



BAKER EXEGETICAL COMMENTARY
ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

Revelation

Thomas R. Schreiner

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ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

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ON THE NEW TESTAMENT



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To my grandchildren:

Sam, Iris, Willa, Lydia,
Kesid, Julianna, Canaan, Maria,
Thomas, Isabella, and James
for all the joy they bring

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Series Preface

The chief concern of the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (BECNT) is to provide, within the framework of informed evangelical thought, commentaries that blend scholarly depth with readability, exegetical detail with sensitivity to the whole, and attention to critical problems with theological awareness. We hope thereby to attract the interest of a fairly wide audience, from the scholar who is looking for a thoughtful and balanced examination of the text to the motivated lay Christian who craves a solid but accessible exposition.

Nevertheless, a major purpose is to address the needs of pastors and others involved in the preaching and exposition of the Scriptures as the uniquely inspired Word of God. This consideration directly affects the parameters of the series. For example, serious biblical expositors cannot afford to depend on a superficial treatment that avoids the difficult questions, but neither are they interested in encyclopedic commentaries that seek to cover every conceivable issue that could be raised. Our aim, therefore, is to focus on those problems that have the most direct bearing on the meaning of the text (although selected technical details are treated in the Additional Notes) or that pose unavoidable challenges for interpretation.

Similarly, a special effort is made to avoid treating exegetical questions for their own sake, that is, in relative isolation from the thrust of the argument as a whole. This effort may involve (at the discretion of the individual contributors) abandoning the verse-by-verse approach in favor of an exposition that focuses on the paragraph as the main unit of thought. In all cases, however, the commentaries will stress the development of the argument and explicitly relate each passage to what precedes and follows it so as to identify its function in the flow of discourse as clearly as possible.

We believe, moreover, that a responsible exegetical commentary must take into account the latest scholarly research, regardless of its source. The contributors to this series, accordingly, attempt to avoid two pitfalls. On the one hand, they do not consider traditional opinions to be sacrosanct, and they are committed to doing justice to the biblical text in the light of compelling evidence regardless of whether it supports such opinions. On the other hand, they will not quickly abandon a long-standing view, if there is persuasive evidence in its favor, for the sake of theories perhaps currently more in vogue. Contributing to this balance is contributors' affirmation of the trustworthiness and essential unity of Scripture. They also consider that the historic

formulations of Christian doctrine, such as the ecumenical creeds and many of the documents originating in the sixteenth-century Reformation and its aftermath, arose from a legitimate reading of Scripture, thus providing a valuable framework for its subsequent interpretation. While respect for formulations of classic consensual Christianity (Thomas Oden) may risk an imposition of tradition on the text, we deny that it must necessarily do so or that rejection of any hermeneutic that comports with Christian tradition automatically results in more valid exegetical insights and exposition.

In other words, we do not consider exegetically justifiable theological convictions to be a hindrance to biblical interpretation. On the contrary, an exegete who hopes to understand the apostle Paul in a theological vacuum might just as easily try to interpret Aristotle without regard for the philosophical framework of his whole work or without having recourse to those subsequent philosophical categories that make possible a meaningful contextualization of his thought. At the same time, it bears mention that the contributors to the present series come from a variety of theological traditions and that they represent a considerable span of hermeneutical outlooks and ecclesial orientations. In the end, what matters is representing the original text, in light of all of the relevant data and considerations that can and ought to be brought to bear, accurately, clearly, and meaningfully to the contemporary reader.

Shading has been used to assist the reader in locating salient sections of the treatment of each passage. This occurs particularly in introductory comments and concluding summaries. Textual variants in the Greek text are signaled in the author's translation by means of half-brackets around the relevant word or phrase (e.g., "Gerasenes"), thereby alerting the reader to turn to the Additional Notes at the end of each exegetical unit for a discussion of the textual problem. The documentation uses the author-date method, in which the basic reference consists of author's surname + year + page number(s): Fitzmyer 1992: 58. The only exceptions to this system are well-known reference works (e.g., BDAG, LSJ, *TDNT*). Full publication data and a complete set of indexes can be found at the end of the volume.

Robert W. Yarbrough
Joshua W. Jipp

Author's Preface

Writing a commentary on Revelation is more daunting than I realized when I blithely volunteered the idea to Jim Kinney of Baker Academic while enjoying lunch with him several years ago. The amount written on the book is staggering and unending. Let me say a word of appreciation for the very fine commentary by Osborne (2002) in the Baker series, which I often draw upon in this work. My commentary replaces his in the series, but I hope Osborne's work will continue to be read and consulted for years to come. I have not attempted to write the kind of in-depth commentary that we find in Aune (1997, 1998a, 1998b), Beale (1999), and Koester (2014). My hope is that my commentary is substantial enough for serious exegesis but short enough for the busy pastor to read. I have tried to write in an accessible style for readers so that they can grasp what is being said in scholarship. After nearly two millennia, it is difficult to say that one offers anything truly new. Many brilliant commentators and theologians have preceded us, and thus the notion that we have truly said anything novel is probably a pretension, especially for those who are orthodox. It seems to me, however, that the recapitulatory and symbolic nature of Revelation hasn't always been consistently demonstrated; in this commentary I attempt to show that John doesn't write a linear account. The recapitulatory character of Revelation plays a role in particular ways in my reading of the sixth seal (6:12–17), the life of those coming out of the great tribulation (7:15–17), the relationship between the seals and trumpets, the 144,000 in 14:1–5, the climactic nature of the seven bowls, the judgment on Babylon in chapters 17–18, and so on. The sixth seal, the seventh trumpet, the seven bowls, the judgment of Babylon, and Jesus's return on the white horse (19:11–21) are different ways of describing the last judgment. John shakes the kaleidoscope and gives us different pictures of the same reality. In the commentary I also defend a minority position that the apostle John is the author, and at various points I try to show how the cross-fertilization between the Apocalypse and the Gospel of John (and occasionally 1–3 John) proves to be illuminating and suggestive. The connections aren't clear enough to prove common authorship, but in my judgment they fit with the notion that we have the same author. When it comes to the millennium, I side with a minority opinion that doesn't fit with postmillennialism, amillennialism, or historic premillennialism. I side with a view that has been called new-creation millennialism. I don't think for a second that I have resolved this matter or provided a final answer! The debate will continue until the end arrives. I also hope that

the pastoral and pragmatic purpose of the book is clear in the reading of the commentary. John encourages the readers to persevere amid persecution by refusing to capitulate to the blandishments of the devil, the beasts, and Babylon. He regularly reminds readers of the final reward that awaits the faithful.

