their meaning is appropriated today” (BAUCKHAM, *Theology*, p. 19-20).

⁵⁸ BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 55-56.

⁵⁹ RISSI, *Zeit und Geschichte*, p. 96.

logical purpose of establishing His kingdom”⁶⁰. Tavo calls this view of John “an extraordinary far-sightedness”: “No longer can the history of a church or the individual for that matter be narrowed down solely to the ‘here and now’, but always in conjunction with the bigger picture of its final destiny in God”⁶¹. An example of the combination of all the three approaches applied to Rev 6,1-8 provides the commentary of Boxall⁶².

4. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE STRUCTURE OF THE APOCALYPSE

4.1 THE SOURCE CRITICAL APPROACH AND THE UNITY OF REVELATION

The possible versions proposed for the structure of Revelation are one of the most significant and discussed topics in the literature. The importance of establishing the order underlying the visions of the book which at first sight looks chaotic is indeed uncontested. Scholars employing source criticism proposed various hypotheses on the formation of the text, claiming to identify various sources of different origin that were allegedly incorporated by John⁶³. These theories accounted for the repetitions and what appeared as inconsistencies. Some even claimed that the author handled his sources in an unsystematic and careless way or that the text was later disarranged by the disciples. Three advocates of the source criticism are to be mentioned: H. Kraft, Aune and Ford. Ford holds to the theory of two separate documents that were united in the book⁶⁴. Aune attempts to identify several major stages in the composition of the book and separate verses inserted by a later scribe⁶⁵. He argues that the Jewish author firstly composed twelve separate passages during or after the first Jewish revolt (66-73 CE)⁶⁶. Later in 68-74 CE, when he was gradually converted to Christianity, he added material and united his previous texts. At that stage, called the “first edition”, appeared the whole section 4,1-22,5 and 1,7-12. All the other remaining passages of Revelation are attributed by Aune to the “second” edition, made by another scribe at the end of the first century or even under Trajan. The vision of seven seals and the other septets are then attributed to the first edition, and not to the original “core” passages.

In contrast to this view, H. Kraft suggested that the vision of the seven seals represented the original document used by John, which he then expanded by adding two other series of seven⁶⁷. This hypothesis was not widely accepted, but it rightly emphasizes the significance of the vision of the seven seals.

From the second half of the 20th century the majority of biblical scholars abandoned the source critical method; they came to the conclusion that Revelation is a nuanced literary work

⁶⁰ BAUCKHAM, *Theology*, p. 15. Cf. another definition: “John’s description of his own situation in terms of fusion or coalescence of eschatological and historical realities, or of heavenly and earthly realities. He understands that this fusion is present whenever, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, men share in the same θλίψις καὶ βασιλεία καὶ ὑπομονή (Rev 1,9)” (MINEAR, *Ontology and Ecclesiology*, p. 93).

⁶¹ TAVO, *Woman, Mother and Bride*, p. 22.

⁶² I. BOXALL, *The Revelation of Saint John* (Black’s New Testament Commentaries; 18), Peabody, 2006.

⁶³ Cf. Charles, Spitta, Bousset, Bietenhard and later Boismard, Müller; see references in A.Y. COLLINS, *The Structure of the Apocalypse*, in *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 1, 1998, p. 388-390.

⁶⁴ According to Ford, chapters 4-11 belong to John the Baptist, chapters 12-22 were added by his disciple. - J. MASSYNGBERDE FORD, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries, 38), NY, 1980.

⁶⁵ See the criticism of the positions of Ford and Aune in R. MORTON, *One upon the Throne and the Lamb: A Traditional Historical-Theological Analysis of Revelation 4-5* (Studies in Biblical Literature, 110), N.Y.; Washington; Baltimore, 2007, p. 40-44.

⁶⁶ According to Aune, these twelve original passages are Rev 7,1-7; 10,1-11; 11,1-13; 12,1-17; 13,1-18; 14,1-20; 17,1-18; 18,1-24; 19,11-16; 20,1-10; 20,11-15; 21,9-22,5 (AUNE, *Revelation 1-5* (WBC, 52A), Dallas, 1997, p. cxx-cxxxiv).

⁶⁷ H. KRAFT, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (HNT, 16), Tübingen, 1974.

with a highly elaborated structure, unity in style and vocabulary, and a logical development of ideas⁶⁸. Our analysis will be based on the presupposition of the literary unity of the narrative.

4.2 FOUR STRUCTURAL MARKERS AND FOUR MAJOR PARTS OF REVELATION

The starting point in structuring the narrative is the fact that the book was primarily destined for aural reception: the author meant it to be read aloud in the context of Christian gatherings (cf. Rev 1,3). Commentators search for repetitive expressions, which could function as markers, easily attracting the readers' attention or indicating the beginning of a new section. The four explicit series of *seven* immediately spring in the eye: seven letters to the Churches (Rev 2-3), seven seals (Rev 6,1-8,1), seven trumpets (Rev 6,2-11,15), seven bowls (Rev 15,1; 16,1-21). It is in principle quite plausible that these series of seven were destined to provide a "carcass" for organizing the narrative, and thus can be defined as the first "structural marker". The vision of the seven seals represents the second series of seven; even more importantly, the *first* series of seven in the visionary narrative.

The four separate major units which almost all scholars agree upon are the prologue (although it is disputed with verse exactly the prologue ends), the letters to the seven Churches, the visionary part and the epilogue. They are marked by the words "soon" and "after this", which Beale regards as the second structural marker stemming from Dan 2,28.45⁶⁹. This results in the following structural pattern:

I	1, 1-3	prologue,
II	1,4-3,22	the letters to the seven communities
III	4,1-22,5	the main part: visionary section
IV	22,6-21	epilogue.

Thirdly, Aune and Bauckham point out the structuring function of the expression "in the spirit" (Rev 1,10; 4,2; 17,3; 21,10)⁷⁰. Therefore, within the visionary part the sections dedicated to Babylon and New Jerusalem are outlined. Fourthly, 3,5 years could also serve as a marker which appears in the three central chapters of the book (Rev 11-13)⁷¹.

4.3 A STRUCTURE BASED ON THE PRINCIPLE OF SEVEN

Tavo proposed a structure based on the principle of seven and on the major divisions listed above⁷². He argues that the author designed the structure of the book to be easy to grasp and followed by the hearers. Along with the four explicit septets he identifies three other major sections – the series of visions in the central part of the book, the visions dedicated to Babylon and to the New Jerusalem. Therefore his structural model is composed by *seven* major sections; thus number seven serves as the main constitutive principle of the book, and it is possible that such a scheme could reflect the author's intention. Between the seven sections Tavo

⁶⁸ "John does, indeed, borrow his material from the traditions of his time, especially from Jewish apocalyptic theology, but he works it into an independent literary form and a personal theological conception... On the one hand, Revelation appears as an artistic mosaic, and on the other hand, as an artificial construction. As a result, Revelation is a great drama of poetical conciseness into which material from the OT, Jewish apocalyptic, and mythological sources has been worked" (SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation. Justice and Judgment*, p. 36).

⁶⁹ Cf. BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 137-141.

⁷⁰ AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. c; R. BAUCKHAM, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh, 1993, p. 1-37.

⁷¹ The mention of 3,5 years appears in Rev 12,14; 1260 days – in Rev 11,3; 13,6; 42 months – in Rev 12,2; 13,5.

⁷² TAVO, *Woman, Mother and Bride*, p. 23-35. The similar structure was proposed by GARROW, *Revelation*, p. 61-65.

identifies the so-called “transitional” passages, which are characterized by the presence of the themes of both the previous and next major sections and by the prominent liturgical character.

Prologue (1, 1-3)

1. Seven Messages		1,4-3,22
<i>transition:</i>	4,1- 5,14	
2. Seven Seals		6,1-7,17
<i>transition:</i>	8,1-5	
3. Seven Trumpets		8,6-11,14
<i>transition:</i>	11,15-19	
4. Series of Visions I		12,1-14,20
<i>transition:</i>	15,1-8	
5. Seven Bowls		16,1-16
<i>transition:</i>	16,17-19,10	
6. Series of Visions II		19,11-20,15
<i>transition:</i>	21,1-8	
7. New Jerusalem		21,9-22,5

Epilogue (22, 6-21)

The vision of the seven seals is treated as one of the seven major sections, thus its role in the narrative is emphasized.

This structure has two considerable weaknesses. The first one is that some transitional passages are too long. For example, Rev 4-5 cannot be characterized as a mere “transition”, because this section formulates some of the leading theological ideas of the book and provides a setting for all the series of seven⁷³. The second one is that the large unit dedicated to Babylon (Rev 16,17–19,10) is also regarded as a transition, and in this case its obvious correlation with the New Jerusalem unit is lost.

4.4 A STRUCTURE BASED ON THE FOUR STRUCTURAL MARKERS

The structure proposed by Bauckham basically combines all the four mentioned structural markers: the principle of seven, “soon” / “after this”, “in the spirit”, “3,5 years”:

Prologue (1,1-8)

1. Inaugural vision of Christ and the churches, including seven messages to the churches (1,9-3,22)
 2. Inaugural vision of heaven leading to three series of sevens and two intercalations (4,1-5,14):
 - Seven seals (6,1-8,1; 8,3-5),
numbered 4+1+(1+intercalation Rev 7,1-17)+1
 - Seven trumpets (8,2; 8,6-11,19),
numbered 4+1+(1+intercalation Rev 10,1-11,13)+1
 3. The story of God’s people in conflict with evil (12,1 – 14,20; 15,2-4)
 - Seven bowls (15,1; 15,5 – 16,21),
numbered (4+3) without intercalation
 4. Babylon the harlot (17,1-19,10)
 5. Transition from Babylon to the New Jerusalem (19,11-21,8)
 6. The New Jerusalem the bride (21,9-22,9)
- Epilogue (22,6-21)

⁷³ Cf. MORTON, *One upon the Throne*, p. 56-57.

The vision of the seven seals is regarded as a unit within the larger section of septets, which starts with Rev 4-5 and is identified as the “inaugural vision of heaven”. Thus its importance within this structure is less than on the scheme of Tavo.

The scheme of Bauckham emphasizes that the series of seals and trumpets possess a similar structure. The first four elements represent a group; between the sixth and the seventh element there is an “intercalation” (or also called “interlude”), a separate unit which “interrupts” the unfolding of the septet. The intercalations in Rev 7 and Rev 10,1-11,13 share important parallels in the content: they emphasize that God protects His people in the midst of the period of tribulation. The series of seven underline the idea of judgment (especially in the case of the seven trumpets and bowls), while the intercalations provide hope for salvation⁷⁴. The series of seven bowls does not have any intercalation; this possibly indicates that John thinks the time of the *universal* judgment has come.

The strengths of this scheme are the employment of all the markers and the explicit juxtaposition of Babylon and the New Jerusalem. The possible weakness of the proposal of Bauckham (and also that of Tavo) is that it does not clarify how the visions are to be understood in terms of chronology.

4.5 LINEAR PROGRESSION OR RECAPITULATION IN THE SEPTETS

A number of commentators, primarily the proponents of the futurist approach, regard Rev 1,19 as a programmatic chronological marker, corresponding to the three major sections of the book⁷⁵. “Write *what you have seen*” was then referred to the vision of Christ as the Son of man in the prologue, “*what is*” to the historical situation of the seven Churches in Asia Minor, and “*what is to take place after this*” to the whole corpus of Rev 4,1-22,6, implying that described events are thought to occur in the linear sequence. The scheme below presents the linear view on the septets:

Seals	1	2	3	4	5	6	7												
Trumpets							1	2	3	4	5	6	7						
Bowls													1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Enthronement	_____																		End ⁷⁶

An active proponent of the sequential understanding was Charles, who nevertheless admitted that there are exceptions: chapter 12 provides a “flashback” to the past, and the unfolding of events is interrupted by a number of anticipatory visions, pointing to some distant moment in the future (Rev 7,9-17; 10,1-11,13). The linear theory was called into question on account of the inadequacy of explaining the references to the past and numerous repetitions in the narrative⁷⁷. The possibility that the visions of Revelation can describe the *same* realities from dif-

⁷⁴ KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 356. However, according to Biguzzi, neither the septet of seals, nor of the trumpets and bowls do introduce the *final* punishment: people are confronted with plagues and are able to decide to repent or not; Rev 9,20-21; 16,9.11 indicate that the chance of conversion remains possible (*I settenari nella struttura dell'apocalisse: analisi, storia della ricerca, interpretazione* (Supplementi della Rivista Biblica, 31), Bologna, 1996, p. 136). Aune also expresses this though although in a more moderate way: the plagues “are not meant to be ends in themselves but are meant to be stern messages of warning from God intended to produce repentance” (*Revelation 6-16* (WBC, 52B), Nashville, 1998, p. 419).

⁷⁵ R.H. CHARLES, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (International Critical Commentary), vol. 1, Edinburgh, 1920, p. 33; E. LOHMEYER, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (HNT, 4), Tübingen, 1926, p. 19, 185-188; for other references see GIESEN, *Kirche in der Endzeit*, p. 15-19.

⁷⁶ The scheme is taken from JAUHAINEN, *Recapitulation*, p. 544-545 and BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 117.

⁷⁷ Cf. G.B. CAIRD, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, London, 1984, p. 26; BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 152-163.

ferent points of view is justified by a clear example in the text: a period of 3,5 years is mentioned in *three* subsequent chapters (Rev 11-13), which allows to conclude that the three different scenes presented in these chapters describe essentially the same reality from different perspectives. One can agree with the conclusion of Giesen: "...dem Seher geht es nämlich in seinem ganzen Buch um Vergangenes, Gegenwärtiges und Zukünftiges, allerdings stets im Blick auf die gegenwärtige Situation der Christen"⁷⁸.

The heated debates between scholars on chronological progression or recapitulation deal especially with the understanding of the three series of seven. Already in 300 CE Victorinus of Pettau suggested that the series of the seven trumpets and the seven bowls *both* predict the eschatological judgment while employing different imagery. This view, later called "recapitulation theory", was later adopted by a number of commentators. Bornkamm pointed out that it is a logical conclusion from the fact that the visions of the trumpets and bowls share obvious similarities in structure and content, both being modeled after the Exodus plagues⁷⁹.

According to the most consistent form of the recapitulation theory, all the sections with the septets are chronologically parallel: Rev 4,1-8,1, 8,2-11,19 and 12,1-19,10 describe the same events. The progression only starts with Rev 19,11, where the coming of Christ in glory is portrayed. This view on the septets is presented in the following scheme:

Seals	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Trumpets	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Bowls	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Enthronement _____ End

However, this "full" form of the recapitulation theory has an obvious weakness. It ignores the fact that along with all the repetitive elements the three series of seven manifest two major differences which indicate progression⁸⁰. Firstly, the number of people that are affected by the plagues grows from a fourth (Rev 6,8) to the third (Rev 8,7-9,19), and finally is unlimited (Rev 16,1-21). Secondly, the formula which first appears in Rev 4,5 and concludes each series of seven is intensified:

- 4,5 "flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder"
- 8,5 + earthquake;
- 11,19 + "hail"
- 16,18 + expanded descriptions of hail and earthquake.

One can see that taking into account both similarities and differences of the series of seven represent a constant challenge for scholars structuring the book.

4.6 STRUCTURES COMBINING RECAPITULATION AND PROGRESSION

Many have proposed models which to a different extent *combine* the principles of progression and recapitulation; here will be discussed the models of A.Y. Collins, Koester and Beale.

⁷⁸ GIESEN, *Kirche in der Endzeit*, p. 20.

⁷⁹ G. BORNKAMM, *Die Komposition der apokalyptischen Visionen in der Offenbarung Johannis*, in ZNW 36 (1937) 132-149.

⁸⁰ As it is rightly pointed out by JAUHAINEN, *Recapitulation*, p. 545-559.

For Collins the book consists of two major units, Rev 1,1-11,19 and Rev 12-21,8 (“two great cycles of visions”⁸¹), with three sections in each part. The first part can be identified as a “draft” for the eschatological events to come. The second part offers a more elaborate portrayal of the same eschatological events, which indicates the challenges of the believers more explicitly⁸². The events inside the two cycles of visions do follow the chronological order:

Prologue (1,1-8)

The first cycle of visions (The sealed scroll)

1. Seven Messages (1,9-3,22)

2. Seven Seals (4,1-8,5)

3. Seven Trumpets (8,2-11,19)

The second cycle of visions (The opened scroll)

4. Seven Unnumbered Visions (12,1-15,4)

5. Seven Bowls (15,1-16,20)

Babylon Appendix (17,1-19,10)

6. Seven Unnumbered Visions (19,11-21,8)

Jerusalem Appendix (21,9-22,5)

Epilogue (22,6-21)

The vision of the seven seals is presented as a separate unit beginning with Rev 4-5, and is placed in one section with the trumpets, while separated from the bowls. It is seen as chronologically preceding the trumpets and gradually leading into the eschatological end⁸³.