The sheer amount of material on Revelation has helped to sharpen the nature of the commentary. Trying to cover and to document all that has been written would shift the commentary from an exposition to a survey of research. My goal was to read representatively so that I had a good sense of what was going on in Revelation scholarship, but I don't claim to cover all the dimensions of scholarship that swirl around this fascinating book. For instance, source-critical theories aren't described or analyzed here. Such an approach was featured in the great two-volume commentary by R. H. Charles (1920a; 1920b). We still see such in the work of Aune (1997; 1998a; 1998b; cf. Moloney 2020: 3), but the trend is against such endeavors (e.g., Paul 2015). Morton (2014: 9), summarizing the work of source criticism on Revelation, says, "This method, however, has not been deemed a success." In any case, my goal is to explain the finished product as it has come down to us.¹ Scholars now recognize the advantage of reading the text itself and tracing the narrative in the text instead of focusing on the world behind the text (cf. Barr 2012; Resseguie 1998; W. Campbell 2012; Ureña 2019).² The fundamental focus in this work is on unfolding the meaning of the text. The interpretation proposed takes place in conversation with other scholars and various interpretive stances. I tried to get a feeling of what various people said on Revelation, and thus I consulted the earliest commentaries written on Revelation, historical-critical commentaries, dispensational readings, feminist and nonviolent takes on the book, postmillennial preterists, and more. I have tried to include representative voices from the past (reception history) and from the present (e.g., feminist interpreters). We can learn from them all, but I also don't hesitate to disagree where I think they aren't convincing. In any case, I am not claiming that I have included all the views that jangle for attention; instead, I include matters that I found interesting or particularly relevant for interpreting the book.

The meaning and relevance of Revelation for today's world surfaces in the commentary, and my own standpoint as an evangelical becomes obvious. We all recognize today that no one writes from a neutral standpoint, yet I have

1. For a short history of the attempt to locate sources, see Wainwright 1993: 118–22. None of the reconstructions have proved to be persuasive (C. Koester 2014: 62; Osborne 2002: 27–29). A recent attempt to see redactional layers is in the work of Aune (1997: cv–cxxxiv), who surveys scholarship on the entire question and then gives his own theory about how the work was edited. Such complex explanations have not persuaded others (see esp. A. Collins 1998b) and are too subjective to be given credence (Morton 2014: 38–40; Karrer 2017: 82–85). A. Collins (1984a: 72) says about source criticism, "Today that theory has been largely discredited because of the overall consistency of language and style in the book. An alternative view is that the repetition is purposeful, that it is part of the author's careful literary design."

2. W. Campbell (2012: 43) points out that one of the weaknesses of Resseguie's (1998) approach is that he fails to see recapitulation. Campbell rightly observes that the account is both linear and recapitulatory. We don't have to choose one and exclude the other.

tried to be fair and charitable to those who come from different confessional and ideological standpoints. And I am the first to say that I have often learned the most from those who see things differently from me. The Additional Notes are devoted to grammatical matters and text-critical variants. I don't discuss all the text-critical variants in the book, and many are treated briefly. One encouraging result of doing text-critical work is that variant readings, even if accepted, rarely change the meaning of the text in substantial ways.

In my translation my goal isn't always to render the Greek precisely but to convey the meaning of the text. For instance, I often turn third singulars into plurals when I think the plurals render accurately what the text means. Or I may shift the pronouns to capture the meaning for the present time in which we live. In other words, I don't invariably render the text in a literal fashion. I should also say at the outset that all citations of the Pseudepigrapha come from Charlesworth (1983; 1985) unless stated otherwise. Similarly, Greco-Roman sources are taken from the Loeb Classical Library. The Greek text of the Old Testament is from the Septuagint (LXX).

I am thankful to Jim Kinney of Baker Academic for inviting me to contribute this book to the series. My longtime friend of many years, Robert Yarbrough, one of the general editors, read the commentary and gave important feedback that improved the finished product. Similarly, Joshua Jipp read the commentary carefully, and I profited from his notes and suggestions as well. Juan Hernández, Michael Kruger, and John Meade read part of what I wrote and gave me valuable feedback, and I am grateful for their keen observations and wise corrections. I am very grateful to Tim West for his careful editorial work on the manuscript, and his attention to detail was simply outstanding. He helpfully answered a number of my queries along the way. Similarly, Dave Garber, the copyeditor, made countless suggestions and read the entire manuscript with intense care, for which I am very thankful. Along the same lines, Robert Banning read the final draft, catching infelicities and other errors. My colleague Rob Plummer assigned my commentary in a doctoral class on Revelation. I am especially grateful to Elizabeth Mehlman and Aaron Rosenau, who proofed the document with amazing care and insight, catching many minor errors and infelicities. Two of my doctoral students, Dalton Bowser and Richard Blaylock, tracked down scholarly sources for me, checked out scores and scores of books from the library, delivered them to my office, and returned them to the library. They also sent me numerous articles so that I didn't need to chase them down myself. My thanks to both of them for assisting me in such a practical way. I dedicate this book to my eleven grandchildren: Sam, Iris, Willa, Lydia, Kesid, Julianna, Canaan, Maria, Thomas, Isabella, and James. As they grow older, may the prayer of their hearts be "Come, Lord Jesus."

Abbreviations

Bibliographic and General

*	scribe's original hand
§(§)	section(s), paragraph(s)
//	parallel to
×	times
「 . . . 」	enclosing textual variants
ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , ed. D. N. Freedman et al., 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008)
AD	<i>anno Domini</i> (in the year of our Lord)
a.m.	<i>ante meridiem</i> (before noon)
BDAG	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , by W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)
BDF	<i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , by F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961)
bo	Boharic mss.
ca.	<i>circa</i> , around
cent.	century
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
chap(s).	chapter(s)
CJB	Complete Jewish Bible
CSB	Christian Standard Bible
d.	died
ed(s).	edition, editor(s)
EDNT	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. H. Balz and G. Schneider, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–93)
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
Eng.	English Bible versification differing from the LXX or MT
esp.	especially
ESV	English Standard Version
et al.	<i>et alii</i> , and others
frag.	fragment
HALOT	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> , by Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm, trans. and ed. under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson, 4 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1994–99)
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible

i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
KJV	King James Version
L&N	<i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains</i> , ed. J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988–89)
lat	Latin mss.
LEH	<i>Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint</i> , ed. J. Lust, E. Eynikel, and K. Hauspie, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003)
LW	Luther's Works. Saint Louis: Concordia, 1955–
LXX	Septuagint: the Greek OT = Old Greek, translated in NETS; Greek words tracked in the OT are from the LXX, with its versification; <i>see</i> Rahlfs
ⲙ	Majority Text, including Byzantine Koine MSS
ⲙ ^A	Majority Text of the Apocalypse, via Andrew of Caesarea
ⲙ ^K	Majority Text of the Apocalypse, Koine manuscripts
MS(S)/ms(s)	manuscript(s)
MT	Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible
NA ²⁷	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , 27th rev. ed., ed. [E. and E. Nestle], B. and K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos, C. M. Martini, and B. M. Metzger (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993)
NA ²⁸	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , 28th rev. ed., ed. [E. and E. Nestle], B. and K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos, C. M. Martini, and B. M. Metzger (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012)
NASB	New American Standard Bible (1995)
NET	The NET Bible (New English Translation)
NETS	<i>A New English Translation of the Septuagint</i> , ed. A. Pietersma and B. G. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/
NIDNTT	<i>The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> , ed. L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, and H. Bietenhard; English translation ed. C. Brown, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–86)
NIV	New International Version (2011)
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation (2007)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OG	Old Greek = the original LXX
OT	Old Testament
OTP	<i>The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> , ed. J. H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983–85)
Ⲑ	papyrus manuscript, as in Ⲑ ⁹⁸
p(p).	page(s)
par(s).	(and) parallel(s)
P.Oxy.	Oxyrhynchus papyrus (+ number)
Ps.-	Pseudo-
Rahlfs	<i>Septuaginta</i> , ed. A. Rahlfs, rev. R. Hanhart (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006)
REB	Revised English Bible
repr.	reprinted
rev.	revised
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBLGNT	<i>The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition</i> (2010; online at BibleGateway)
s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> , under the word

Abbreviations

TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)
Theod.	Theodotion's Greek OT (mid-2nd cent.), paralleled in Rahlfs and NETS
TR	Textus Receptus
trans.	translated by, translator
v(v).	verse(s)
vol(s).	volume(s)

Hebrew Bible

Gen.	Genesis	Neh.	Nehemiah	Hosea	Hosea
Exod.	Exodus	Esther	Esther	Joel	Joel
Lev.	Leviticus	Job	Job	Amos	Amos
Num.	Numbers	Ps(s).	Psalms(s)	Obad.	Obadiah
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Prov.	Proverbs	Jon.	Jonah
Josh.	Joshua	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mic.	Micah
Judg.	Judges	Song	Song of Songs	Nah.	Nahum
Ruth	Ruth	Isa.	Isaiah	Hab.	Habakkuk
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Jer.	Jeremiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Lam.	Lamentations	Hag.	Haggai
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Ezek.	Ezekiel	Zech.	Zechariah
Ezra	Ezra	Dan.	Daniel	Mal.	Malachi

Greek Testament

Matt.	Matthew	Gal.	Galatians	Philem.	Philemon
Mark	Mark	Eph.	Ephesians	Heb.	Hebrews
Luke	Luke	Phil.	Philippians	James	James
John	John	Col.	Colossians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Acts	Acts	1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians	1–3 John	1–3 John
Rom.	Romans	1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy	Jude	Jude
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians	Titus	Titus	Rev.	Revelation

Other Jewish and Christian Writings

An.	Tertullian, <i>De anima</i> (<i>The Soul</i>)	Bar.	Baruch
Antichr.	Hippolytus, <i>The Antichrist</i>	2 Bar.	2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch
Apoc. Ab.	Apocalypse of Abraham	3 Bar.	3 (Greek Apocalypse of) Baruch
Apoc. Dan.	Apocalypse of Daniel	4 Bar.	4 Baruch
Apoc. El. (C)	Coptic Apocalypse of Elijah	Barn.	Epistle of Barnabas
Apoc. Zeph.	Apocalypse of Zephaniah	Bel	Bel and the Dragon
1 Apol.	Justin Martyr, <i>First Apology</i>	Civ.	Augustine, <i>De civitate Dei</i> (<i>The City of God</i>)
Aris. Ex.	Aristeas the Exegete	1–2 Clem.	1–2 Clement
Ascen. Isa.	Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah 6–11	Comm. Jo.	Origen, <i>Commentaries on the Gospel of John</i>
		Conf.	Augustine, <i>Confessions</i>