Two weaknesses of this structure can be pointed out. Firstly, it is questionable that the sections dedicated to Babylon and the New Jerusalem can be called “appendixes” and regarded as subordinate to seven bowls and “unnumbered” visions. In this regard the structure of Bauckham does justice to the importance of these sections in a better way. The second problem consists in postulating two series of seven “unnumbered” visions⁸⁴. This is often seen as artificial: Tavo and Morton argue that since the visions of chapters 12-15 and 19-21 are not explicitly *marked* as seven, they are not intended to be understood in this way. Even more importantly, it would be very difficult for the hearers to recognize the pattern of seven behind the visions.

The structure of Koester is based on the model of Collins. It has the same six sections, while avoiding the term “unnumbered” visions. All the six cycles share similarities in content: they start from the presence of God, and move from scenes of conflict to God’s victory and heavenly worship⁸⁵. Indicating this thematic parallelism, Koester emphasizes the presence of “recapitulation” in the narrative. The text is divided into two major parts, with three cycles in each part; the second part is thought to develop the idea of God’s victory to a more full extent. Thus the progression and the dynamics of the narrative are also taken into account⁸⁶:

⁸¹ A.Y. COLLINS, *Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Missoula, 1976, p. 16.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸³ Such a division is challenged by BORNKAMM, *Die Komposition*, p. 133-135.

⁸⁴ As pointed out by Aune (*Revelation 1-5*, p. xciv). Unnumbered visions are also postulated by Lohmeyer, but he identifies those visions in a different way than Collins (*Die Offenbarung*, p. 185-188).

⁸⁵ KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 112-115.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

Introduction (1,1-8)

The first part

1. Christ and the Seven Assemblies (1,9-3,22)
2. The Seven Seals (4,1-8,5)
3. The Seven Trumpets (8,6-11,18)

The second part

4. The Dragon, the Beasts, and the Faithful (11,19-15,4)
5. The Seven Bowls and the Fall of Babylon (15,5-19,10)
6. From the Beast's Demise to New Jerusalem (19,11-22,5)

Conclusion (22,6-21)

The place of the septet of seals is the same as in the structure of Collins.

The structure of Koester has numerous positive features, with the clear balanced view on progression/recapitulation. This structure contains some insights of the proposal of Tavo: the importance of the theme of worship between the sections. There remains one possible weak point: the scheme ignores the structural marker "in the spirit", while uniting the septet of bowls with the section of Babylon and uniting the section of the New Jerusalem with the previous visions. However, the marker in Rev 17,1 and 21,10 probably presupposes the beginning of new sections.

The structure of Beale regards more visions as chronologically parallel than Koester and Collins do. Separating Rev 1,9-3,22 as the reference to contemporary "earthly" level, Beale divides the visionary section into five parts, in accordance to five sections of Dan (Dan 2; 7; 8; 9; 10-12). These sections are synonymously parallel, symbolically describing the same historical events; therefore, five sections of Revelation are also thought to be chronologically parallel. The section of the New Jerusalem is not included in five sections, thus emphasizing that a completely new reality is described, the eschatological fulfillment in the new creation. The general outline is quite close to Koester's structure. There are three major differences: first, separating the letters to the Churches from the visionary section; second, doing justice to the marker "in the spirit" in separating the septet of bowls, while uniting the Babylon section with Rev 19,11-21,8 (depictions of parousia, final battle and the last judgment); third, the additional emphasis on Danielic allusions⁸⁷.

Danielic allusion (literary hinge in 1,1) Introduction (1,1-8)

Danielic allusion (literary hinge in 1,19-20) Church in the imperfect world (1,9-3,22)

1. Danielic allusion (literary hinge in 4,1) Seven Seals (4,1-8,1)
2. Seven Trumpets (8,2-11,19)
3. Deeper Conflict (12,1-14,20)
4. Seven Bowls (15,1-16,21)
5. Final Judgment of Evil Enemies (17,1-21,8)

Church in Perfect Glory (21,9-22,5)

Danielic allusion (literary hinge in 22,6) Conclusion (22,6-21)

The place of the septet of seals is the same as in the structure of Collins and Koester; the difference is that it is seen as chronologically parallel to the series of trumpets and bowls.

Among the strengths of Beale's structure are the separation of Rev 1,9-3,22 from the visionary section (which is not that clear in the scheme of Koester) and highlighting the structural

⁸⁷ BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 136.

significance of Rev 17,1 and 21,9, which was also not done by Koester. The weaknesses are the neglecting the dynamics of the septets and overestimating the role of Danielic allusions⁸⁸.

4.7 ENCOMPASSING AND CHIASTIC MODELS

Two more models should be mentioned that provide a different perspective on the place of the vision of the seven seals. The structure of 4,1-22,5 proposed by Lambrecht regards the principle of seven as constitutive and is based upon the “principle of encompassing”⁸⁹. As Bornkamm, he argues that the last element of the seven seals encompasses the whole series of the seven trumpets; in turn, the last element of the seven trumpets encompasses the whole series of seven bowls. In this case, *all* the series of seven are thought to result in the eschatological end, while the gradual approaching is maintained. Thus his structure can be labeled “progressive recapitulation”.

The model of Lambrecht emphasizes the importance of the vision of the seven seals, because it is thought to contain the septet of trumpets and it in turn the septet of bowls. The septet of seals is not seen as a distant preparation to the eschatological end, but leads to the eschatological consummation directly.

The major weakness of Lambrecht’s structure consists in the dominance of the sevenfold division, while the other possible principles of structuring are not elaborated enough. For example, the important section Rev 12-13 is presented in a rather artificial way, strictly subordinated to the series of seven trumpets⁹⁰.

In contrast to Lambrecht, the chiasmic structure proposed by Schüssler-Fiorenza stresses the crucial role of chapters 12-13, putting the section Rev 10-15 in the center⁹¹:

- A. Prologue and epistolary greeting (1,1-8)
- B. Rhetorical situation in the cities of the Asia Minor (1,9-3,22)
- C. Opening of the sealed scroll: Exodus plagues (4,1-9,21; 11,15-19)
- D. The Bitter-Sweet Scroll: “War” against the Community (10,1-15,4)
- C’. Exodus from the Oppression of Babylon/Rome (15,5-19,10)
- B’. Liberation from Evil and God’s World City (19,11-22,9)
- A’. Epilogue and Epistolary Frame (22,10-21)

The vision of the seven seals is grouped together with the septet of trumpets and seen as corresponding to the septet of bowls and the vision of the fall of Babylon (C’).

The chiasmic structure is valuable to a certain point, since it allows to discern and outline the parallels between various parts of the narrative, for example, some parallels between the trumpets and bowls, and between the letters to the Churches and the vision of the New Jerusalem. However, the first weakness of all the chiasmic structures is that they in no way address the chronology of the events, being organized exclusively according to a thematic principle, and thus obviously underestimate the linear development and dynamics of the book. The second weakness of Schüssler-Fiorenza’s structure consists in placing the fragment 11,15-19 to section C out of its original context; thus her structure proves to be rather artificial.

⁸⁸ Cf. MORTON, *One upon the Throne*, p. 60-61.

⁸⁹ J. LAMBRECHT, *Collected Studies on Pauline Literature and on the Book of Revelation* (Analecta Biblica, 147), Roma, 2001, p. 85-86.

⁹⁰ Cf. MORTON, *One upon the Throne*, p. 55.

⁹¹ SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 35-36.

4.8 CONCLUSION

Our analysis of the structural models has shown that the structure of Koester should be preferred, because it combines the positive features of other models and provides a fine balance between progression and recapitulation: “The combination of elements can best be pictured as a forward-moving spiral, which repeatedly leads the readers through the scenes of threat and back to the presence of God, even as the broad storyline moves forward to the new creation”⁹². However, his model cannot reflect all the nuances of literary links that appear in the text (first of all, Rev 17,1 and 21,10). One can see that various elements of the book of Revelation are linked together and developed in a highly sophisticated way, so that *different* structural models are to be applied to see the narrative in a multidimensional perspective.

The examined schemes present the vision of the seven seals in different ways. For Tavo Rev 6,1-8,1 represents a unit on its own, one of the seven major units. For Bauckham it is subordinated to the vision Rev 4-5. Koester, Beale, Schüssler-Fiorenza, A.Y. Collins do not separate Rev 4-5 and Rev 6,1-8,1: they regard the septet of seals as starting already in Rev 4,1, and consider this broader section to be an independent unit. There are various models for the chronological relation between the three septets. The scheme of Beale regards the seven seals as chronologically parallel to the trumpets and bowls and therefore leading into the eschatological end directly. Koester and Collins see the septets of seals and trumpets as sequential, thus implying that the meaning of the seals differs from that of trumpets: the vision of seals does not yet indicate the eschatological end, but is a *preparation* for the coming judgment. The same view holds Lambrecht, but for him the seventh seal already encompasses the septet of trumpets.

Agreeing with Koester, I argue that the septets of seals and trumpets are to be understood not as parallels, but separately, both in chronology and in meaning. The recapitulation scheme advocated by Beale does not take into account the dynamical development of seals and trumpets. In general, the understanding of the relation between the three septets widely influences the interpretation of the vision of the four riders.

⁹² KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 115. The image of “conical spiral” was also employed by SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation. Justice and Judgment*, p. 170-177.

II. THE PRECEDING CONTEXT: THE BOOK WITH SEVEN SEALS

The vision of the four riders Rev 6,1-8 keeps to the setting of the previous vision, Rev 4-5. Moreover, in several structural models Rev 4-5 and the seven seals Rev 6,1-8,1 are united in one section⁹³. Therefore, in this chapter I will examine the setting of Rev 4-5 and will focus on the topics which will be relevant for the further interpretation of the four riders: the throne of God, four living beings and twenty four elders surrounding the throne, their actions and hymns evoking associations with imperial cult and expressing the theological message (Rev 4), the sealed book and the Lamb (Rev 5).

Rev 4-5 follows the section of the letters to the seven communities Rev 2-3 (3,21 is a transitional verse), and is of a great importance for three reasons: it is the first heavenly vision shown to John; the scene of this vision will recur further in the narrative (Rev 7,9-17; 11,16-19; 14,1-3; 16,17); and some of its particular features will be developed later (cf. Rev 4,5 and 8,5; 11,19; 16,18-21).

1. REV 4: GOD'S AUTHORITY AS THE CREATOR

1.1 GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VISION

Rev 4 represents a theophanic vision and forms the narrative and theological basis for the second part (Rev 5). The scene is modeled after similar ones in Hebrew Scripture (especially Is 6, Ez 1, Dan 7) and has no specifically Christian features. The focus of the vision is on portraying God as the Creator of the universe to whom heavenly worship is unceasingly addressed. The scene contains clear liturgical and political motives. The vision is introduced by a promise to show John "what must take place after these things" (Rev 4,1-2); however, there are no references to any period in time, the action unfolds as if "in eternity".

1.2 THE THRONE MOTIF AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

The central motif of Rev 4 is undoubtedly the throne of God, which is mentioned 14 times in 11 verses⁹⁴; the actions in Rev 6,1-8 also ultimately originate from the throne. The throne motif highlights the idea of royal power and authority, and anticipates the scenes of judgment in the following chapters (Rev 8-20)⁹⁵. God is referred to as the One sitting on the throne, and all the other described characters and details are always related to the throne. The sight of God is likened to precious stones, evoking the associations of majesty and splendor, and no anthropomorphic features are used, thus preserving the divine transcendence⁹⁶. The "flashes of

⁹³ In particular, in the structures of Koester, Beale, Schüssler-Fiorenza, A.Y. Collins.

⁹⁴ Thorough analysis of the throne motif in the book of Revelation see L. GALLUSZ, *The Throne Motif in the Book of Revelation* (Library of New Testament Studies), London, 2014; and also R. STEFANOVIĆ, *The Background and Meaning of the Sealed Book of Revelation 5* (Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, 22), Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1996, p. 157-166. Gallusz concludes that God's throne is depicted in Revelation as the center of the entire universe, and the circumlocution for God "the One sitting on the throne" emphasizes God's awesomeness, "mysterious transcendence" and His total control over history. The throne motif does not remain static, but has a dynamic development in the narrative showing God's active involvement in history and His supreme authority as a judge.

⁹⁵ As Aune observes, the theme of the dominion of God in Rev 4 anticipates the theme of judgment when God will eliminate evil from His creation (*Revelation 1-5*, p. 295-296; cf. OSBORNE, *Revelation*, p. 232). However, Tóth supposes that the theme of judgment is *already* present in Rev 4-5 (*Der himmlische Kult. Wirklichkeitskonstruktion und Sinnbildung in der Johannesoffenbarung* (Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte, 22), Leipzig, 2006, p. 288-300). The "moderate" position of Aune seems more plausible, because there are no explicit references to judgment in Rev 4-5, only in an indirect way (cf. Rev 4,5).

⁹⁶ "The unknowable transcendence of God is protected by focusing instead on the throne" (BAUCKHAM, *Theology*, p. 32). That the description of God in Rev 4 is avoiding anthropomorphic features is argued by R.

lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder” (Rev 4,5) coming from the throne recall the majestic theophanies described in the Scripture (cf. Ez 1,13; Ex 19,16); these motifs are mentioned at the end of each series of seven (Rev 8,5; 11,19; 16,18-21). The rainbow around the throne recalls God’s fidelity to His creation (cf. Gn 9,12-17; Ez 1,28)⁹⁷.

1.3 THE FOUR LIVING BEINGS AND 24 ELDERS AROUND THE THRONE

God is worshipped by four living creatures and 24 elders who surround the throne⁹⁸. The four creatures resemble seraphim (cf. Is 6,2) and cherubim (Ez 1,4-21); they are commonly interpreted as angelic beings, symbolizing the entire creation of God. In Rev 6,1-8 these heavenly creatures give a command for the four riders to come⁹⁹.

Much more diverse is the interpretation of the 24 elders (Rev 4,4). Some scholars trace their origin to the heavenly assembly surrounding God (cf. 1 Kg 22,19; Is 24,23; Dan 7,9), and regard them as angels composing the divine council and reigning over the heavenly realm¹⁰⁰. However, others point out that in Jewish tradition as well as in Revelation itself it was not common to portray angels as “elders”¹⁰¹; more widespread is the interpretation of the elders as glorified *people*, or, as Gradl calls them, “Gestalten der heilsgeschichtlicher Vergangenheit”¹⁰². They manifest the future glory promised to the believers (cf. Rev 2,10; 3,5.21; 4,4)¹⁰³. The number probably alludes to the 24 lots of the priestly houses mentioned in 1 Chron 24¹⁰⁴; this background fits the role of the elders in the scene as representing the liturgical assembly worshipping the Creator, “the community of faith”¹⁰⁵.

1.4 ALLUSIONS TO THE IMPERIAL CULT

The elders putting their crowns before the throne and praising God as a Creator are regarded as allusions to the imperial cult: “honour and power” and the acclamation “dominus ac deus”¹⁰⁶ and “dignus”/ ἄξιός¹⁰⁷ were addressed to the emperors. The readers of Revelation were

WHITAKER, *The Poetics of Ekphrasis: Vivid Description and Rhetoric in the Apocalypse* (WUNT 2, 410), Tübingen, 2015, p. 130-139; H.-G. GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung: Medien und Medialität der Johannesapokalypse* (HBS, 75), Freiburg im Breisgau, 2014, p. 280.

⁹⁷ BAUCKHAM, *Theology*, p. 51.

⁹⁸ It is remarkable that in the vision of the prophet Ezekiel every creature has four faces, and in Rev 4 the creature has one face. The described cherubim could be thought as the heavenly prototypes of the two cherubim flanking the Ark of the covenant in the holy of holies (Ex 25,18-22). Cf. BAUCKHAM, *Theology*, p. 33.

⁹⁹ The number four, corresponding to the four corners of the earth, traditionally symbolized the whole created universe (BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 329).

¹⁰⁰ Cf. H. GIESEN, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (RNT), Regensburg, 1997, p. 151; BAUCKHAM, *Theology*, p. 24.

¹⁰¹ Unlike elders who are said to be sitting on the thrones, angels in Revelation typically stand (KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 362).

¹⁰² GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung*, p. 230; AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 288-292; BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 323-326.

¹⁰³ Following Rev 21,12.14, in the early Church tradition 24 elders were understood as 12 Old Testament patriarchs and 12 apostles – Victorinus Petavionensis, *In Apocalypsin* 4.3; Andreas Caesarensis, *Comm. in Apoc.* 4. 10. However, the explicitly “Jewish” context of the vision Rev 4 tends to presuppose that the elders should be understood in the Old Testament framework (cf. OSBORNE, *Revelation*, p. 228-229). Some commentators see here an allusion to the 24 scriptures of the Hebrew Bible (P. PRIGENT, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, Tübingen, 2001, p. 227-228).

¹⁰⁴ Cf. AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 289; TÓTH, *Der himmlische Kult*, p. 212-216; GIESEN, *Die Offenbarung*, p. 151–152. On the basis of Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* 67, 4.3. D. Aune argues that the number 24 can be explained as a reference to 24 lictors of the emperor (*Revelation 1-5*, p. 292; also GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung*, p. 227); R. Morton supposes that the motif of 24 elders has an astrological background (*One upon the Throne*, p. 109-110).

¹⁰⁵ KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 367.

¹⁰⁶ Several commentators see here a hint to the title of the emperor Domitian “Dominus et Deus noster“, as it is mentioned by Suetonius, *Vita Caesarum: Domitian* 13.2. However, scholars tend to doubt that it were an official title of Domitian (cf. L. THOMPSON, *The Book of Revelation: the Apocalypse and Empire*, Oxford, 1997); still it

highly familiar with the aspect of the imperial cult¹⁰⁸. The gesture of the elders resembles the sign of loyalty expressed by local rulers towards the Roman authorities; the elders thereby indicate that the source of their power is God alone¹⁰⁹. It is remarkable that in this first vision the theme of true worship due to God is highly prominent; it will be elaborated further in contrast with the “false” worship (cf. Rev 9,20; 13,4.15; 14,7.9-10; 19,4-5; 22,1).

1.5 GOD AS A SOVEREIGN COMING TO HIS WORLD

The hymn of the four living beings Rev 4,8 also emphasizes God’s absolute authority. The text is a transformed version of Is 6,3. The omission of the “positive” affirmation that God’s glory is manifested on earth may not be incidental, but possibly implies that John sees the created world occupied by evil powers and in need for God to come¹¹⁰. Indeed, instead of the future form of the verb “to be” John uses the participle of the verb “to come” (ἔρχομαι); by doing so he stresses the idea of the coming of God to restore and save His creation.

Therefore, through a number of liturgical and political motives the scene of Rev 4 presents God as the holy and almighty Creator, worthy of heavenly worship, to whom all the authorities are subdued, and who will come to His world. This latter aspect is clearly formulated by Bauckham: “Heaven is the sphere of ultimate reality: what is true in heaven must become true on earth. Thus John is taken up to heaven to see that God’s throne is the ultimate reality behind all earthly appearances. Having seen God’s sovereignty in heaven, he can then see how it must come to be acknowledged on earth”¹¹¹. This indication to the eschatological perspective in Rev 4 will be pointed out in a discussion with regard to the four riders.

2. REV 5: CHRISTOLOGY AND THE EMPHASIS ON THE RULERSHIP OF GOD AND CHRIST

2.1 GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VISION

Rev 5 keeps to the setting of Rev 4 – the action takes place at the “throne of God”, but also contains some new elements, so that the two chapters have rightly been called “two panels of a diptych”¹¹². Rev 5 introduces a new object and a new character that will become the entire focus of the narrative: the book sealed with seven seals and the Lamb; they both will be present in Rev 6,1-8. Because of its importance for the interpretation of the four riders, the sealed book will be examined separately in the next section. Here the figure of the Lamb and the general significance of Rev 5 will be discussed.

Contrary to the previous scene, Rev 5 develops Christological ideas, in particular on the redemption and the divine status of Jesus Christ. It elaborates the transitional verse 3,21 which arguably defines the main theme of the scene: the glorification of Christ that followed His

is attested that emperors were addressed as gods in their private circles, by the people who wished to flatter the emperors (see KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 366).

¹⁰⁷ The word “worthy” was used in particular as a greeting to the emperor entering the city (AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 309).

¹⁰⁸ Since the first century BC the cult of the emperor was spreading through the cities of Asia Minor and eventually became very popular. About the social setting of the addressees of Revelation see C. J. HEMER, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (The Biblical Resource Series, JNTSup, 11), Sheffield, 1989; S. J. FRIESEN, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins*, NY, 2001.

¹⁰⁹ For example, Tacitus describes that the Parthian king Tiridat took off his crown and put it before the statue of the emperor Nero (Tacitus, *Annales* 15.29, AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 308).

¹¹⁰ Cf. BAUCKHAM, *Theology*, p. 46. The hymn of the living creatures combines two of the most important names of God in Revelation: “the Almighty” and “Who was and is and is to come”.

¹¹¹ BAUCKHAM, *Theology*, p. 31.

¹¹² WHITAKER, *The Poetics of Ekphrasis*, p. 141.

death and resurrection¹¹³. Another difference is the important role of the dialogues in contrast to the majestic calm of Rev 4¹¹⁴. Rev 5 is appropriately defined as “one of the most dramatic and emotional scenes in the book and also one of great theological significance”¹¹⁵.

2.2 THE CHRISTOLOGY OF REV 5: JESUS AS A LION AND A LAMB

The appearance of Christ in Rev 5 is closely related to the sealed book in the hand of God. Nobody in the whole creation was “found worthy” to open it, and this fact provokes a highly emotional reaction of John (Rev 5,2-4)¹¹⁶. John is comforted by one of the 24 elders, who announces the appearance of the appropriate person (Rev 5,5). This verse combines two traditional messianic titles from Gn 49,9 and Is 11,10 for describing the Messiah as a descendant of David. The lion is a common symbol of power and royalty, and together with the motif of “conquering” the description evokes the image of a mighty warrior gloriously overcoming his enemies, which corresponded to widespread Jewish messianic expectations¹¹⁷. However, the “military” imagery is immediately changed in a remarkably unexpected way: having heard about the *Lion*, John actually “sees” the *Lamb* standing “as slain” in the midst of the throne and the heavenly creatures¹¹⁸.

The Lamb was associated with vulnerability, a victim of slaughter and sacrifice. The probable background is the Passover lamb (Ex 12) and motif of “the servant of YHWH” (Is 53,7). Many commentators regard this striking transformation of imagery as an indication that John wants the readers to interpret the Hebrew Bible prophecies in the light of what happened to Jesus¹¹⁹. Jesus Christ is the real conqueror over evil, but He achieves this victory only through his death¹²⁰. The Lamb has a mortal wound, but it “stands”: a probable reference to the resurrection. The paradoxes of imagery continue when the fragile Lamb is said to possess seven eyes and seven horns, symbols of wisdom and strength¹²¹. The readers are once again confronted with the tension: “das tödlich verletzte Lamm besitzt allumfassende Macht”¹²².

2.3 THE GLORIFICATION OF THE LAMB

Having achieved victory, the Lamb has received the authority to open the book. the Lamb comes to God’s throne and takes it; this solemn moment obviously correlates to the ascension

¹¹³ This verse is sometimes called “a key for the interpretation of Rev 4-5” (STEFANOVIĆ, *The Background and Meaning*, p. 207). In the several passages of the book of Revelation there are single verses which anticipate the themes of the following narrative: for instance, the vision of the “sealing” of the elect and the “great multitude coming from the great tribulation” of Rev 7 represents an answer to the question of Rev 6,17, “Who will be able to stand?” in the time of the “wrath of the One sitting on the throne and the Lamb”. And the theme of war of the dragon with the saints, firstly introduced in Rev 12,17, is developed further in Rev 13-14.

¹¹⁴ Cf. LOHMEYER, *Die Offenbarung*, p. 51.

¹¹⁵ WHITAKER, *The Poetics of Ekphrasis*, p. 139.

¹¹⁶ The reference to weeping is a rhetorical “means of both displaying and eliciting emotions” (Ibid., p. 150). The used Greek verb κλαίω implies deep mourning and grief; thus the author indicates that opening the scroll is of the utmost importance for humanity. As Gradl formulates it, the narrative “demonstriert die erfolglose Suche durch die emotionale Reaktion des Sehers” (GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung*, p. 251).

¹¹⁷ E.g., this idea is developed in the Psalms of Solomon (the first century BC).

¹¹⁸ The position of the Lamb is described in an ambiguous way – it is said to be in the midst of the throne and in the midst of the living creatures; the theological analysis of these expressions see G. SCHIMANOWSKI, *Die himmlische Liturgie in der Apokalypse des Johannes: die frühjüdischen Traditionen in Offenbarung 4-5 unter Einschluß der Hekhalotliteratur* (WUNT 2; 154), Tübingen, 2002.

¹¹⁹ As many scholars point out, John “hears” the Old Testament promise, and “sees” its New Testament fulfillment (cf. KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 386).

¹²⁰ On this issue see further: BAUCKHAM, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 74; CAIRD, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 74-75.

¹²¹ CAIRD, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 75.

¹²² GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung*, p. 276. Thus the Lamb of Revelation combines the ideas of being a victim and a conqueror (KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 385).

to the Father's throne in Rev 3,21. It is noteworthy that neither God nor the Lamb ever speak a word: the message is expressed through the motif of the book¹²³ and the emotional reactions of John and the heavenly beings. Three hymns hail the Lamb as if it possesses the same status as the One seated on the throne¹²⁴. While God is glorified for the act of creation, Lamb is praised for the accomplished redemption "by its blood"¹²⁵. The first hymn sung by the 24 elders is called "a new song"¹²⁶. Through Christ a new eschatological era has already begun. "The new song" describes the result of the redemption in making believers from all the nations a part of "a kingdom and priests serving our Lord", who will reign on earth¹²⁷. The second heavenly hymn has political overtones, attributing to the Lamb characteristics commonly associated with the emperor (Rev 5,11-12). The third hymn is sung to God and the Lamb by "every creature" of the universe (Rev 5,13); thus "in the worship of God and the Lamb by the whole creation the eschatological goal of God's purpose for his creation is already anticipated"¹²⁸.

2.4 THE RULERSHIP OF CHRIST

In identifying the leading idea of Rev 5, scholars observe that the most important theological and structural New Testament parallel to Rev 5 is the Christological hymn from Phil 2,8-11, and the closest Hebrew Scripture prototype the passage in Dan 7,13-15. As Beale formulates it, "John intends chapters 4-5 to depict the fulfillment of the Daniel 7 prophecy of the reign of the 'son of man' and of all the saints, which has been inaugurated by Christ's death and resurrection, that is, his approach to the throne to receive authority"¹²⁹. Taking into account these parallels, many scholars define the scene of Rev 5 not as an "enthronization", as it was quite commonly argued¹³⁰, but an "investiture" of Christ¹³¹. Indeed, the main point of Rev 5 consists not in introducing a "new" king, but in delegating to Christ God's authority (as in Dan 7)¹³². The universal dominion of God (Rev 4) is revealed to be a dominion of God *and Jesus Christ* (Rev 5); this new reality is fully acknowledged in the heavenly realm (Rev 5,9-13) and is revealed to the faithful who already can become a part of His "kingdom".

¹²³ The importance of the sealed book can be seen in the fact that through the book is expressed the relation between God and the Lamb/ Jesus Christ – cf. GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung*, p. 238.

¹²⁴ WHITAKER, *The Poetics of Ekphrasis*, p. 158.

¹²⁵ The majority of scholars argue that the "victory" means the sacrificial death of Christ (cf. John 16,33) – AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 352; BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 351-353; P. PRIGENT, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, Tübingen, 2001, p. 248; KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 386; WHITAKER, *The Poetics of Ekphrasis*, p. 154.

¹²⁶ The adjective "new", *καινός*, has in Revelation obvious eschatological connotations (Rev 21,5; 3,12; 2,17; 21,2; 14,3), it is a "Leitwort der apokalyptischen Verheißung" (J. BEHM, *καινός*, in *ThWNT* 2 (1938) 450-456, p. 451).

¹²⁷ The promise to reign could provide an inspiration and a consolation to the members of the Christian communities of Asia Minor, who were facing marginalization in the Roman society – cf. GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung*, p. 266, 276.

¹²⁸ BAUCKHAM, *Theology*, p. 33.

¹²⁹ BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 369.

¹³⁰ For instance, LOHMEYER, *Die Offenbarung*, p. 50.

¹³¹ AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 346; BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 356-359; S.S. SMALLEY, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse*, Downers Grove, 2005, p. 112; OSBORNE, *Revelation*, p. 257-258; SCHIMANOWSKI, *Die himmlische Liturgie*, p. 220; GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung*, p. 262.

¹³² R. Whitaker argues that Rev 5 represents not an enthronement/ investiture scene, but an epiphany scene – a presentation of the Lamb as deity. She observes that status of the Lamb is not changed throughout the scene, and there no mention of royal regalia or a symbol of might (WHITAKER, *The Poetics of Ekphrasis*, p. 142-143). These arguments are worth taking into account, but I do not regard them as compelling enough to prove that the idea of the glorification of Christ and the "investiture" is completely absent from Rev 5.

2.5 LINKS WITH THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS: POLEMICS WITH IMPERIAL IDEOLOGY

It is commonly observed that the theme of the true rulership is of central importance in Revelation¹³³. It is introduced already in the first chapter: Jesus Christ is called “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev 1,5). The scene Rev 5 has its counterpart in Rev 13: the “dragon” (Satan) delegates to the first beast his authority and his throne (Rev 13,2)¹³⁴. In the image of the first beast can be recognized clear allusions to the empires built on violence and claiming for the absolute power and divine status, in particular the Roman empire. John emphasizes that in spite of the earthly appearances, the universal rulership belongs to God the creator and Lamb the redeemer. Scholars argue that Rev 4-5 constitutes the “theological anchor”¹³⁵ or “theological center”¹³⁶ of the entire book. In Rev 6-22 it is shown how the victory of Jesus Christ will be actualized in human history, when the dominion of God and Christ will be acknowledged by the fullness of creation¹³⁷.

3. THE SEALED BOOK (REV 5,1)

3.1 THE DESCRIPTION OF THE BOOK

The book in God’s hand seems to have a form of a scroll (cf. Rev 6,14)¹³⁸. As in Ez, the detail that there was text in the inner and outer side (Ez 2,9-10), could indicate the fullness of the content of the revelation stemming from God¹³⁹. As elsewhere in Revelation, the number seven bears a connotation of completeness and totality¹⁴⁰. The sealing is strengthened by the prefix “κατα” (κατασφραγίζω - hapax in the NT). In the Greco-Roman and Jewish world a seal was commonly associated with secrecy and mystery, legal documents, authority¹⁴¹ and personal relationship (cf. Song 8,6; 2 Cor 1,22), but also with eschatological revelation (Dan 12,4; Rev 22,10). Gradl argues that the context makes it clear that God has sealed it (κατεσφραγισμένον can be regarded as “passivum divinum”), and correspondingly “die Öffnung des Buches der Einwilligung und Beauftragung Gottes bedarf”¹⁴².

As many commentators point out, the interpretation of the sealed book should take into account *three* aspects – the role of the book in the scene Rev 5, its meaning based on its characteristics, and its role in the further narrative.

3.2 THE FIRST ASPECT: A SYMBOL OF AUTHORITY

The sealed book is undoubtedly the central motif of Rev 5 (in 14 verses it is mentioned eight times), and it is logical to suppose that it is related to the main theme of the section – the sov-

¹³³ This is emphasized by many researchers, for instance BAUCKHAM, *Theology*, p. 34–35; GIESEN, *Die Offenbarung*, p. 145.

¹³⁴ In the description of the beast the author uses antithetic parallelism, which allows to express an apparent similarity as well as an essential difference between the beast and the Lamb. As the Lamb receives worship in heaven, the beast receives worship from the inhabitants of the earth, who sing a hymn: “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” (Rev 13,4).

¹³⁵ GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung*, p. 489.

¹³⁶ KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 367.

¹³⁷ Cf. 1 Cor 15,24-28.

¹³⁸ See AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 341-342.

¹³⁹ Commentators observe that in Ezek 2,10, Ex 32,15 and Zech 5,1-3 the writing “inside and on the back” symbolizes the fullness of the content and its universal character; so the sealed book is supposed to “contain the fullness of divine determinations about the world” (GIESEN, *Die Offenbarung*, p. 164; cf. G. REICHEL, *Das Buch mit den sieben Siegeln in der Apokalypse des Johannes*, Göttingen, 1975, p. 97-99).

¹⁴⁰ Cf. MORTON, *One upon the Throne*, p. 141.

¹⁴¹ Cf. G. BIGUZZI, *Apocalisse. Nuova versione, introduzione e commento* (I Libri Biblici. Nuovo Testamento, 20), Milano, 2005, p. 144; REICHEL, *Das Buch*, p. 99.