<i>Dial.</i>	Justin Martyr, <i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>	Papias	Fragments of Papias (in Holmes 2007: 722–67)
<i>Did.</i>	Didache	<i>Praescr.</i>	Tertullian, <i>De praescriptione haereticorum</i> (<i>Prescription against Heretics</i>)
1 En.	1 (Ethiopic) Enoch		
2 En.	2 (Slavonic) Enoch		
3 En.	3 (Hebrew) Enoch	Pr. Azar.	Prayer of Azariah
<i>Epist.</i>	Jerome, <i>Epistles</i>	Ps.-Phoc.	Pseudo-Phocylides
1 Esd.	1 Esdras	Pss. Sol.	Psalms of Solomon
2 Esd.	2 Esdras (4 Ezra)	<i>Quis div.</i>	Clement of Alexandria, <i>Quis dives salvetur</i> (<i>Salvation of the Rich</i>)
<i>Haer.</i>	Hippolytus, <i>Refutatio omnium haeresium</i> (<i>Refutation of All Heresies</i>)	<i>Res.</i>	Tertullian, <i>The Resurrection of the Flesh</i>
<i>Haer.</i>	Irenaeus, <i>Adversus haereses</i> (<i>Elenchos</i>) (<i>Against Heresies</i>)	Sib. Or.	Sibylline Oracles
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i> (<i>Ecclesiastical History</i>)	Sir.	Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)
<i>Ign. Eph.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Ephesians</i>	<i>Strom.</i>	Clement of Alexandria, <i>Stromateis</i> (<i>Miscellanies</i>)
<i>Ign. Magn.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Magnesians</i>	T. Ab.	Testament of Abraham
<i>Ign. Rom.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Romans</i>	T. Adam	Testament of Adam
<i>Ign. Trall.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Trallians</i>	T. Benj.	Testament of Benjamin
<i>Jdt.</i>	Judith	T. Dan	Testament of Dan
<i>Jos. Asen.</i>	Joseph and Aseneth	T. Isaac	Testament of Isaac
<i>Jub.</i>	Jubilees	T. Job	Testament of Job
LAB	Liber antiquitatum biblicarum (Pseudo-Philo)	T. Jud.	Testament of Judah
LAE	Life of Adam and Eve	T. Levi	Testament of Levi
Let. Aris.	Letter of Aristeas	T. Mos.	Testament of Moses
1–4 Macc.	1–4 Maccabees	T. Reu.	Testament of Reuben
<i>Marc.</i>	Tertullian, <i>Against Marcion</i>	T. Sol.	Testament of Solomon
<i>Mart. Pol.</i>	Martyrdom of Polycarp	T. Zeb.	Testament of Zebulun
<i>Odes Sol.</i>	Odes of Solomon	Tob.	Tobit
<i>Pan.</i>	Epiphanius, <i>Panarion</i> (<i>Adversus haereses</i>) (<i>Refutation of All Heresies</i>)	<i>Vir. ill.</i>	Jerome, <i>De viris illustribus</i> (<i>On Illustrious Men</i>)
		Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon

Josephus

<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i>	<i>J.W.</i>	<i>The Jewish War</i>
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Philo

<i>Deus</i>	<i>Quod Deus sit immutabilis</i> (<i>That God Is Unchangeable</i>)	<i>Mos.</i>	<i>On the Life of Moses</i>
<i>Dreams</i>	<i>On Dreams</i>	<i>Names</i>	<i>On the Change of Names</i>
<i>Flight</i>	<i>On Flight and Finding</i>	<i>Sacr.</i>	<i>On the Sacrifices of Cain and Abel</i>
<i>Legat.</i>	<i>Legatio ad Gaium</i> (<i>Embassy to Gaius</i>)		

Rabbinic Tractates

m. Avod. Zar.	Mishnah tractate Avodah Zarah	m. Tehar.	Mishnah tractate Teharot
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Qumran/Dead Sea Scrolls

1QH	Thanksgiving Hymns (Hodayot)	4Q161	Isaiah Peshera ^a
1QM	War Scroll (Milhamah)	4Q174	Florilegium
1QpHab	Peshera Habakkuk	4Q175	Testimonia
1QS	Rule of the Community	4Q252	Commentary on Genesis A
1QS _a	Rule of the Congregation (appendix a to 1QS)	4Q286	Blessings ^a
		11Q19	Temple Scroll
		CD	Damascus Document

Inscription

- I. Philadelphia inscription at Philadelphia, in the Roman province of Asia

Classical Writers

<i>Aen.</i>	Vergil (Virgil), <i>Aeneid</i>	<i>Metam.</i>	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i>
<i>Agr.</i>	Tacitus, <i>Agricola</i>	<i>Mor.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Moralia (Table Talk)</i>
<i>Ann.</i>	Tacitus, <i>Annals</i>	<i>Mur.</i>	Cicero, <i>For Murena</i>
<i>Att.</i>	Cicero, <i>Letters to Atticus</i>	<i>Nat.</i>	Pliny the Elder, <i>Natural History</i>
<i>Carm.</i>	Horace, <i>Carmina (Odes)</i>	<i>Nat. d.</i>	Cicero, <i>De natura deorum (On the Nature of the Gods)</i>
<i>Deipn.</i>	Athenaeus, <i>Deipnosopistae (The Dinner Sophists)</i>	<i>Nero</i>	Suetonius, <i>Nero</i>
<i>Descr.</i>	Pausanias, <i>Description of Greece</i>	<i>Oct.</i>	Minucius Felix, <i>Octavius</i>
<i>Diatr.</i>	Epictetus, <i>Diatribes (Dissertations)</i>	<i>Oneir.</i>	Artemidorus Daldianus, <i>Oneirocritica (The Interpretation of Dreams)</i>
<i>Dom.</i>	Suetonius, <i>Domitian</i>	<i>Or.</i>	Aelius Aristides, <i>Oration(s)</i>
<i>Ecl.</i>	Vergil, <i>Eclogues</i>	<i>Or.</i>	Dio Chrysostom, <i>Oration(s) (Discourses)</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	Pliny the Younger, <i>Epistles</i>	<i>Pan.</i>	Pliny the Younger, <i>Panegyricus</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	Seneca (the Younger), <i>Moral Epistles</i>	<i>Rab. Perd.</i>	Cicero, <i>Pro Rabirio Perduellionis Reo</i>
<i>Epigr.</i>	Martial, <i>Epigrams</i>	<i>Rhod.</i>	Dio Chrysostom, <i>Rhodiaca (Oration 31) (To the People of Rhodes)</i>
<i>Eum.</i>	Aeschylus, <i>Eumenides</i>	<i>Sat.</i>	Horace, <i>Satires</i>
<i>Geogr.</i>	Strabo, <i>Geography</i>	<i>Sat.</i>	Juvenal, <i>Satires</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	Cassius Dio, <i>Roman History</i>	<i>Theog.</i>	Hesiod, <i>Theogony</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	Herodotus, <i>Histories</i>	<i>Vesp.</i>	Suetonius, <i>Vespasian</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	Polybius, <i>Histories</i>	<i>Vit. Apoll.</i>	Philostratus, <i>Vita Apollonii (Life of Apollonius)</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	Tacitus, <i>Histories</i>		
<i>Inst.</i>	Quintilian, <i>Institutes of Oratory</i>		
<i>Jul.</i>	Suetonius, <i>Divus Julius (Divine Julius [Caesar])</i>		
<i>Metam.</i>	Apuleius, <i>Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass)</i>		