¹⁴² GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung*, p. 247. “The scroll’s locked and hidden nature lends a sense of anxiety, anticipation and emotion to the scene” (WHITAKER, *The Poetics of Ekphrasis*, p. 152).

ereignty of God and Christ¹⁴³. Scholars observe that the first and the second hymn to the Lamb have a parallel structure: they both begin with the word “worthy” (ἄξιός) followed by an infinitive. For many the second hymn explains the first one: taking the book signifies accepting “the power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing”¹⁴⁴. This interpretation corresponds to the realities of the Greco-Roman context. Scholars point out that the book and the throne relate to the idea of power. On many Roman bas-reliefs the emperor is depicted with a scroll in his hand, which distinguishes him from other persons¹⁴⁵. The scroll symbolizes the legislative and executive authority of the emperor¹⁴⁶. D. Aune argues that Rev 5 corresponds to this particular Roman motif¹⁴⁷. Moreover, T. Birt supposes that the scroll could also mean the supreme *religious* power of the emperor as “pontifex maximus”¹⁴⁸. On the pillar of Trajan, for instance, the emperor holds a scroll in his right hand while addressing his subjects and sacrificing. Therefore, in Rev 5 one can perhaps see Jesus Christ as a counterpart to the Roman emperor claiming absolute power.

The *transmission* of the scroll could also be perceived as a symbol related to authority. A similar act was performed during the coronation ceremonies of the Eastern rulers, for instance in Egypt¹⁴⁹. The Old Testament rite of anointing a new king possibly also included this element¹⁵⁰. The word “worthy” (four times in Rev 5), was used in acclamations of a new king¹⁵¹. These arguments are in line with the conclusion of Aune, according to which “the transfer of the sealed scroll from God to the Lamb clearly functions as a symbol of the unique role of Christ as the Lamb, the sovereignty of Christ, which he received from the Father”¹⁵².

3.3 THE SECOND ASPECT: A SYMBOL OF GOD’S ESCHATOLOGICAL PLAN

The position in God’s right hand, the seven seals and the text “inside and on the back” evoke associations with fullness of knowledge which is accessible to God alone. Many commentators suppose that the book contains the destinies of creation as “written” or ordained by

¹⁴³ On the sovereignty of Christ as the leading idea of the scene Rev 5 and the book as a symbol of accepting universal dominion by Christ see further: T. BIRT, *Die Buchrolle in der Kunst: archäologisch-antiquarische Untersuchungen zum antiken Buchwesen*, Leipzig, 1907, p. 68-72; HOLTZ, *Die Christologie*, p. 28-29; REICHEL, *Das Buch*, p. 28-29; AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 346; SCHIMANOWSKI, *Die himmlische Liturgie*, p. 220.

¹⁴⁴ HOLTZ, *Die Christologie*, p. 29; AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 334; BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 340; H.-P. MÜLLER, *Die himmlische Ratsversammlung: Motivgeschichtliches zur Apc 5,1-5*, in ZNW 54 (1963) 254–255.

¹⁴⁵ Since the end of the first century CE in this way were depicted Trajan, Marcus Aurelius and Caracalla (BIRT, *Die Buchrolle*, p. 71-72).

¹⁴⁶ BIRT, *Die Buchrolle*, p. 68.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 341.

¹⁴⁸ BIRT, *Die Buchrolle*, p. 72.

¹⁴⁹ In particular, T. Holtz argues that the scene Rev 5 is modeled after the ancient coronation ritual in the ancient Egypt, which included the transmission of the scroll. He identifies in Rev 5 three verses that allegedly correspond to the three stages of the coronation: acclamation (Rev 5,5), presentation (Rev 5,6) and enthronement (Rev 5,7) (T. HOLTZ, *Die Christologie der Apokalypse des Johannes* (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, 85), Berlin, 1962, p. 28-29). The opinion of the parallel to ancient Egyptian ritual is criticized by D. Aune, who points out to the scarcity of data from the Egyptian sources (D. AUNE, *Revelation 5 as an Ancient Egyptian Enthronement Scene?*, in *Apocalypticism, Prophecy and Magic in Early Christianity*, Tübingen, 2006, p. 233-239).

¹⁵⁰ G. VON RAD, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, London, 1975, p. 319.

¹⁵¹ In particular, Josephus Flavius employs the word “worthy” in the descriptions of the coronation ceremonies – Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 6.66; 6.346, 7.338. See further STEFANOVIĆ, *The Background and Meaning*, p. 170-176.

¹⁵² AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 346; the same opinion is expressed by H. BIETENHARD, *Die himmlische Welt im Urchristentum und Spätjudentum* (WUNT, 2), Tübingen, 1951, p. 64-65.

God¹⁵³. Some draw parallels between the sealed book and the motif of the so-called “heavenly book of fate” which appears in ancient Middle Eastern and Greco-Roman literary sources¹⁵⁴. This book was thought to contain all the destinies of the world recorded in advance and was closely associated with the notions of power and authority. This is a plausible correlation; however, one should be aware that Revelation does not promote the idea that history is pre-determined in every single detail¹⁵⁵. Rather, the emphasis is on God’s control over the course of history and leading towards ultimate salvation (cf. Rev 21,1-22,5). Therefore, the book indicates that “der Geschichtsprozess ist von planvollen Walten Gottes gesteuert und gelenkt”¹⁵⁶. Scholars commonly define the book as an outline of “God’s redemptive plan and the future history of God’s creation”¹⁵⁷, “the secret purpose of God for establishing his Kingdom”¹⁵⁸, “the eternal plan of God about the whole history led by Him to the salvation”¹⁵⁹, or “the eschatological divine plan”¹⁶⁰. As Caird aptly observes, God Himself does not open the book, apparently because He “has set this limit to His own omnipotence: man’s destiny, and with it the destiny of all creation, must be achieved by man”¹⁶¹. Correspondingly, Jesus Christ is found worthy to take the book since He has fulfilled the plan of God for mankind.

Scholars point out the importance of the motif of the sealed book for the readers, the members of the Christian communities – emphasizing the power of God over human history, the book provides hope in their present circumstances and the assurance in future salvation. As H. Giesen says, “Gott und Lamm bestimmen die Weltgeschichte. Deshalb können die Christen auch in aussichtslos erscheinenden Situationen standhaft bleiben und schließlich an die Herrschaft Christi teilhaben”¹⁶².

3.4 THE THIRD ASPECT: AN “ANCHOR” FOR STRUCTURING REV 6-22

The third aspect is closely connected to the second and is also based on the features of the book as presented in Rev 5. It is plausible to expect that the purpose of taking the book would be to read it; however, John never employs the verb “to read”, but instead emphasizes its “opening” (ἀνοίγω, used four times, Rev 5,2.3.4.5) and “seeing” (βλέπειν, used two times, Rev 5,3-4). One should also bear in mind that the allusion to Ez 2,9-10 (text “inside and on

¹⁵³ This is a very widespread scholarly opinion; see, for example, REICHEL, *Das Buch*, p. 179; CAIRD, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 72; BAUCKHAM, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 74; GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung*, p. 282.

¹⁵⁴ For example, W. BOUSSET, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, Göttingen, 1966, p. 255; E. LOHSE, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes: übersetzt und erklärt* (Das Neue Testament Deutsch, 11), Göttingen, 1971, p. 42; COLLINS, *Combat Myth*, p. 24; cf. L. KOEP, *Das himmlische Buch in Antike und Christentum: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur altchristlichen Bildersprache* (Theophaneia, 8), Bonn, 1952, p. 25. Cf. the motif of the “Table of destinies” in Akkadian epic “Enuma Elish”; the analysis see in S.M. PAUL, *Heavenly Tablets and the Book of Life*, in *Journal of the Ancient Near East Studies* 5 (1973) 345-353. In Greco-Roman sources the heavenly book of fate is mentioned in Homer, *Ilias*, 6.486-488; 8.34, 9.245, 13.400; *Odyssea* 17.326-327; Ovidius, *Metamorphoses*, 15.809-815; further examples and their analysis see further H. CANCIK, *Libri Fatales. Römische Offenbarungsliteratur und Geschichtstheologie*, in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, ed. D. Hellholm, Tübingen, 1989, p. 549-576.

¹⁵⁵ The valuable statement of E. Allo should be cited: “Ni dans l’A.T., ni dans l’Apocalypse, ni meme dans les Apocryphes, il n’est question de livres doués par eux-mêmes d’une force magique, comme ce pouvait être le cas pour les ‘tablettes des destinées’ à Babylone... le contenu de nos livres et sa réalisation dépend de la volonté libre de Dieu et de la volonté libre des hommes” (E.B. ALLO, *Saint Jean l’Apocalypse*, Paris, 1921, p. 68).

¹⁵⁶ M. REISER, *Das Buch in der Apokalypse*, in *Kirchliches Buch- und Bibliothekswesen* 1 (2004) 68-83, esp. 76.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. CAIRD, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 72; OSBORNE, *Revelation*, p. 249-250.

¹⁵⁸ BAUCKHAM, *Theology*, p. 74.

¹⁵⁹ BIGUZZI, *I settenari*, p. 196.

¹⁶⁰ REICHEL, *Das Buch*, p. 179.

¹⁶¹ CAIRD, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 73.

¹⁶² GIESEN, *Die Offenbarung*, p. 145; cf. also GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung*, S. 222, 277-279, 283-287; 388.

the back”) points to a prophetic *revelation*. As R. Whitaker concludes, “by omitting any reference to writing and reading, John highlights the visual aspect of his revelation”¹⁶³. The Lamb received the authority to open the seals, and further visions are presented as a direct result of this process (Rev 6-8): each time the Lamb opens a seal, John sees a new vision. Thus it is reasonable to conclude that the content of the sealed book is thought to become visible in the following visions. This conclusion corresponds to the identification of the book as God’s eschatological plan for the history of mankind led to salvation, because Revelation symbolically portrays precisely the realization of this plan till its eschatological fulfillment (cf. Rev 21,1-22,5). It should be recalled that the title of the book is “revelation”, and it is significant that this revelation is said to be given to Jesus Christ by God (Rev 1,1). Many scholars suggest that the opening verse of the book finds its explanation in the scene of Rev 5; the sealed book indicates the promised revelation about the future that will unfold in the narrative¹⁶⁴. Indeed, the sealed book is the “starting point” of all the actions presented in Rev 6-22; there is consensus among the commentators that the book undoubtedly serves as a literary means for structuring the visionary section, since the series of the seven seals and seven trumpets directly originate from it¹⁶⁵.

3.5 THE SEALED BOOK AND THE INTERPRETATION OF THE RIDERS

The choice for an eschatological or historical understanding the four riders is connected with the interpretation of the book with seven seals¹⁶⁶. There are three controversial points, which have an impact on understanding the riders.

Firstly, a number of scholars hold that the book contains a revelation about *eschatological* events, about God’s *final judgment* over evil¹⁶⁷; others argue that the book encompasses the plan of God for the history of mankind. Hence, its content may refer to the eschatological future as well as to the present and past¹⁶⁸.

Secondly, it is not clear what precisely the process of opening the book indicates. A considerable number of commentators argues that an *actualization* of its content of takes place, a realization of God’s plan. To quote G. Caird, "until the scroll is opened, God’s purposes remain not merely unknown but *unaccomplished*"¹⁶⁹; according to Gradl, “mit der Übergabe des Siegelbuchs an das Lamm beginnt sich in der Johannesoffenbarung der eschatologische Heilsplan Gottes zu *realisieren*”¹⁷⁰. Others argue that the point of the opening is not the actual realization, but to *show* the divine revelation about the earthly reality, how it is seen from the heavenly perspective.

Thirdly, the text nowhere explicitly states that the book is *read* or that its actual content becomes visible. Many scholars maintain that the disclosure of its content starts from Rev 6,1

¹⁶³ WHITAKER, *The Poetics of Ekphrasis*, p. 146.

¹⁶⁴ F.D. MAZZAFERRI, *The Genre of the Book of Revelation from a Source-Critical Perspective* (BZNV, 54), Berlin, 1989, p. 265-296; BAUCKHAM, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 254-255.

¹⁶⁵ See AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 345; GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung*, p. 374, 274.

¹⁶⁶ The interpretation of the sealed book influences interpretation of the riders, and also vice versa: some reconstruct the meaning of the book on the basis of the actions that it provokes, depicted in chapter 6: cf. L. BAYNES, *The Heavenly Book Motif in Judeo-Christian Apocalypses, 200 BCE-200 CE*, Leiden, 2012, p. 143-162.

¹⁶⁷ H. GIESEN, *Im Dienst der Weltherrschaft Gottes und des Lammes: die vier apokalyptischen Reiter (Offb 6,1-8)*, in *SNTU 22* (1997) 92-123, esp. 96; GARROW, *Revelation*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁸ See I. BOXALL, *The Revelation of Saint John* (Black’s New Testament Commentaries, 18), Peabody, 2006, p. 95.

¹⁶⁹ CAIRD, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 72.

¹⁷⁰ GRADL, *Buch und Offenbarung*, p. 374, italics mine. Giesen also says that the transmission of the book signifies “die Einsetzung Christi in seine Macht über die Endereignisse” (*Die Offenbarung*, p. 145).

and either extends till the end of the visionary section (Rev 22,6)¹⁷¹ or only till Rev 8,1, where the last seal is removed¹⁷². In this case the series of the seven seals has the *first* position in disclosing the content of the book. Its theological message then is strongly accentuated. A number of scholars maintain that John is consistent in employing the image of a scroll: “normally all the seals would have to be broken before the scroll could be opened”¹⁷³. Some scholars claim that the process of disclosing the content of the scroll either starts with the breaking the last seal (Rev 8,2)¹⁷⁴ or with the sounding of the seventh trumpet (Rev 11,15)¹⁷⁵. Then the vision of the seven seals is understood as a preparation or an overture, “foreshadowing” the eschatological events to come¹⁷⁶. In this case the riders are naturally to be interpreted against the contemporary historical background. The argument based on the features of an “earthly” scroll has been criticized by A.Y. Collins and Whitaker, who argue that the emphasis is not on reading the book but on *seeing* visions¹⁷⁷. According to Biguzzi, the logic of the narrative implies that the disclosure already starts with the visions accompanying the breaking of the seals. This view seems to be more plausible and also in line with the imagery of Revelation, which sometimes challenges ordinary presuppositions of reality (cf. Rev 7,14) and in many places obviously is not meant to be understood in a strict literal way.

¹⁷¹ So HOLTZ, *Die Christologie*, p. 34; REICHEL, *Das Buch*, p. 220-222; BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 347; BIGUZZI, *I settenari*, p. 188-190; REISER, *Das Buch in der Apokalypse*, p. 68-83; SCHIMANOWSKI, *Die himmlische Liturgie*, p. 165; TÓTH, *Der himmlische Kult*, p. 266; A. SPATAFORA, *Symbolic language and the Apocalypse*, p. 105-106.

¹⁷² BOUSSET, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, p. 255; LOHMEYER, *Die Offenbarung*, p. 53; AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 344.

¹⁷³ BAUCKHAM, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 249-250; cf. KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 404.

¹⁷⁴ SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 6-8; MAZZAFERRI, *The Genre of the Book of Revelation*, p. 271; G. E. LADD, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, Grand Rapids, 1972, p. 81.

¹⁷⁵ GARROW, *Revelation*, p. 18-35. There is also a view that the content of the book is disclosing after the seventh bowl - M. JAUHAINEN, *Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Rev 1,1): The Climax of John's Prophecy?*, in *Tyndale Bulletin* 54 (2000) 99-117.

¹⁷⁶ BORNKAMM, *Die Komposition*, p. 133; BAUCKHAM, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 250; OSBORNE, *Revelation*, p. 249.

¹⁷⁷ WHITAKER, *The Poetics of Ekphrasis*, p. 146. “There is no reason to suppose that only what follows the seventh unsealing can be understood as the revelation of the content of the scroll” (COLLINS, *Combat Myth*, p. 26; cf. also BIGUZZI, *I settenari*, p. 189).

III: THE ESCHATOLOGICAL OR HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE FOUR RIDERS

1. THE STRUCTURE AND LITERARY CONNECTIONS

The narrative of Rev 6 is anchored in the same setting as Rev 4-5, but then the Lamb starts removing the seals from the book. The removal of each seal is accompanied by a vision. The structure of the vision of the seven seals can be presented as 4+3¹⁷⁸; the fifth seal is clearly separated from the first four¹⁷⁹.

The focus shifts between Rev 6,1 and 6,2: the visions of the first four seals are linked with the earth, not with heaven¹⁸⁰. The first four seals are closely connected to the four living beings: each vision starts with a call of the creature¹⁸¹. The visions of the first four seals represent a coherent unit with a stereotypical structure: the appearance of a horse of a particular color, then the mentioning of the rider and of the object he carries¹⁸². The last part of the visions is the description of rider's activity.

Within the group of four one can detect several links and juxtapositions. It is noteworthy that the rider of the second seal is called "another" (ἄλλος), as if he were of a different quality. The first rider is said to "ride away" (ἔξῃλαθεν), while about the others it is not clear, did they eventually execute their tasks or not¹⁸³. The first rider correlates with the fourth: in both introductory descriptions occurs the word φωνή¹⁸⁴. The importance of the first rider is strengthened by the comparison of the voice with "thunder"¹⁸⁵. The fourth rider can be defined as a climactic element, because he summarizes the activities of the previous riders (Rev 6,8)¹⁸⁶. De Villiers argues that "the first seal and the fourth one have a special relationship, encompassing the other two as their introduction and conclusion"¹⁸⁷. Exceptionally, the fourth rider is given a name, "Death", and is accompanied by another figure (Hades). In Revelation Death and Hades represent the ultimate enemies; they are the first to be mentioned (Rev 1,18) and the last to be overcome (Rev 20,14), even after dragon-Satan (Rev 20,10). "Death" is placed in the middle of the septet (3+1+3); this fact should not be overlooked in the interpretation of the vision¹⁸⁸.

¹⁷⁸ The same structure (4+3) has the septet of the seven trumpets.

¹⁷⁹ The last three seals indeed form a group; their descriptions are more detailed and possess numerous internal connections. The seals five and seven both refer to the heavenly altar, to the group of people (the saints), and the focus is on the Church as the persecuted people of God. Incense and prayers of the saints elaborate the motif of "heavenly liturgy" of chapter 5. The imagery of the sixth seal elaborates the theme of judgment, and in this way provides an answer to the cry of the martyrs of the fifth seal (Rev 6,10). The imagery and structure of the fifth and sixth seals are more developed than those of the other seals; this indicates their crucial importance for the overall composition of seals (cf. SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 62). The magnificent striking imagery of the sixth seal results in a question (Rev 6,17) and the vision of Rev 7 is usually understood as an answer (BIGUZZI, *I settenari*, p. 178).

¹⁸⁰ HERZER, *Der erste apokalyptische Reiter*, p. 236.

¹⁸¹ Between the fourth and the fifth seal occurs a subtle change in the word order: the numeral adjective is placed before the noun, and not after it: καὶ ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν σφραγίδα τὴν τετάρτην (Rev 6,7) and καὶ ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν πέμπτην σφραγίδα (Rev 6,9).

¹⁸² Cf. AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 389.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Compare: καὶ ἤκουσα ἐνὸς ἐκ τῶν τεσσάρων ζώων λέγοντος ὡς φωνὴ βροντῆς (Rev 6,1) and καὶ ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν σφραγίδα τὴν τετάρτην, ἤκουσα φωνὴν τοῦ τετάρτου ζώου (Rev 6,7).

¹⁸⁵ As Giesen observes, the comparison of the voice with the thunder indicates that it is especially important for the Christians (*Im Dienst*, p. 106).

¹⁸⁶ AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 389. The cumulative effect of the riders' actions is given in Rev 6,8.

¹⁸⁷ DE VILLIERS, *The Role of Composition*, p. 139.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 142.

2. GENERAL INTERPRETATION OF THE LAST THREE RIDERS

In this section will be outlined some of the common presuppositions on the interpretation of the riders: the general meaning of the last three riders, OT background, NT parallels.

In antiquity a rider and a horse symbolized power¹⁸⁹. The *second* rider refers to wars because of his two attributes: the red color of his horse in combination with the sword naturally evokes associations with blood (cf. also Rev 12,3)¹⁹⁰. The *third* rider on the black horse with scales points to scarcity and famine (cf. reference in Rev 6,8). The voice declares eight times the usual price for wheat and five times for barley¹⁹¹; the protection of oil and wine indicates that famine is expected to be serious, though limited¹⁹². The *fourth* rider symbolizes death in general; however, in LXX θάνατος is frequently used to translate “pestilence” (דבר). Commentators assume that the authority over a quarter of the earth given to the fourth rider refers to all the other three. The sequence of events brought by the riders is quite natural – war renders the land waste, which leads to famine, pestilence and death¹⁹³.

The main OT parallel are the groups of four riders and four chariots of Zch 1,7-17 and 6,1-8. Their function, however, is not to bring calamities, but to observe the earth¹⁹⁴. Further, the last three riders correspond to the pattern of the three plagues (“sword, famine and pestilence”) that commonly occurs in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, though the order of the plagues may differ¹⁹⁵. *Four* plagues of the Lord (along with “wild beasts”, cf. Rev 6,8) are mentioned in Jr 15,3; Ez 14,21. Commentators also see the parallels with the Jewish expectations of afflictions preceding the coming of the new age (Dan 12,1; 2 Bar 25,1-30,5): “The events accompanying the breaking of each seal (with the exception of the fifth) belong to the traditional Jewish and Christian conceptions of the tribulations that will introduce the end”¹⁹⁶.

Indeed, all scholars point to the numerous characteristics that the vision of the seven seals has in common with the eschatological discourse in the Synoptic gospels¹⁹⁷. The parousia will be preceded by wars (Mk 13,7; Mt 24,6-7), famines (Mk 13,8; Mt 24,7) and pestilence (Lk 21,11)¹⁹⁸; these calamities correspond to the last three riders.

¹⁸⁹ A horse was regarded as a “Symbol der Macht, Schnelligkeit, der Angriffsfähigkeit, der Eroberung und der Herrschaft” (GIESEN, *Im Dienst*, p. 99).

¹⁹⁰ AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 395; LOHMEYER, *Die Offenbarung*, p. 60.

¹⁹¹ AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 397. Denarius was a day’s wage for non-qualified worker (cf. Mt 20,1-16).

¹⁹² Cf. BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 381. Sometimes the third rider is regard as an expression of the injustice and inequality, especially if one assumes that oil and wine represent more “luxury” items (BIGUZZI, *Apocalisse*, p. 165; CAIRD, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 81). Still, most commentators observe that oil and wine belonged to the essential daily nutrition, although not as its main elements (GIESEN, *Im Dienst*, p. 112-113). Prigent considers Jl 1,10-11 to be the main background for this verse (*Commentary on the Apocalypse*, p. 270).

¹⁹³ BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 371; J. DESCREUX, *Diversité des méthodes et polysémie des images: le cas de quatre cavaliers (Ap 6,1-8)*, a paper presented in the Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense LXIV, 23-25 July 2015, p. 9.

¹⁹⁴ No passage from the Scripture totally corresponds to the group of riders in their order (SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 62).

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Jr 14,12; 21,7; 24,10; 29,17; 42,17; 44,13; Ez 5,12; 6,11; 7,15; 12,16.

¹⁹⁶ AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 423-424.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. LOHMEYER, *Die Offenbarung*, p. 58; KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 357-358.

¹⁹⁸ Other motives of Synoptic eschatological discourse have parallels in the fifth and the sixth seals - the persecution and martyrdom of Christians (Mt 24,7-10, cf. Rev 6,9-11) and the earthquake (Mt 24,29, cf. Rev 6,12-17). For the argument that there was a common oral tradition underlying both sources see PENLEY, *The Common Tradition*, p. 62-88.

3. THE FUTURIST INTERPRETATION OF REV 6,1-8

3.1 RIDERS AS AGENTS OF DIVINE JUDGMENT

A futurist approach is adopted in particular by Giesen. Giesen bases his interpretation on his understanding of the sealed book as “eschatologische Heilsbotschaft”, which “für die treuen Christen Heil bedeutet, während es ein Gerichtsbuch für deren Feinde ist”¹⁹⁹. Assuming that the content of the book is the whole text of Revelation, Giesen relates the whole of Rev 6,1-22,6 to an eschatological future. The opening of the book is not merely a vision, but a process of *actualization* of eschatological events²⁰⁰.

As a primary background for the riders Giesen sees the Hebrew Scripture texts related to divine judgment²⁰¹. He argues that the riders do not symbolize evil powers opposing God²⁰², but rather super-human powers whose overall function is *positive*²⁰³. The arguments are as follows: the riders appear directly after removing the seals of the book of God’s salvific plan; they are summoned by the Lamb and the four heavenly beings, which means that the riders act according to God’s orders. Identifying, against whom the riders act, Giesen assumes that the series of seven is parallel to the other septets and has the same meaning; in the case of the trumpets and the bowls, modeled after the plagues of Exodus, it is explicitly indicated that they affect the unrighteous (Rev 8,13; 9,4; 16,9-11)²⁰⁴, but not the faithful (cf. Rev 7,1-3). Correspondingly, the riders also exercise judgment on sinners, and presumably do not harm the faithful²⁰⁵. Giesen discusses the objection against his latter point: other scholars claim that the martyrs in the fifth vision represent an immediate result of the actions of the riders (Rev 6,9-11)²⁰⁶. Giesen counters this by arguing that the fifth vision rather continues the theme of judgment introduced by the riders²⁰⁷. The martyrs’ question “artikuliert zwar die Erwartung

¹⁹⁹ GIESEN, *Im Dienst*, p. 96.

²⁰⁰ The same view is also expressed by Baynes and Gradl; discussing the heavenly book motif, Baynes argues that the sealed book functions to destroy the unrighteous, in the same way as the book of Zch 5,1-4 does. Baynes classifies both books as “books of action”. The connection of the books is supported by the allusions of Rev 6 to Zch 6,1-8, which is close to the pericope Zch 5 (BAYNES, *The Heavenly Book Motif*, p. 154, 162).

²⁰¹ In particular, Ez 5,16-17; Lv 26,18-28; Dt 32,24-25; Jr 15,1-4; 16,4-5. The primary role of the Hebrew Scripture background for Rev 6,1-8 over all the other possible sources is also advocated by Beale, Rissi, Feullet and Herzer (M. RISSI, *The Rider on the White Horse: A Study of Revelation 6,1-8*, in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 18 (1964) 407-418; A. FEULLET, *Le premier cavalier de l'Apocalypse*, in *ZNW* 57 (1966) 229-259). “Doch für den Apokalyptiker und seine Gemeinden steht an erster Stelle eher der traditionell alttestamentliche Verstehenshorizont: die vier Pferde mit den Reitern sind eine deutliche Aufnahme der apokalyptischen Motive aus Sach 1 und 6” (J. HERZER, *Der erste apokalyptische Reiter und der König der Könige. Ein Beitrag zu Christologie der Johannesapokalypse*, in *NTS* 45 (1999) 230-249, esp. 234).

²⁰² Against, for example, Kraft, who considers the riders to be the evil powers opposing God (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, Tübingen, 1974, p. 115).

²⁰³ Giesen observes that in John’s point of view even the evil powers can be directly employed by God: “Gott benutzt dämonische Mächte als Werkzeuge, damit sie den gottfeindlichen Menschen Schaden zufügen (Rev 17,16)” (*Im Dienst*, p. 100).

²⁰⁴ From the comparison of Rev 8,13 and 9,4 it is clear that John equates “living on earth” with those who have no seal of God, and therefore this expression signifies not all the inhabitants of the earth in general, but the sinners, or, more precisely, “non-Christian persecutors of Christians” (AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 240).

²⁰⁵ Since the sealed book for Giesen indicates God’s salvific plan, he assumes that “die treuen Christen ausdrücklich von den Plagen ausgenommen sind” (*ibid.*, p. 96). The same view expresses Gradl: “Mit jedem Brechen eines Siegels ist jeweils eine Handlung verbunden, die sich auf einen Ausschnitt der gottfeindlichen Wirklichkeit bezieht” (*Buch und Offenbarung*, p. 279).

²⁰⁶ Cf. BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 389-390.

²⁰⁷ Giesen disagrees that the martyrs of the fifth seal imply the persecutions of Christians in John’s time and that John primarily wanted to provide his readers with consolation in this situation of oppression. Neither in Revelation itself, nor in the historical records of in time of Domitian’s rule in Asia Minor the situation of the on-going persecution is presupposed. “Die Situation der Christen ist vielmehr dadurch bestimmt, dass sie nicht wie die

der Christen, dass sich Gott gegen seine und der Christen Feinde endgültig durchsetzt". The sixth seal with the imagery of the Day of the Lord also continues the function of the riders as punishment of the evil-doers²⁰⁸.

With regard to the first rider, Giesen firstly points to the difference between him and the other three: his description contains a number of positive elements ("victorious" nature, a crown, white horse); unlike the other riders, he is not linked to any destructive action. This is strengthened by the fact that in Rev 6,8 there is no mention of a "bow"²⁰⁹. Still, Giesen acknowledges that the rider belongs to the group of four and does not possess a completely different identity. He has the same function as the others: "Heil für die Glaubenden zu bringen durch den Sieg über die gottlose Welt"²¹⁰. Further, Giesen argues that the color "white", being used in Revelation exclusively with positive connotations, has primarily an *eschatological* meaning²¹¹. Thus he defines the rider as "eschatologische Eroberer", a general symbol of the ultimate victory of God²¹². Giesen then relates the first rider with war, and consequently interprets the second rider as the symbol of a *civil* war.

3.2 EVALUATION

The interpretation of the riders as general metaphors is plausible. Still, the position of Giesen is open to criticism. Above all, his arguments fail to take into account the difference of the seven seals from the other two septets: there are no *exact* parallels between the seals and the trumpets/bowls; the seals contain no explicit elements of the plagues of Exodus²¹³. All the other problems with Giesen's interpretation actually result from this one. The *positive* nature of the last three riders as agents of God's justice remains highly questionable for three reasons. First, Death and Hades in Revelation obviously represent negative, ungodly realities²¹⁴. Second, the use of "passivum divinum" much more frequently occurs with a reference to ungodly powers²¹⁵. Third, Giesen's correlation of the martyrs of the fifth seal with the riders is

anderen Bürger des Römischen Reiches am öffentliche Leben teilnehmen können, da dieses stark vom Götter- und Kaiserkult und seinen Festen geprägt ist" (ibid, p. 98).

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 99; also OSBORNE, *Revelation*, p. 274-277. Minear suggests that the punitive actions of the riders are directed mainly towards false teachers acting within the Christian communities, such as the false prophetess Jezebel (Rev 2,20-23); the "inner" danger of compromising the Christian witness allegedly was the primary concern of John (P.S. MINEAR, *I Saw a New Earth: an introduction to the visions of the Apocalypse*, Washington, 1968, p. 80).

²⁰⁹ As the chief scriptural reference for the rider Giesen regards Ez 5,16-17, where the bow symbolizes a weapon of divine chastisement (*Im Dienst*, p. 109). It is noteworthy that for Herzer the main scriptural background for Rev 6,2 is Zch 9,13-14, which speaks about the bow and the sword together and thus could provide an indirect link between Rev 6,2 and 19,11-16 (*Der erste apokalyptische Reiter*, p. 235).

²¹⁰ Ibid., p. 106. Giesen's interpretation of the first rider closely resembles that of Feuillet, who claimed that the rider is intended as a representation of divine judgment in general, and the other three riders are his "instruments" in the service of God. The first rider is positive in nature, because his "victory" assures that God will ultimately conquer evil (FEUILLET, *Le premier cavalier*, p. 247).

²¹¹ Rev 2,17; 4,4; 1,14; 14,14; 19,11; 20,11; white garments given to the faithful are mentioned in Rev 3,4.5.18; 6,11; 7,9.13.14; 19,8.14. "White garments symbolize a range of positive meanings that center on the concept of ritual and moral purity" (AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 223). Cf. GIESEN, *Im Dienst*, p. 107.

²¹² Ibid., p. 101.

²¹³ Still, Sommer identifies in Rev 6 implicit references to Exodus 7-11 via the imagery of the arrival of the Day of the Lord in the sixth seal (M. SOMMER, *Der Tag der Plagen: Studien zur Verbindung zur Rezeption von Ex 7-11 in den Posaunen- und Schalenvisionen Der Johannesoffenbarung und der Tag des Herrn-Tradition* (WUNT 2; 387), Tübingen, 2015).

²¹⁴ See the section 1 of the present chapter. Caird concludes that the riders "cannot therefore be regarded as obedient angels faithfully carrying out the task of retribution allotted them by God" (CAIRD, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 81). Interestingly, it is the angels who act in the series of the trumpets and the bowls.

²¹⁵ The expression "ἐδόθη" + pronoun in Dat is used 15 times in a negative context (Rev 6,4.8; 7,2; 9,1.3.5; 11,2; 13,5.7. (two times each) 14,15; 16,8), and 7 times in a positive one (Rev 6,11; 8,2.3; 11,1; 12,14; 19,8; 20,4).

not plausible, for as Aune notes, “it seems somehow out of place that the martyrs demand vengeance upon the inhabitants of the earth when that appears to be precisely what has been dispensed by the four horsemen in vv.2-8”²¹⁶. So, the fifth seal is likely to presuppose that the people faithful to God are affected by the calamities brought by the riders²¹⁷. Therefore, it is more plausible that the last three riders represent *negative* forces or events, affecting the whole of mankind, which are not directly caused by the will of God²¹⁸. I will adopt this view here.

3.3 THE RIDERS AS NEGATIVE EVENTS AND THE FIRST RIDER AS THE ANTICHRIST

Rissi, Thomas and Wong claim that the riders have a *negative* identity and bring calamities to all²¹⁹. They understand the group of riders as a part of the beginning of the “birth pangs” (Mt 24,8; Mk 13,8)²²⁰: the riders portray disastrous events that are necessary to happen before the end, which according to synoptics will affect *all* people. The argument for the eschatological interpretation of the riders is that the unit Rev 6,1-11 is followed by Rev 6,12-17, which marks the arrival of the Day of the Lord²²¹.