Transliteration

Hebrew

א ׳	בְּ	<i>qāmeṣ</i>
ב <i>b</i>	בַּ	<i>pataḥ</i>
ג <i>g</i>	הַ	furtive <i>pataḥ</i>
ד <i>d</i>	דֶּ	<i>səgōl</i>
ה <i>h</i>	הֶ	<i>šērē</i>
ו <i>w</i>	וִ	short <i>ḥîreq</i>
ז <i>z</i>	זִ	long <i>ḥîreq</i> written defectively
ח <i>ḥ</i>	חֹ	<i>qāmeṣ ḥātûp</i>
ט <i>ṭ</i>	בוֹ	<i>ḥōlem</i> written fully
י <i>y</i>	בֹּ	<i>ḥōlem</i> written defectively
כ/ך <i>k</i>	בוּ	<i>šûreq</i>
ל <i>l</i>	לֹ	short <i>qibbûṣ</i>
מ/ם <i>m</i>	לֻ	long <i>qibbûṣ</i> written defectively
נ/ן <i>n</i>	בְּהַ	final <i>qāmeṣ hēʾ</i> (בְּהַ = <i>āh</i>)
ס <i>s</i>	יְיִ	<i>səgōl yōd</i> (יְיִ = <i>ēy</i>)
ע ׳	יֶיִ	<i>šērē yōd</i> (יֶיִ = <i>ēy</i>)
פ/ף <i>p</i>	יִיִ	<i>ḥîreq yōd</i> (יִיִ = <i>îy</i>)
צ/ץ <i>ṣ</i>	צֶ	<i>ḥātēp pataḥ</i>
ק <i>q</i>	קֶ	<i>ḥātēp səgōl</i>
ר <i>r</i>	רֶ	<i>ḥātēp qāmeṣ</i>
שׁ <i>ś</i>	שׂ	vocal <i>šəwāʾ</i>
שׂ <i>š</i>		
ת <i>t</i>		

Notes on the Transliteration of Hebrew

1. Accents are not shown in transliteration.
2. Silent *šəwāʾ* is not indicated in transliteration.
3. The spirant forms ת פ כ ג ד ב are usually not specially indicated in transliteration.
4. *Dāgēš forte* is indicated by doubling the consonant. Euphonic *dāgēš* and *dāgēš lene* are not indicated in transliteration.
5. *Maqqēp* is represented by a hyphen.

Greek

α	<i>a</i>	θ	<i>th</i>	ο	<i>o</i>	χ	<i>ch</i>
β	<i>b</i>	ι	<i>i</i>	π	<i>p</i>	ψ	<i>ps</i>
γ	<i>g/n</i>	κ	<i>k</i>	ρ	<i>r</i>	ω	<i>ō</i>
δ	<i>d</i>	λ	<i>l</i>	σ/ς	<i>s</i>	‘	<i>h</i>
ε	<i>e</i>	μ	<i>m</i>	τ	<i>t</i>		
ζ	<i>z</i>	ν	<i>n</i>	υ	<i>y/u</i>		
η	<i>ē</i>	ξ	<i>x</i>	φ	<i>ph</i>		

Notes on the Transliteration of Greek

1. Accents, lenis (smooth breathing), and *iota* subscript are not shown in transliteration.
2. The transliteration of asper (rough breathing) precedes a vowel or diphthong (e.g., ἄ = *ha*; αἶ = *hai*) and follows ρ (i.e., ῥ = *rh*).
3. *Gamma* is transliterated *n* only when it precedes γ, κ, ξ, or χ.
4. *Upsilon* is transliterated *u* only when it is part of a diphthong (i.e., αυ, ευ, ου, υι).

Introduction to Revelation

Perspectives on Revelation

G. K. Chesterton (1909: 29) humorously said about Revelation, “And though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators.” I suppose I am adding to the wildness in writing this book. Augustine (1996: 135) identifies the challenge of interpreting the book, while also expressing its message with his usual acumen:

And in the book entitled the Apocalypse there are, to be sure, many obscure sayings, to exercise the mind of the reader; and there are a few so clear enough to throw light on the meaning of others, even at the cost of effort. This is chiefly because the writer repeats the same things in such different ways as to seem to be dealing with different matters, whereas he is found on investigation to be dealing with these same matters in different ways. But in the words, “He shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, nor shall there be any pain,” he is so clearly speaking of the world to come and of immortality and of the everlasting life of the saints (for only then and only there shall these things be non-existent), that if we think these expressions obscure we ought not to seek clarity or read it anywhere in the sacred Scriptures.

Augustine (1996: 135) also reflects on why some texts in the Scriptures are difficult to understand:

Those who read them [the Scriptures] in a light-minded spirit are liable to be misled by innumerable obscurities and ambiguities, and to mistake the meaning entirely, while in some places they cannot even guess at a wrong meaning, so dense and dark is the fog that some passages are wrapped in. This is all due, I have no doubt at all, to divine providence, in order to break in pride with hard labor, and to save the intelligence from boredom since it readily forms a low opinion of things that are too easy to work out.

G. B. Caird’s (1966: 13) reflection on the book of Revelation fits with my experience when I first read the book of Revelation about fifty years ago. “It is some indication of [the author’s] consummate artistry and of the validity of his claim to inspiration that he never fails to make a profound impression, even on those who imperfectly apprehend his meaning.” He also says that “for a generation whose mental eye has been starved of imagery it is in some ways the most important book in the New Testament” (Caird 1966: 13). A. Collins

(1984a: 144) remarks that the book “creates a virtual experience for the hearer or reader.” And thus the book “elicits” a particular response. John “handles skillfully the hearers’ thoughts, attitudes, and feelings by the use of effective symbols and a narrative plot that invites imaginative participation” (A. Collins (1984a: 145). Flannery O’Connor (1988: 805–6; cited by Michaels 1997: 201), though she was not talking about Revelation, astutely remarks that a Christian writer

will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. . . . You have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.

O’Connor’s description fits well the startling images of the book of Revelation. K. Huber (2020: 53) says, “The imagery of Revelation is multicolored, diverse, and ambivalent: powerful, impressive, fascinating, and captivating on the one hand; opaque, bizarre, offensive, and threatening on the other. The pictures drawn in the narration elude full terminological or conceptual explication, and for the most part they encompass manifold senses.” The imagery has a pastoral purpose, and it stirs up the emotions for a reason. K. Huber (2020: 63) also remarks, “It is the emotions affected that shape people’s commitments and actions and encourage faithfulness to God, Christ, and the Christian community.” The book both comforts and challenges believers with its symbols and imagery.

The book of Revelation has had a checkered history in the Christian church, and some have detested the book.¹ G. Allen (2020: 45–73) investigates the titles of the book found in the manuscript tradition, noting that such titles reflect interpretive traditions and perspectives about the author, meaning, and genre of the book. The difficulty with the book was present from the beginning. Dionysius of Alexandria notes that some reject the Apocalypse as incomprehensible, complaining that the book is shrouded in obscurity (Eusebius,

1. For a history of reception, see Wainwright 1993; Kovacs and Rowland 2004; Boxall 2020; B. Chilton 2013; C. Koester 2014: 29–65. For a brief survey of its history, see also Rowland 2002. For the period 1945 to 1979, see Schüssler Fiorenza 1985: 12–32. For a compact and excellent survey of the first four centuries of the church, see C. Hill 2020. Prigent (2001: 1–22) surveys the history of the 1980s and 1990s. Holz (1997) surveys the period from 1980 to 1996. For a survey of contemporary scholarship around 2012, see Tóth 2012. For two recent surveys of scholarship, see also M. M. Thompson 2012 and M. C. Thompson 2019. Other helpful surveys of content and scholarship are found in Michaels 1992; Murphy 1994; Frey 2001; Paul 2008; A. Collins, *ABD* 5:694–708; Gorman 2012; Diehl 2013; Pate 2016. The vast amount of work being done in this area can’t be chronicled here, but we are not surprised that the images of Revelation have attracted artists throughout history, and now there are several valuable studies of the history of artistic representation in Revelation (van der Meer 1978; O’Hear 2011; N. O’Hear and A. O’Hear 2015). Some fascinating specialized studies have also been done. One that stands out is the reception history of the book in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Cowley 1983).

Hist. eccl. 7.25.1–2). Martin Luther, early in his ministry, lamented that the book didn't reveal Christ and wasn't of great value (LW 35:399).² He said, "It is a concealed and mute prophecy and has not yet come to the profit and fruit which it is to give to Christendom" (LW 35:400). He thought a revelation should reveal something clearly, "but until this very day they [interpreters] have attained no certainty. Some have even brewed it into many stupid things out of their own heads" (LW 35:400). Luther also says, "They are supposed to be blessed who keep what is written in this book; and yet no one knows what that is, to say nothing of keeping it" (LW 35:398–99).³ George Bernard Shaw (1933: 93) says it contains the "curious record of the visions of a drug addict which was absurdly admitted to the canon under the title of Revelation." Carl Jung (1954: 80) said the God of Revelation represents "an unheard-of fury of destruction against the human race." He says (1954: 123) that the Christ of Revelation "behaves rather like a bad-tempered, power conscious 'boss.'" He sees (1954: 125) "a veritable orgy of hatred, wrath, vindictiveness, and blind destructive fury." D. H. Lawrence (1980: 61) says it may be "the most detestable" book in the Bible when read "superficially" since John had "a grandiose scheme for wiping out and annihilating everybody who wasn't of the elect" (1980: 63). Lawrence (1980: 67) goes on to say, "If you have to suffer martyrdom, if all the universe has to be destroyed in the process, still, still, still, O Christian, you shall reign as a king and set your foot on the necks of the old bosses!" The problem with Revelation (1980: 69) is that it "wants to murder the powerful, to seize power itself." Harold Bloom (1988: 4) remarks, "Resentment and not love is the teaching of the Revelation of St. John the Divine. It is a book without wisdom, goodness, kindness, or affection of any kind." In due course we will see that objections to Revelation linger today, especially from radical feminists and those who advocate nonviolence. I will attempt to show that the book's message should be treasured today and that detractors either misunderstand or wrongly criticize it.

Before looking at some high points in the history of interpretation, I will sketch major interpretive theories (see Osborne 2002: 18–22; Fanning 2020: 37–40). The major views are (1) preterist, (2) historicist, (3) futurist, and (4) idealist. These paradigms are overly simplistic because many interpreters don't fit neatly into one category, and often there is overlap. Still, an overly simplified map assists us in getting a handle on the book.