For Rissi, Thomas and Wong the first rider is a more specific figure than the general symbol of war: he represents the Antichrist. Six arguments are cited²²². Firstly, if the rider belongs to the group he is also likely to have a negative identity²²³. Secondly, since the riders correspond to future eschatological tribulations, the *first* rider is likely to be intended to correlate with “false Christs” and “false prophets” that are mentioned at the very beginning of the apocalyptic discourse (Mk 13,5-6; Mt 24,4-5; Lk 21,8). Thirdly, the “wild beasts” of Rev 6,8 do not correlate with the last three riders, but could be referred to the first rider, indicating his actual negative action which is lacking in Rev 6,2. Through the term “beasts” the rider could be linked to Rev 13 and the “beast from the sea”. Fourthly, the color “white” is indeed used in Revelation to portray righteousness, which would apparently speak against a negative interpretation, but in Rev 12-13 the beast is sad to deceive people by imitating Christ’s appearance. Correspondingly, the white horse can be understood as an attempt to *imitate* Christ in His righteousness and splendor (cf. 2 Cor 11,14). Fifthly, Wong builds on the argument of Rissi who draws special attention to the imagery of the bow as a weapon of Gog (Ez 39,3). The latter represents the eschatological adversary of the people of God, who will be defeated in the final battle²²⁴. Imagery of Ez 38-39 is employed in Rev 19, and in Rev 20,7 Gog is even

The formula “it was given” is called “passivum divinum”, which represents “a circumlocution of divine activity or authorization” (AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 389).

²¹⁶ AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 391.

²¹⁷ One could indeed see the act of “sealing” in Rev 7,1-3 as providing security for the faithful; but it obviously represents a sign of protection from the judgment of God manifested in the Exodus-like plagues of trumpets and bowls, and not from the actions of the four riders who precede the act of sealing.

²¹⁸ For the first rider the negative interpretation is also quite possible. However, at the same time one should take into account the difference of the rider from the others and numerous *positive* connotations present in his description (see below in the next section).

²¹⁹ RISSI, *The Rider on the White Horse*, p. 407-418; R.L. THOMAS, *Revelation 1-7*, Chicago, 1992, p. 413-439; K.K. WONG, *The First Horseman of Revelation 6*, in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (1996) 212-226.

²²⁰ The same view is advocated by R.H. CHARLES, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, vol. 1, Edinburgh, 1920, p. 164.

²²¹ The details of Rev 6,12 “are difficult to explain as occurring during the present age” (WONG, *The First Horseman*, p. 222).

²²² Almost the same arguments and conclusion are proposed by Beale; however he elaborates this argument more in the framework of the idealist approach than of the futurist one (see below, 5.2).

²²³ This argument is strengthened by the expression ἐδόθη αὐτῷ in Rev 6,2 (WONG, *The First Horseman*, p. 223). Cf. the footnote 215 for the references.

²²⁴ RISSI, *The Rider on the White Horse*, p. 415-416; WONG, *The First Horseman*, p. 224.

mentioned by name. Sixthly, the interpretation of the rider as the Antichrist allows to underline the contrast between Rev 6,2 and 19,11 and to see an antithetical parallelism, a comparison between the false imitator and the genuine sovereign. Thus, the first rider would represent the end-time Antichrist, a violent dictator who will become a world ruler before the parousia. The rider-antichrist will “conquer” all the inhabitants of the earth.

3.4 EVALUATION

The interpretation of the last three riders as negative forces affecting all the people does justice to the imagery of the fifth seal and to the use of the formula ἐδόθη αὐτῷ.

At first sight the identification of the first rider with the Antichrist appears more consistent with the imagery of the apocalyptic discourse in the Synoptic gospels than the interpretation of Giesen. However, this argument proves to be not totally compelling on the basis of five points. Firstly, the *unity* of the group of the four riders, three of which symbolize impersonal realities, is a strong argument against the “personified” interpretation of the rider²²⁵. In this regard a more general metaphorical interpretation of Giesen would fit the context better. Secondly, the proposed link between Rev 6,8 and 6,2 is not convincing, since 6,2 lacks an explicit mention of beasts; “beasts” in 6,8 are more naturally understood as an integral part of the scriptural formula of the four plagues and not as a reference to a further point in the narrative²²⁶. Thirdly, against the negative interpretation of the first rider may speak the fact that the colors of the other three riders express their *genuine* identity²²⁷. Fourthly, the verb “to win” without an object is used exclusively in a positive context²²⁸; from 17 cases there are only two references of the “victory” of the beast over the saints (with an object: Rev 11,7; 13,7)²²⁹. Fifthly, the word στέφανος is also mostly used in the positive contexts, with reference to the glorified faithful²³⁰.

4. THE CONTEMPORARY-HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF REV 6,1-8

4.1 THE INTERPRETATION OF THE RIDERS

According to the majority of exegetes, the four riders do not (or at least, not exclusively) pertain to the eschatological future. Five arguments are put forward.

Firstly, the martyrs of the fifth seal most probably allude to some historical event of the past²³¹. The theme of suffering and martyrdom is of great importance throughout the entire

²²⁵ Cf. KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 394. This argument is also valid against the interpretation of the first rider as Jesus Christ.

²²⁶ See, for example, FEUILLET, *Le premier cavalier*, p. 236-237.

²²⁷ This fact is emphasized by FEUILLET, *Le premier cavalier*, p. 239; BIGUZZI, *Apocalisse*, p. 166-168; M. BACHMAN, *Die apokalyptischen Reiter. Dürers Holzschnitt und die Auslegungsgeschichte von Apk 6,1-8*, in *ZTK* 86 (1989) 33-58.

²²⁸ The victory of Christ is mentioned four times (Rev 3,21; 5,5; 17,14); two times the victory of Christians is mentioned, who overcome the Satan with “the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 12,11; 15,2); eight times the promise to the “conqueror” occurs in the letters to the seven Churches (Rev 2,7.11.17.16; 3,5.12.21; 21,7).

²²⁹ Giesen provides an additional argument that the interpretation of the rider as Antichrist does not do justice to the link with the sealed book which contains God’s *salvific* plan for the world (*Im Dienst*, p. 104). This argument, however, may be refuted: see the theological significance of the negative interpretation below (5.2).

²³⁰ Rev 2,10; 3,11; 4,4.10; 12,1; 14,14. The exception is Rev 9,7, where the locusts are said to have ὡς στέφανοι, but one could argue that this only negative use is just basically a comparison. Wong proposes to interpret στέφανος given to the first rider as a general sign of military victory.

²³¹ Cf. KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 399. “While it is obvious that they are martyrs, their precise identity is unclear. It is more probable that the Christian martyrs are particularly in view, including those who died in the Neronian persecution in A.D. 64” (AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 406). A big number of scholars support the view that the exact historical background for the fifth seal is Neronian persecution, which was still remembered at the end of

narrative (Rev 1,9; 2,9-10.13; 13,7; 18,24; 19,2)²³², one martyr of Pergamon community is mentioned by name – Antipas. It would be artificial to suppose that behind the theme of martyrdom were no specific actual experience relevant to John and his addressees. Biguzzi claims that the vision of the martyrs reveals that the interest of the author lies in real history and that he is not just speculating about the end of the present aeon²³³.

Secondly, the imagery of the sixth seal in Rev 6,12 possesses an eschatological motif drawn from the “Day of the Lord”; consequently, the previous five seals are thought to *precede* it²³⁴. Rev 6,17 is of a crucial significance in this argument: the reaction of fear from part of the people and their wish to hide from the wrath of the Lamb “makes it clear that the plagues unleashed by the opening of the first six seals are only preliminary in nature, indicating that the terrible events of the great day of wrath are about to begin”²³⁵. Therefore, the first five seals are likely to present “on-going history”²³⁶. Beale summarizes the two latter points: “The cry ‘how long?’ of the fifth seal and the approach of the final judgment of the sixth seal demonstrate that the events of 6,1-8 precede the final judgment”²³⁷.

Thirdly, the vision of the opening of the seals immediately follows the scene of Christ receiving the sealed book from God. All scholars consider this to symbolize Christ’s resurrection and heavenly glorification. Thus it is plausible to regard that the visions of the riders as directly *following* the death and resurrection of Christ, to refer to the events from the first century CE onwards²³⁸. As Beale expresses it, “Rev 6,1-8 describe the operations of the destructive forces that were unleashed *immediately* on the world as a result of Christ’s victorious suffering on the cross”²³⁹.

Fourthly, Schüssler-Fiorenza suggests that eschatological discourse in the Synoptic gospels distinguishes *two stages* of the end time events. Christians are already living in the eschatological era, experiencing afflictions (Mk 13,9-13), but only after the great tribulation (cf. Mk 13,24) will come “the Day of the Lord” and the parousia. Accordingly, the septet of the seals corresponds to the first stage, the historical level, and the two other septets to the second, the eschatological. In turn, Garrow claims that John perceived history as “repeating itself in inten-

the first century CE as a shocking experience (CHARLES, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, p. 174; ALLO, *Saint Jean l'Apocalypse*, p. 85; LOHMEYER, *Die Offenbarung*, p. 62-63). However, Biguzzi makes a point that John was primarily interested in the situation of his own time (the end of the first century CE) and in the Asia Minor region. In Revelation there is a reference to the martyr Antipas and to the coming tribulation of the community of Smyrna (Rev 2,9-10; also 3,8). According to Biguzzi, Neronian persecution was present in the mind of John as a paradigmatic precedent in light of which one can interpret present and future, but his *primary* concern was the actual present and the future of his communities (BIGUZZI, *I settenari*, p. 132-133).

²³² Several passages portray the future vindication of the persecuted and their blessed life in the presence of God and the Lamb (Rev 7,14-17; 20,4-6; 21,3-4; also 11,11-13; 12,10-12).

²³³ BIGUZZI, *I settenari*, p. 134. Biguzzi claims that the fifth seal, introducing the theme of persecution, provides a bridge from the contemporary reality of John to eschatological tribulation.

²³⁴ LOHMEYER, *Die Offenbarung*, p. 64-65; this goes against the argument of Wong - WONG, *The First Horseman*, p. 222.

²³⁵ AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 423. Cf. also the important idea in terms of chronology of the sixth seal: “even though the concept of the day of the Lord was drawn into Israelite and early Jewish eschatology when the final activity of God was in view, the phrase often refers to expected historical event and can be defined as a prophetic interpretation of momentous events in the past, present or future (Lam 1,21)” (ibid., p. 422).

²³⁶ Cf. C.H. GIBLIN, *Recapitulation and the Literary Coherence in John's Apocalypse*, in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994) 81-95, esp. 92; JAUHAINEN, *Recapitulation and Chronological Progression*, p. 548; LADD, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 95-96.

²³⁷ BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 371; BIGUZZI, *I settenari*, p. 149.

²³⁸ CAIRD, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 79.

²³⁹ BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 371, italics mine.

sifying circles until the End²⁴⁰... If so, it was possible for John to point to the events of the past as foreshadowing the events of the future”. Thus it would be logical to investigate which historical events witnessed by John’s addresses could provide parallels to the activities of the riders.

Fifthly, Schüssler-Fiorenza and Garrow argue that Rev 6,1-8 should be understood as a preparation and an anticipation of the disclosure of the content of the sealed book²⁴¹. The visions of the seals show the readers some elements from the content of the scroll, but only in a partial and fragmentary way, maintaining the suspense²⁴². According to Garrow, the riders are “messengers sent out to warn the four corners of the earth about the about the disasters which pour forth from the scroll eventually opened”²⁴³. The riders are summoned by each of the four living creatures, so it is plausible that they are sent forth in four *different* directions; Zechariah’s horsemen and chariots were probably also sent separately to the four points of the compass. If the “fourth” part of the earth of Rev 6,8 refers to *all* the riders, they are commissioned to warn one quarter of the earth each, so that the people a chance to repent before the final judgment begins.

4.2 THE BACKGROUND FOR THE SECOND AND THIRD RIDERS

4.2.1 Events of the first century

Among the grim events during the second half of the first century that were probably well-known to John and his addressees commentators mention several wars (cf. Rev 6,3) and famines (cf. Rev 6,5-6): the civil wars and political turmoil during “the year of the four emperors”; the Jewish war of 66-70; the defeat of the Roman army by Parthians in 62²⁴⁴; the famines in 62 and 93²⁴⁵. Moreover, one of the most painful events was the persecution of Christians by Nero after the fire of Rome in 64²⁴⁶. Caird argues that in the imagery of the seals John alluded to some of these events, because they could evoke in Christians the disturbing question whether anything in history had positively changed after the victory of Christ. “The vision of John was meant to assert Christ’s sovereignty over such a world as that”²⁴⁷.

For the events that could have shaped the image of the *third* rider many commentators refer to the situation during the famine in Asia Minor in 91-92²⁴⁸, which would be more close to the date of composition of Revelation than the famine in 62. Domitian issued an edict prescribing

²⁴⁰ GARROW, *Revelation*, p. 19. As a New Testament expression of this view Garrow sees the idea that the Lord’s supper will be repeated and intensified in the end (Mt 26,29; 1 Cor 11,26).

²⁴¹ SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 62.

²⁴² In particular, Garrow sees the following correspondences, where in the following chapters are given further explications of the riders: Rev 6,2 – 16,12 explicated in 17,12.17 (connection of the first rider with the beast and a link with the legend of the returning Nero with the Parthian army); 6,3 – 17,16.17 (civil war); 6,5 – 16,2-12 (famines as the effects of the judgment of the bowls and a consequence of the civil war); 6,9-11 – 13,7.15 (the slaughter of the faithful by the beast, also a probable allusion to Nero’s time); 6,12-17 – 16,18-21, especially 20,11-15. The earthquake of the sixth seal already points forward to the Last Judgment (GARROW, *Revelation*, p. 18-23). “Both are explicitly passages in which the earthquake accompanies the theophany of God as Judge. Moreover, in these two cases John employs the tradition of the cosmic quake in which heavens as well as the earth flee from God’s presence” (BAUCKHAM, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 209).

²⁴³ GARROW, *Revelation*, p. 18. This interpretation is supported by the fact that each horseman rides alone, with the exception of the fourth; there is no mention of the following army. One single rider often was sent as a messenger (cf. Est 8,10.14; 2 Kg 9,18; Zch 1,8-11).

²⁴⁴ Tacitus, *Annales*, 15.13-17.

²⁴⁵ Suetonius, *Vita Caesarum: Domitian*, 7.

²⁴⁶ Tacitus, *Annales*, 15.44.

²⁴⁷ See the references in CAIRD, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 79.

²⁴⁸ Suetonius, *Vita Caesarum: Domitian*, 7.2; 14.2; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii*, 6.42; Statius, *Silvae*, 4.3.11-12.

to cut down vineyards in order to promote the production of grain. This edict provoked protests of the population and eventually was cancelled. At first sight it seems to explain much in the vision; Bousset, Swete, Hemer and Osborne regard Domitian's edict as a highly probable background of Rev 6,5-6²⁴⁹. Still, others raise two major objections against it. Firstly, in the edict is no mention of *oil*, so the correlation remains imprecise. Secondly, as Aune says, "the frequency of famines in various parts of the empire means that it is difficult to correlate the famine anticipated in Rev 6,6 with any particular historical event"²⁵⁰.

As a background for the *second* rider some exegetes see the civil unrest of "the year of the four emperors"²⁵¹; many point out that his action - taking peace away from the earth - is not portrayed as some *local* military conflict, but rather as a universal phenomenon. On that basis scholars claim that here is implied a reversal of the famous and widely propagated idea of the *pax Romana*²⁵². Red is associated with the dragon-Satan (Rev 12,3) and the luxury of Babylon (Rev 17,4; 18,12.16); so these factors together might indicate that "the Apocalypse gives a brutal reminder that the wealth of empires and the prosperity of their citizens are often founded in a shedding of blood"²⁵³. If the third rider is understood not exclusively as famine, but as a symbol of socio-economic inequality²⁵⁴, then one could agree with Schüssler-Fiorenza that the visions of the seals "describe in apocalyptic language and imagery the political, economic and religious oppression"²⁵⁵. Scholars often assume that the four riders are meant to "reveal and highlight the true nature of Roman power and rule"²⁵⁶; in other words, "the first group of seal-openings... describes the condition of the Empire as it revealed itself to the mind of the Seer"²⁵⁷.