The preterist reading situates the message of the book in the first century, emphasizing that the book was written for the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (Rev. 1:4), the western part of the province of Asia (now a large part of Turkey). This reading rightly sees that the book was intended for the original recipients of the book. Ureña (2019: 37) is not a preterist, but she rightly observes that we as readers should recognize that John writes to real

2. See the survey of those who questioned the book's value in Wainwright 1993: 108–16.

3. Gieschen (2015), as a contemporary Lutheran, argues that the book does present and reveal Christ.

places; he does not construct an imaginary recipient. Furthermore, preterism grounds the book in its historical context instead of limiting it to some period far off in the future. Some preterists claim that John predicted the coming of Jesus in his own day but was mistaken in that conception. Such a reading lessens the significance of the book for today's readers since the promises of final triumph are called into question (rightly, Rainbow 2008: 10). Other preterists think everything the book describes was fulfilled in AD 70, including the second coming. It is difficult, however, to see how the promise that there will be no more tears or death has been true since AD 70! Evangelical preterists often emphasize the fulfillment of the visions of the book in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and see the promise of Jesus's return in the destruction of the temple; yet they also look for a future coming of Jesus and the resurrection of the body. As stated above, the preterist approach rightly looks to the historical context to interpret the book.

Let me offer a brief evaluation of these views. First, the *preterist* approach goes astray in claiming that John erred or in the contention that Jesus returned in AD 70 with the destruction of the temple. Most preterists typically understand Dan. 2 and 7 to refer to the judgment of pagan nations and even identify the beast of Rev. 13 as Rome, but then focus on the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Such a reading is flawed since the appropriation of Dan. 2 and 7 points to universal judgment instead of the destruction of the temple (Beale 1999: 44–45). It is also difficult to explain why the destruction of Jerusalem would be of interest for Christians in the province of Asia.⁴ Their lives in the province of Asia would not change dramatically because of what happened in Jerusalem. Leithart (2018a: 40–43) emphasizes the impact on Jews in the diaspora, but he doesn't recognize or account for the many gentiles (who were probably the majority) in the churches.⁵ It is difficult to see how the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple would resonate with Christians struggling to handle their own issues in the province of Asia, nor is it easy to see how they would feel that their faith was vindicated by such an event. Indeed, John says nothing about the prophecy that Jerusalem would fall, which is hard to square with a preterist reading.

Second, the *historicist* view reads Revelation as a prophecy or chart of history. Often the state of the seven churches or the seven seals is taken as a chronological forecast of what would happen in history.⁶ The historicist perspective took off in the Middle Ages, and it has waned since then, though it

4. As Beale (1999: 45) also notes, some preterists maintain that John predicts the fall of the Roman Empire. Yet the problem here, as Beale rightly observes, is that the fall of Rome in the fifth century AD (August 24, 410) doesn't fit the universality of judgment in Revelation either.

5. The cities in the province of Asia probably had a significant number of Jews (C. Koester 2014: 273, 285–86, 311–12, 322–23, 335; Aune 1997: 169–72), but it doesn't follow from this that the churches were mainly Jewish.

6. See, e.g., Anselm of Havelberg (d. ca. 1158), who interprets the seven seals this way (the text is in McGinn 1979: 114–16).

is still popular in some dispensational circles.⁷ The strength of the approach is seeing the contemporary significance of the book for modern readers, but very few adopt such an approach today, and rightly so, since the sketch of history proposed is artificial, forced, and arbitrary.⁸ Bede (Weinrich 2011: 128–30) maintained that the first four seal judgments encompassed the first four hundred years of church history. We see a similar attempt to correlate the seven letters with church history when, in some dispensational readings, the church of Thyatira represents the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, supporting the dispensationalists' view of the deficiencies of Roman Catholicism (deSilva 2021: 70). “Thomas Brightman (d. 1607) could view the congregations of Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea as different branches of the Church of his own time—connecting Sardis with the Lutheran Church, Philadelphia with the Calvinist Christians (his own leaning) and Laodicea with the Anglican Church” (deSilva 2021: 70). This approach is problematic since the book would not make much sense for the original readers if it was mainly intended for later ages (Morris 1969b: 17). We can see, however, why the approach was popular since the book spoke to readers in their times.

Third, *futurist* interpreters—especially in the dispensationalist tradition, though it is not restricted to them—see the book as a prophecy of future events. Certainly John looks forward to the fulfillment of God's promises and to the wrapping up of history with the coming of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the same objection raised against the historicist view pertains here. The futurist reading doesn't clearly explain the book's significance for the *original* readers. Indeed, in some futurist readings the book doesn't relate to the life of most Christians throughout history but is limited in its significance to the final generation. Indeed, some futurist interpreters, especially in popular circles, fall prey to newspaper eschatology so that the contemporary events become the prism through which Revelation is interpreted (Lindsey 1970; LaHaye and Jenkins 1995–2004; rightly, Rainbow 2008: 9, 155–57). The approach is arbitrary and capricious, as everyone who has been paying attention over the years knows, since the interpretation shifts as the headlines change (see esp. Rossing 2004; cf. J. Collins 2015: 326–42).⁹

Fourth, the *idealist* view sees general principles and truths in the book but doesn't anchor the text to history in any definite way. The advantage of this approach is that the message of the book applies to all readers at all times. The weakness is a tendency to sever the text from the historical context in which Revelation was birthed. To put it another way, one can turn the historical meaning of specific texts into general principles instead of perceiving the referent intended. The approach in this commentary borrows from all

7. For a survey of Nicholas of Lyra's historicist approach, see Krey 2000; Burr 2019: 212–15.

8. Some today, along somewhat similar lines, claim that the seven letters represent a chronological survey of OT history (D. Chilton 1987: 86–89; Leithart 2018a: 130–31), but such an approach is equally arbitrary.

9. Rossing (2004) underplays the judgment texts in Revelation, but her fundamental criticisms of the approach advocated by Lindsey and many others are correct.

these perspectives; even the historicist perspective rightly perceives the book as speaking to later generations. Since there is some truth in all four views, we need to consider the historical context, future fulfillment, and ongoing truths as we examine John's message.