4.2.2 Events of the second century

In his recently proposed new interpretation of the riders, Witulski provides ample historical data from the *second* century CE, because he claims that Revelation was written during the rule of the emperor Hadrian, more precisely in 132-135 CE²⁵⁸. Witulski argues that the red horse was associated with the Jews, and the second rider would refer to the Jewish revolt in Northern Africa; during this uproar many died (this accounts for the "sword"). The fourth rider and his companion Hades would stand for the Roman prefects of the province, M. Rutilius Lupus and Q. Marcius Turbo, who took an active part in suppressing the revolt. Further, in the figure of the third rider one could recognize the governor of Asia Minor, whose unsuccessful policy resulted in famine and civil resentment²⁵⁹. Witulski argues that when one

²⁴⁹ BOUSSET, *Die Offenbarung*, p. 135; H.B. SWETE, *Commentary on Revelation*, Grand Rapids, 1906, p. 88; HEMER, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 158; OSBORNE, *Revelation*, p. 281.

²⁵⁰ AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 400; GIESEN, *Im Dienst*, p. 112-115; KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 396-397.

²⁵¹ Cf. OSBORNE, *Revelation*, p. 279.

²⁵² AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 395-396; SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 63.

²⁵³ BOXALL, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 111. Boxall argues that when the second rider is allowed to take peace from the earth, it signifies not the blessed peace which God can give, but "the pseudo-peace offered by victorious empires which human beings are bidden to put their trust in" (ibid.).

²⁵⁴ Cf. BIGUZZI, *I settenari*, p. 124. Economical persecution is the theme of Rev 2,9 and 13,16-17.

²⁵⁵ The vision of the fifth seal accounts for the religious oppression (SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 65).

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

²⁵⁷ SWETE, *Commentary on Revelation*, p. 87.

²⁵⁸ T. WITULSKI, *Die vier "apokalyptischen Reiter" Apk 6,1-8: ein Versuch ihrer zeitgeschichtlichen (Neu-) Interpretation* (Biblich-theologische Studien, 154), Neukirchen-Vluyn, 2015, p. 200. The beast from the sea (Rev 13) would stand for the emperor Hadrian.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 161-188.

accepts a dating under Hadrian, the precise meaning of the riders becomes clear and they will “zwanglos” fit together in one coherent picture²⁶⁰.

4.3 THE BACKGROUND FOR THE FIRST RIDER

4.3.1 Events of the first century

There are two widespread interpretations of the *first* rider. The first one is rooted in the first-century Roman political context and sees the rider as an expression of John’s general ideas about the empire. In the minds of John’s readers the image of a conquering military commander who is a mounted archer naturally evoked a picture of Parthians, who were particularly famous for their cavalry and archers. The Parthian empire presented a threat to Rome; notably, the Parthian army defeated the Romans three times within one century (in 53 BCE, 35 BCE, 62 CE). This understanding of the first rider is strengthened by the idea of an impending invasion from the east, as alluded to in Rev 9,14 and 16,12. Moreover, Boxall and Garrow see an additional link of the first rider with Nero. John might refer to the rumors, broadly circulated after 68 CE that Nero had escaped to Parthia and would return with his eastern allies to destroy the Roman empire; in Asia Minor there even appeared several impostors of Nero²⁶¹. Regardless of this, the first rider allegedly had a strong rhetoric function for the contemporary readers. From the letters to the seven Churches it is clear that at least some groups of Christians perceived the empire as a guarantor of peace, security and prosperity. For them the vision of the riders “represents a wake-up call... The apparently impregnable empire has sown the seeds for its own destruction. To put one’s trust in any political and economic system built upon conquest or exploitation is ultimately futile”²⁶². Schüssler-Fiorenza points out that the first rider “reveals that the expansionistic military power of Rome / Babylon will be overcome. If that is the case, the first rider functions as a precursor of the victorious parousia-Christ” (cf. Rev 19,11)²⁶³.

The second interpretation is anchored in the religious context of the time and assumes that the rider might be an allusion to Apollo. This interpretation is partially accepted by Aune²⁶⁴; Karrer and De Villiers advocate it for four reasons²⁶⁵. Firstly, the bow and crown were common and well-known attributes of Apollo. Secondly, Apollo was regarded as a source of oracular prophecy; the notion of the false prophecy is of considerable importance in Revelation (Rev 2,20-23; 16,13; 19,20; cf. 21,27; 22,15)²⁶⁶. Thirdly, Rev 9,11 mentions the angel of the abyss called Ἀπολλύων, in whom many see an evident reference to Apollo. Fourthly, Rev 12 probably exhibits John’s knowledge of mythological traditions on Apollo’s origin, which he adapted to narrate the story of Christ. It is possible that for John Christ is a divine counterpart of the so-called “Sun god”, and genuine Christian prophecy a counterpart to the “victorious” pseudo-prophets of Apollo. De Villiers argues that the first rider-Apollo provides a contrast to the glorious Christ of Rev 19,11. “They both introduce a new phase – the evil rider in Rev 6

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 200.

²⁶¹ BOXALL, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 108; Cf. BAUCKHAM, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 384-453; H.J. KLAUCK, *Do They Never Come Back? Nero Redivivus and the Apocalypse of John*, in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63 (2001) 683-698.

²⁶² BOXALL, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 112.

²⁶³ SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 63.

²⁶⁴ AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 393.

²⁶⁵ M. KARRER, *Apoll und die apokalyptischen Reiter*, in: *Die Johannesoffenbarung: ihr Text und ihre Auslegung*, eds. M. Labahn, M. Karrer, Leipzig, 2012, p. 223-251.

²⁶⁶ The association of the rider with (pseudo)prophet-Apollo would also correlate with Mk 13,22.

marks the beginning of the times of woe on earth and inaugurates the persecution of the saints. The Rider in Rev 19 inaugurates the beginning of the time of salvation”²⁶⁷.

4.3.2 Events of the second century

Witulski observes that the first rider is portrayed as a triumphant, military, god-like figure, and thus his appearance is likely to allude to the “imperium Romanum”. The first rider would represent Trajan, who was widely glorified for his military successes; he defeated the Parthians and received the title “Parthicus”²⁶⁸.

4.4 EVALUATION

The five proposed arguments do not have the same force. The strongest argument for a historical background of the septet of seals is the vision of the fifth seal which is placed after the vision of the riders; in general, the prominence of the theme of oppression in Revelation is so high that it certainly presupposes some background relevant to the readers. The argument that the riders precede the Day of the Lord portrayed in the sixth vision is less compelling since it can be imagined that they *directly* lead into the eschatological culmination. The argument about the moment of transmission of the sealed book is partially convincing; the additional force provides the identification of the book as God’s plan for the history of mankind, and not just for the eschatological period. Thus it would be natural that the riders may reflect some historical events. The argument of Schüssler-Fiorenza about the two stages of the apocalyptic discourse in the gospels is worth considering, although there are little indications that these stages were strictly distinguished in the Synoptic gospels and in Revelation itself. Still, the elements of realized eschatology in Revelation may strengthen this argument. The additional evidence for it provides the discussed above considerable difference of the septet of seals from the two other septets, which are modeled after the Exodus plagues and most likely depict the eschatological plagues. The view on the moment of the disclosure of the contents of the book is too speculative; as indicated above, it is more plausible that the content of the book is already shown in the visions accompanying breaking the seals. Taken together, the arguments have weight; obviously, they do not totally exclude the eschatological interpretation of the riders, but allow to see them in a broader temporal perspective, and justify the search for a historical background.

In the case the second and the third rider the contribution of the contemporary-historical approach is not highly insightful, because it proves impossible to identify *particular* military conflicts and famines, which would immediately spring to mind of John’s first readers. Still, the interpretation of the second rider as a contrast with pax Romana is plausible; if one assumes that the first rider alludes to Parthians, then the two riders together would represent a threat to the established order of the empire, thus undermining the assurance of its stability that some of John’s addressees could feel²⁶⁹. Domitian’s edict provides an interesting contemporary parallel to Rev 6,6, but on the basis of the two mentioned arguments it can be viewed only as a secondary background, not as a primary one²⁷⁰.

The identification of the last three riders with specific persons involved in the revolt in Northern Africa in 132-135 CE can be challenged by a question, why these historical details would

²⁶⁷ DE VILLIERS, *The Role of Composition*, p. 144. Boxall adds that Nero, being a singer, lyre-player and chariot-
eer, was quite often compared by his contemporaries to Apollo; moreover, there were coins portraying Nero as
Apollo (BOXALL, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 109).

²⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 131-143.

²⁶⁹ This idea can be compared to Thes 5,3.

²⁷⁰ RISSI, *The Rider on the White Horse*, p. 408-410.

be of such an utmost relevance for a Christian apocalyptic-writer addressing the communities of Asia Minor²⁷¹. As it was said above (3.2), a personified interpretation of the riders is improbable, because riders are likely to represent impersonal powers, correlating with the scriptural formula of the three/four plagues (cf. Rev 6,8), which has a figurative sense in the OT. The identification of the second rider with Jewish revolt provides too “local” understanding of the universal image of “taking peace away from the earth”. The proposed interpretation of the second rider does not explain the details about the oil and wine; in this regard Domitian’s edict would provide a more plausible correlation. Particularly unlikely seems the identification of the fourth rider with some ill-known Roman official. In general, the “pin-pointing” hypothesis of Witulski appears to narrow the message of Rev 6,1-8; as Schüssler-Fiorenza points out, the language of Revelation is metaphorical, possessing rich and polyvalent character²⁷². Thus, the interpretation of Witulski seems far-fetched; moreover, his overall hypothesis is based on the late dating of Revelation in 132-135 CE, which is open to questions. If the dating in the time of Hadrian proves to be improbable, then the whole hypothesis makes no sense.

More fruitful and insightful is the contemporary-historical interpretation of the first rider. If not the identification, but the association with Parthians and Apollo is quite plausible, since these figures were well-known in the Roman empire in the first century CE. Against such links may be brought three arguments: the “positive” connotations of the rider; the fact that the motif of military conquest is already present in the figure of the second rider and repeating it would be superfluous²⁷³; the absence of the motif of false prophecy in the particular pericope Rev 6,1-8,1. The view of Schüssler-Fiorenza that the first rider representing the Parthian threat to Rome could be understood as a “precursor of Christ” is implausible; however critical towards the Roman empire John might be, the idea of military conquest resulting in slaughter and famine is negative, and the probable allusions to Parthians in Rev 9,14; 16,12 are related to plagues, not to Christ. In Rev 6,2 there is no sufficient evidence for a link with Nero; allusions to the legend of returning Nero (Nero redux/redivivus) are probably present only in chapters 13 and 17, where the more elaborate description allows to discern some hints. The association with Trajan proposed by Witulski is also not convincing enough, due to the lack of the corresponding details and to the improbability of personified interpretations.

Summarizing, one can say that the general weakness of the contemporary-historical approach consists in a tendency to overestimate the relevance of particular historical events for Revelation. It is highly probable that certain historical events have *inspired* John to write his literary work, but the meaning of the imagery is not *determined* and *limited* by the particular historical references. More plausible in this regard is the statement of Descreux: “Si les cavaliers font allusion à la situation historique de l’auteur, c’est de manière *plus générale*: les conquêtes militaires, les troubles civils, les famines et les épidémies mortelles étaient des événements récurrents au I^{er} s.”²⁷⁴ According to Aune, “the first cavalier primary represents warfare, and each of the three following cavaliers represents one of the stereotypical evils of war: sword, famine, and plague”²⁷⁵.

²⁷¹ Cf. FEUILLET, *Le premier cavalier*, p. 230.

²⁷² SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 19.

²⁷³ So FEUILLET, *Le premier cavalier*, p. 233; ALLO, *Saint Jean l’Apocalypse*, p. 96.

²⁷⁴ DESCREUX, *Diversité des méthodes*, p. 7, italics mine.

²⁷⁵ AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 393; SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 62. “The first rider points to the threat posed by the violent forces operated within the human society” (KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 394). “More important than any specific historical reference is the general point: even in the midst of the es-

This “moderate” form of the contemporary-historical approach prevails among commentators. However, in this case there can be raised an objection against the value of this approach: if John wanted to allude to some contemporary events, he could have done it in a more explicit form, and the riders are presented as too stereotypical. Still, this approach attempts to connect the literary motives with the world of John’s addressees and to search for their immediate associations rooted in their experience; otherwise, without this contemporary “anchor”, the interpretations can become too abstract or artificial. It is well-known that the later interpreters sometimes related the riders with particular events of later ages, partially because they ignored the historical context of John.

Therefore, the contemporary-historical approach is indispensable, but for the understanding the riders it is not the primary approach. Discussing the variants of contemporary interpretations, Koester says that “the imagery is broader”²⁷⁶. Such a “broader” understanding implies an idealist approach.

5. THE IDEALIST INTERPRETATION

5.1 ASSURING GOD’S VICTORY OVER EVIL

Commentators employing the futurist approach often claim that the riders express God’s sovereignty and the ultimate defeat of evil doers. Thus, Giesen defines the rhetorical function of the first rider – the eschatological conqueror – as providing Christians with hope and confidence already at the beginning of the first series of plagues, motivating them to remain faithful. The civil war symbolized by the second rider “ist letztlich ein Bild für die heillose Situation, in der sich die gottfeindlichen Mächte befinden”²⁷⁷. In the interpretation of the third rider Giesen makes a link with Rev 21,6 and explains “hunger” in a metaphorical way: “Wie in Off 21,6 das Lebenswasser Symbol für die Gemeinschaft zwischen Gott und den Glaubenden ist, so drückt die Hungersnot die mangelnde Verbindung mit Gott aus, der Ursprung allen Leben ist”²⁷⁸. According to Giesen, the four riders do not exclusively refer to the eschatological period, but also serve to encourage Christians of all times: “...deswegen können sie vertrauensvoll in die Zukunft schauen, die allein Gott und dem Lamm gehört und jenen, die ihnen auch in schwerer Zeit die Treue halten”²⁷⁹.

5.2 PROVIDING AN INSIGHT IN SUFFERING

Commentators who regard the riders as negative destructive forces often move to a general discussion of the presence of evil in human history. Caird claims that the vision of the riders is of crucial significance for understanding the whole message of the book. After the solemn scene of the transmission the sealed book to the Lamb, the visions following breaking the seals seem to be an anticlimax. The four riders represent disasters that are typical for every age, including the time of John’s addressees. Caird says that the clue for understanding the riders provide two themes of the preceding context, Rev 4-5: the “victory” of Christ achieved by His crucifixion (Rev 5,5), and the dominion of God and Christ. Accepting the suffering like a lamb, Jesus transformed all the evil directed against Him into agent of His victory²⁸⁰. Thus, the content of the scroll of God’s salvific plan reveals that God brings good out of evil:

chatalogical woes, the restraining hand of God and His Messiah is at work, ameliorating their excesses” (BOXALL, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 111).

²⁷⁶ KOESTER, *Revelation*, p. 397.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 115.

²⁷⁹ GIESEN, *Im Dienst*, p. 111.

²⁸⁰ CAIRD, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 82.

“Nothing can now happen which cannot be woven into the pattern of God’s gracious purposes”²⁸¹. The Christian communities already knew that Christ is accepted as a sovereign by the faithful and will receive dominion over the world at the eschatological consummation; however, the message of John goes further than that and assures that Christ is *already* a real ruler over the kings of the earth (Rev 1,5)²⁸².

In a similar way, for Beale the riders provide a basis for the theological reflection on the problem of suffering of the righteous (theodicy). He also claims that the four riders represent destructive powers; he sees a contrast between the four living beings and the four riders: the former represent “the praise of the redeemed throughout the entire creation”, the latter symbolize “the suffering of many throughout the earth, which will continue until the parousia”²⁸³. Moreover, Beale and Heil argue that the calamities of the riders are targeted especially at Christians (cf. Rev 6,9-11)²⁸⁴. The first rider is interpreted by Beale as an evil force attempting to weaken and oppress believers through deceit and persecution (cf. Rev 11,7; 13,7)²⁸⁵. “The image of the rider may include reference to 1) the antichrist 2) governments that persecute Christians or 3) the devil’s servants in general”²⁸⁶. The actions of the four riders serve a double purpose – to refine the faith of believers and to punish unbelievers²⁸⁷. Through His death and resurrection, Christ made the forces of evil His agents to serve His purposes of sanctification and judgment (cf. Rev 1,18). The theological message of the riders is that the apparent “earthly” defeat of Christians will become their spiritual victory, if they do not compromise their faith. It is remarkable that the cry “Come!” addressed to the riders may have eschatological connotations, alluding to the future coming of Christ (Rev 22,17.20)²⁸⁸. Thus it is implied that the calamities and afflictions experienced by people are ultimately aimed at preparing the new creation.

5.3 THE FIRST RIDER AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF CHRIST

A number of commentators argue that the first rider possesses a *positive* meaning. They base this interpretation on the view on the sealed book as disclosing the visions of history, and not exclusively eschatological events. Accordingly, the riders as a content of the book “represent different forces intertwining in human history because of divine commission or permission”²⁸⁹, so one of the four symbolizes a positive force. The arguments that the identity of the first rider fundamentally differs from the other three were mentioned above (3.2)²⁹⁰; there can

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 82-83. The same view is expressed, for instance, by Resseguie: “John wants to assure that God uses wickedness – as fearsome and disheartening as it is – to further God’s gracious purposes on earth... On the surface evil appears to bring only famine, death and destruction, but at another level God uses human and demonic destruction to prepare for a new creation in which the Lamb and God reign supreme” (J.L. RESSEGUIE, *Revelation Unsealed: a Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse* (Biblical Interpretation Series, 32), Leiden, 1998, 146-147).

²⁸² OSBORNE, *Revelation*, p. 272–273. Fiorenza also asserts that John “does not assert that calamities are decreed by God. God authorizes the calamities but does not will them” (SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 63).

²⁸³ BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 385. Cf. Rom 8,22-23.

²⁸⁴ J.P. HEIL, *The Fifth Seal (Rev 6,9-11) as a Key to Revelation*, in *Biblica* 74 (1993) 220-243; BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 376-389; idem, *The Unseen Sources of Suffering*, in *Calvin Theological Journal* 41 (2006) 115-126.

²⁸⁵ For the basic arguments for this interpretation see the section 3.3.

²⁸⁶ BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 377.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 388. In this way Beale actually combines the views of Giesen and Caird.

²⁸⁸ So PRIGENT, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, p. 264; RESSEGUIE, *Revelation unsealed*, p. 146; DESCREUX, *Diversité des méthodes*, p. 10.

²⁸⁹ BIGUZZI, *I settenari*, p. 124.

²⁹⁰ The first rider is contrasted to the others by the white color, his victorious nature, the absence of calamity associated with him and absence of the bow in Rev 6,8.

be added three further observations: firstly, the “crown” is more widely used in relation to God’s people²⁹¹; secondly, Bachman claims that the adjective ἄλλος of Rev 6,4 points to the *qualitative* difference of the second rider from the first, and thus intentionally separates the first rider from the others²⁹²; thirdly, the rider is regarded as a direct synonymic parallel to Rev 19,11, anticipating the appearance of the glorious Christ.

A number of scholars identifies the rider with Christ²⁹³. Some maintain that he has a *general* positive meaning, for instance, a reference to the victory of the Gospel (in accordance with Mk 13,10)²⁹⁴, or the victory of the people of God²⁹⁵. Against the identification of the rider with Christ was raised the objection that apocalyptic discourse envisages the coming of Christ at the very end of the eschatological tribulations²⁹⁶. However, this objection has little force since the victory of Christ is already achieved (cf. Rev 5,5), and He can be depicted as present in the earthly level, in the life of the communities, protecting and comforting the faithful²⁹⁷. This view is in line with the concept of the realized eschatology: “The End is here ever since the death of Christ at Easter”²⁹⁸. For Christians the first rider is intended to be a herald of hope²⁹⁹, symbolizing that the *first* place in human history belongs to the positive forces, leading to ultimate vindication and salvation.

5.4 EVALUATION

The idealist approach is undoubtedly justified and can be defined as the *theological* approach par excellence, interpreting the message of the book. However, sometimes this feature becomes its weakness: developing general Christian theological ideas, the idealist interpretations can become too abstract and no longer closely connected to the text itself. Still, the value of this approach consists in establishing a link between the two separate time-points – the eschatological future and John’s first century. Precisely the idealist approach is able to emphasize that eschatology is *already* present in the lives of Christians after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The example of Beale is significant: while identifying the first rider in the same way as the futurist Wong, Beale does not strictly distinguish between the final eschatological tribulation and the time of the Church³⁰⁰. Thus, in Beale’s interpretation the focus is shifted from the distant future to the present, and the message of Revelation becomes more relevant for readers of all times. The image of the riders reveals that the disasters do not have the last word, because the ultimate control over history belongs to God and Christ.

²⁹¹ Cf. footnote 230 for the references.

²⁹² BACHMAN, *Die apokalyptischen Reiter*, p. 36-47. Bachman underlines that the analysis of the reception history and the history of art shows that the first rider was always regarded as a positive figure until 13th century. He also adds an additional argument that the juxtaposition of positive and negative images would not be the only example, cf. Rev 12,1.3 (also the adjective ἄλλος is employed).

²⁹³ BORNKAMM, *Die Komposition*, p. 147; PRIGENT, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, p. 266-267; BIGUZZI, *Apocalisse*, p. 167-168; SPATAFORA, *Symbolic language and the Apocalypse*, p. 73. Heil considers the rider to represent Christ, and the martyrs of Rev 6,9-11 are thus praying directly to Him (HEIL, *The Fifth Seal*, p. 223).

²⁹⁴ For instance, LADD, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 99.

²⁹⁵ “Le cavalier incarne une victoire à venir, mais déjà acquise (il porte la couronne), du camp de Dieu” (DESCREUX, *Diversité des methodes*, p. 11).

²⁹⁶ AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 393. Aune argues that since the Lamb is opening the seals, He cannot be present in the following scene; in terms of the literary setting it would be awkward to have Christ as a “subject” of the scene and at the same time as a subordinate figure, for Aune this “double” presence of Christ appears as making no sense.

²⁹⁷ Herzer regards the appearance of the first rider as theophany; the last three riders following the rider-Christ allegedly represent the evil powers which He conquers, in particular, “death” (*Der erste apokalyptische Reiter*, p. 236).

²⁹⁸ PRIGENT, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, p. 268.

²⁹⁹ BIGUZZI, *Apocalisse*, p. 168.

³⁰⁰ In line with 1 John 2,18.

The identification of the rider with Christ seems problematic for four reasons. Firstly, as it was argued before, the personified interpretation is highly improbable. Secondly, the descriptions of the rider and Christ considerably differ in details³⁰¹. Thirdly, the rider is a part of the group (as it is in Zch 1 and 6); this fact probably implies that if the three riders are negative, the first is thought to be evil as well. Kraft says that it would be an “aesthetical sin” to place Jesus Christ in the same level as calamities³⁰². Fourthly, the role of the Christ in the scene of Rev 5-6 is much broader: the Lamb opens the book and summons the riders, determining their activities³⁰³. However, these arguments do not deny the possibility that the first rider can still have positive connotations. It could be the case that the rider is not an antagonist of the victorious Christ anticipates, but provides His anticipation.

6. CONCLUSION

In this chapter were discussed three main methodological approaches to Rev 6,1-8 and it was shown that they are frequently used in combination, in particular, idealist approach is often combined with the futurist and contemporary-historical. The sealed book provides a reference point in the argumentation: it is thought to contain God’s salvific plan over the history of mankind till its end. The majority of commentators employ a contemporary-historical and an idealist approach, while a futurist approach is applied only by some. However, with regard to the second and the third riders were found not many historical correlations as to provide a primary background; in the case of the first rider the proposed historical allusions are more convincing. The last three riders are negative and represent wars, famines and pestilence in a metaphorical sense, probably also expressing a critical view on the cruel and expansionist nature of the Roman empire. The first rider is also mostly viewed negatively, being associated with the Parthians and Apollo. Still, this view is also not without discussion; the first rider remains an enigmatic figure. The idealist approach helps to elucidate the general theological meaning of the riders: assuring that God is in control over human history, and the disasters will be interwoven in His salvific plan. I argue that the riders are to be interpreted primary in an idealist perspective, as referring not exclusively to the contemporary context of John, but to general truths of history in a broader sense. Importantly, in the framework of the idealist approach the eschatological connotation of the riders also remains present, because this approach takes into account that the Lamb has *already* inaugurated eschatological time of salvation (notably, Beale’s interpretation). In general, all the three approaches are applicable to more or lesser extent because the imagery of Revelation is of a highly complex origin. As Boxall expresses it, John sees his visions after “meditating upon prophets such as Ezekiel and Zechariah, pondering the inherited tradition about Jesus’ end-time teaching, and contemplating recent political events”³⁰⁴. The formula of Rev 6,8 is used in Scripture in the figurative sense; therefore it is likely, says Beale, that “no precise historical background can exhaust the meaning” of the four riders³⁰⁵.

³⁰¹ In particular, Christ has a sword (Rev 19,15), not a bow, and has many diadems upon His head (Rev 19,12), not a crown.

³⁰² Cf. KRAFT, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, p. 114-115.

³⁰³ GIESEN, *Im Dienst*, p. 114.

³⁰⁴ BOXALL, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 112.

³⁰⁵ BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 385.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

In this study were discussed three approaches to Revelation. The *futurist* approach sees the book as a revelation about the eschatological period, or, in a more “strict” form, a prophetic description of future events which are to occur shortly before the end of the world. The *contemporary-historical* approach assumes that the author primarily refers to the contemporary situation of his addressees and through the images intends to change their attitudes towards the Roman empire by unraveling its true character. The *idealist* approach concentrates on uncovering general ideas which the symbolic metaphorical imagery can convey, and on their theological and moral significance on the basis of scriptural allusions and/or the contemporary background.

The idealist approach connects the eschatological perspective with the contemporary situation of John; however, some claim that for John these perspectives totally coincide, since he believes that the end will “soon take place” (Rev 1,1; 22,6). Although Revelation quite often speaks about the imminence of the parousia, there are five arguments for concluding that the emphasis is not on the imminence of the end *as such*. First, the imminence language has an explicitly hortatory function, serving to convince the readers to adhere to the Christian message and not to compromise with Roman society; second, it has the function to assure the readers that God’s plan will be fulfilled; third, Revelation contains elements of the realized eschatology, based on the chief importance of the victory of Christ achieved in His death and resurrection; fourth, Rev 14-20 contains the elaborate descriptions of what must precede the end; fifth, some passages about the “coming” of Christ may express the idea of spiritual presence of Christ in the Christian communities and of judgment “within” history. These arguments taken together prove that John’s primary objective was not to convince the addressees in the imminence of parousia, but to give them a pastoral admonition, a warning and encouragement. Since Revelation has more rich and complex view on eschatology than a linear futurist one, the employment of the idealist approach is justified. Still, this approach should be combined with the other two, because they provide a necessary basis: John is concerned with the contemporary social and political context of his readers and his “trans-historical” view of reality enables him to discern an eschatological dimension in contemporary events.

The distinction between eschatological and historical layers of Revelation is connected with the structure of the book. The variety of proposed models can be explained by the complex character of the imagery and different nuanced literary links. Almost all scholars distinguish four major parts (Rev 1,1-3; 1,4-3,22; 4,1-22,5; 22,6-21) and four structural markers (the series of seven, “in the spirit”, “soon”/“after this”, “3,5 years”). The schemes of Tavo and Bauckham based on these structural markers do not make clear, whether there is a linear progression or mere repetition (“recapitulation”) between the septets. The septets of seals and trumpets have a similar structural pattern (4+3); in turn, the septets of the trumpets and bowls have significant parallels in imagery: they can be defined as “eschatological plagues” modeled after the plagues of Exodus. The three septets have two major indications of progression and dynamics: the growth of the number of people that are affected by the calamities (Rev 6,8; 8,7-9,19; 16,1-21) and the intensification of the concluding formula (Rev 8,5; 11,19; 16,18; cf. 4,5). Beale regards all the septets as chronologically and thematically parallel, while the models of Collins and Koester place the seals/ trumpets into the first cycle of visions, and the bowls into the second cycle, which is understood as the *final* eschatological stage. This division also takes into account that the imagery of the septet of seals differs from the other septets considerably. The structure proposed by Koester should be preferred, since it combines the positive features of the other models and is more nuanced with regard to the meas-

ure of progression/recapitulation. Therefore, it is highly plausible that the septets of seals and trumpets are to be understood not as parallels, but separately, both in chronology and in meaning. Consequently, I argue that the meaning of the four riders is not limited to the “eschatological plagues”, as the septets of trumpets and bowls are.

Since Rev 4-5 provides a setting to Rev 6, and in Koester’s structure Rev 6,1-8,1 is regarded as one unit with Rev 4-5, the main characters and theological message of Rev 4-5 are discussed. The main elements of Rev 4 are the throne of God, the four living beings and the twenty four elders around the throne. The hymns of the heavenly beings glorify God as the Creator and contain several allusions to the imperial cult. Rev 5 keeps to the same setting, but introduces a new object and a new character: a book with seven seals and a Lamb. Only the latter, a symbol for Jesus Christ, is found worthy to open the book because it had achieved victory by its death and resurrection (Rev 5,5). Three hymns of the heavenly beings glorify the Lamb as the redeemer who possesses the same status as the One sitting on the throne. The interpretation of the sealed book has three aspects. Firstly, it serves as a symbol of authority that Christ receives from God. Secondly, it symbolizes God’s salvific plan over history, which is in essence eschatological. Thirdly, the book can be defined as a “narrative anchor” of the further septets, and it is plausible that the content of the book is shown in the further visions of Revelation, thus starting with the vision of the four riders.

The four riders of Rev 6,1-8 represent a coherent unit, probably modeled after the four riders of Zechariah 1 and 6 and the three/four plagues of the Lord that occurs frequently in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The riders also have obvious parallels with the elements from the apocalyptic discourse in the Synoptic gospels: wars, famines and pestilence are cited among the signs of the approaching parousia. Scholars have applied to Rev 6,1-8 all the three methodological approaches, often combining them. In particular, those who employ the contemporary or the futurist approach as basic, also employ the idealist one, as a logical development of the proposed interpretations into more general ideas. The *metaphorical futurist* interpretation of the riders regards them as agents of divine judgment, and their function as a punishment of sinners. The first rider is viewed as a general symbol of the ultimate eschatological victory of God. However, Giesen’s arguments about the positive nature of the riders are not plausible, since they are based on the assumption that the septet of seven seals has the same meaning as the septets of the trumpets and bowls, which was proved to be questionable. The *specific futurist* interpretation regards the riders as negative forces affecting all people shortly before the parousia. The first rider is viewed as the Antichrist, who appears at the beginning of the eschatological plagues. The negative interpretation of the last three riders is highly plausible. Still, the identification of the first rider with the Antichrist is not persuasive, because he is a part of the group, three elements of which symbolize impersonal events, and the “summarizing” formula of Rev 6,8 elsewhere in the Scripture has a figurative sense.

The majority of commentators does not see the riders primarily in a futurist perspective, but employ a contemporary-historical and an idealist approach on the basis of five reasons. First, the vision of the fifth seal (Rev 6,9-11) presupposes a historical background; second, the arrival of the Day of the Lord and the “wrath of the Lamb” indicating God’s judgment is depicted only in the sixth seal; third, the moment of the “victory” of Christ (Rev 5,5) is a starting point for “unsealing” the book, so the riders are likely to precede it; fourth, the apocalyptic discourse expresses an idea of the *two* stages of the eschatological events, and the riders can express the first, preliminary stage started after the resurrection of Jesus; fifth, some hold the view that the opening of the contents of the sealed book containing divine judgment starts

only after removal of *all* the seals. Not all these arguments are equally convincing, but taken together they have force, justifying that the riders do not refer just to the short time period directly before the parousia. These arguments provide a reason for the contemporary-historical and also for the idealist approach, in a sense that the riders can be related to human history in general, after the resurrection of Christ up to the parousia. As it was argued in the first chapter, the “trans-historical” view of reality enables John to combine many possible backgrounds in one motif; so it is plausible that the visions can have a historical as well as an eschatological and a scriptural background.

In the framework of the *contemporary-historical* approach were found not so many historical correlations as to provide a primary background for the second and the third rider. The second rider probably expresses a critical view on the cruel and expansionist nature of the Roman empire, but he is not related to any specific contemporary war. The edict of Domitian in 91-92 CE can provide a historical “echo” of the third rider, but more likely the rider is a general symbol for famines and economic inequality. The specifically contemporary interpretation of Witulski based on the evidence from the second century was not found convincing. Thus, the last three riders represent wars, famines and pestilence in a metaphorical sense. The contemporary evidence for the first rider is stronger: he is frequently associated with the Parthians, thus expressing the idea of military conquest, and with Sun-god Apollo, who can be perceived as an antagonist of Christ, an expression of the idea of pseudo-prophecy (cf. Mk 13,22). These allusions are probable, but also not without discussion, since they do not thoroughly explain the numerous positive characteristics of the rider.

The *idealist* approach elucidates the general theological meaning of the riders: assuring that God is in control over human history, and the disasters will be interwoven in His salvific plan; the calamities experienced by people can lead to their spiritual victory and serve to prepare God’s new creation. In case of understanding the riders as symbols of human history and the first rider as a positive figure (cf. Mk 13,10), he provides a sign of hope, symbolizing that the first place in history belongs to positive forces.

The analysis has shown that the riders are to be interpreted primarily in the idealist perspective. Importantly, in the framework of the idealist approach the eschatological connotation of the riders also remains present, because it emphasizes that with the victory of the Lamb the eschatological time of salvation has *already* begun. The idealist approach allows for combining particular historical context with the perspective of the eschatological future, and thus the meaning of the riders is related to John’s contemporary context as well as to the eschatology.