A Brief Historical Survey¹⁰

In the second century, Papias of Hierapolis gleaned from Rev. 20 (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.29.12)¹¹ that a world was coming in which nature would produce abundant fruit and food, and thus the millennium would begin a golden age of prosperity on earth.¹² Montanist eschatology (2nd cent.) raised suspicions when Montanists claimed that Jesus would return to Pepuza in Phrygia (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 49.1.2–3). Their eschatological enthusiasm, the focus on an earthly kingdom, and eschatological extremes probably provoked Gaius of Rome to reject Revelation (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.28.1–5), attributing it to Cerinthus instead of the apostle John (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 51.3.1–6). Hippolytus (d. 235) defended the authenticity of the book but did not envisage an earthly millennium, arguing that believers would be with Christ at death (in the intermediate state) and experience the resurrection on the last day (C. Hill 2001: 160–69). The earliest commentaries on Revelation were also being written. The oldest commentary that we have was authored by Victorinus (d. 304). Victorinus pointed forward to modern commentaries in seeing the beast as Nero and in emphasizing recapitulation, and in doing so he anticipated many commentators who have also emphasized the recursive character of the Apocalypse. Victorinus believed saints would reign for a thousand years on earth and argued that the 144,000 were Jewish believers.

A group later identified by the orthodox church as heretical, the so-called Alogoi, reportedly followed Gaius in seeing Cerinthus as the author (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.25.2–3; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 51.3.1–6; cf. 51.32.2–33.3).¹³ Concerns about an earthly millennium continued to be voiced; Dionysius of Alexandria (d. 264) rejected an earthly millennium and questioned apostolic authorship, though he continued to embrace the book as orthodox. He argued that the vocabulary and especially the grammatical style were too different from the received writings of the apostle John to be ascribed to the apostle, suggesting that the book was written by another John (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.25.1–27). The observations of Dionysius are most interesting and perceptive, and his words forecast debates that continue to this day over the authorship of the book.

10. For an older survey, see Beckwith 1967: 319–34; for a newer survey, see Karrer 2017: 108–58.

11. It is debated whether Papias actually read Revelation. See Nicklas 2011: 32–36.

12. For a discussion of how Revelation was received in the second and third centuries, see Meiser 2016.

13. Scholars differ on whether the Alogoi are a distinct group or whether they are cobbled together by Epiphanius.

One of the most influential interpreters of Revelation was Tyconius (d. ca. 400), who maintained that the millennium represents the period between Christ's first and second coming.¹⁴ Satan is restrained during the thousand years but not entirely absent, and thus the struggle between good and evil continues until Jesus's return. Tyconius's reading was preserved in the history of the church because Augustine picked up some elements of his teaching,¹⁵ seeing a conflict between the city of God and the city of man.¹⁶ The millennium, according to Augustine, lasts from the ascension to the second coming, and believers enter the reign of Christ when they are baptized. Revelation was also mined for christological reasons, and some writers in the Eastern church supported Chalcedonian Christology by pointing out that Christ, according to John, is "the Alpha and Omega" (22:13).

Jerome (d. 420), a contemporary of Augustine, edited Victorinus's commentary (so Matter 1992: 39–40; Weinrich 2011: xxi), and he interpreted Revelation christocentrically, following Tyconius and Augustine in applying the book's message to contemporary circumstances. Jerome departed from Victorinus by removing the latter's chiliastic interpretation since Jerome understood the millennium along the lines of Tyconius and Augustine—that is, from an amillennial perspective. Apringius of Beja (Weinrich 2011; ca. 550) wrote a commentary containing sections from Victorinus that were edited by Jerome (Weinrich 2011: xxvi). Apringius stands out as an interpreter because he assigned John's exile on Patmos to the reign of Claudius (AD 41–54) rather than to the reign of Domitian (AD 81–96). Apringius was thoroughly orthodox, emphasizing the divinity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Oecumenius also wrote a commentary on the Apocalypse (early in the 6th cent.; see Weinrich 2005: 28–33), positing that the six seals spanned the time from Christ's birth to his resurrection, while the seventh seal predicted his return.¹⁷ Andrew of Caesarea (d. ca. 614), who also wrote a commentary, appropriated Revelation in defense of Chalcedonian Christology and differed from Oecumenius in assigning the seven seals to the troubles of the present age. He interpreted the thousand-year reign in amillennial terms; at various points Andrew corrects the interpretation of Oecumenius (e.g., Weinrich 2005: 144–45). Primasius (d. 565) also wrote a commentary, and his work had a massive influence on subsequent commentators (Matter 1992: 41–44). Beatus composed his commentary in Spain, as did Apringius, but the former was written in the eighth century, featuring the holiness of the church and the divinity

14. See Fredriksen (1992: 24–29) on Tyconius and his impact on the interpretation of Revelation.

15. For a short discussion of Augustine's reading of Revelation, see Fredriksen 1992: 29–35. See also Fredriksen 1991.

16. Some change Augustine's phrase to "city of the world," but the term "world" has a different meaning.

17. Tzamalikos (2013: ix–xvi, 74–76, 86–94) maintains that the earliest commentary on Revelation was written by Didymus the Blind two centuries before the commentary by Oecumenius. It is found in the *Scholia in Apocalypsin* written by Cassian—not John Cassian but a Sabaite monk of the sixth century.

of Christ over against adoptionist Christology (Matter 1992: 45–46). Reeves (1984: 44) observes that it is somewhat surprising that Muhammad and his followers were not identified with the antichrist and his followers by Beatus since he lived under Islamic rule, though the notion that Muhammad “was the precursor” of the antichrist did surface in Spain in the ninth century. Bede (d. 735; Weinrich 2011), who also wrote a commentary on the Apocalypse, took the interpretation of Revelation in a new direction by seeing in the book a history of the church during the present era, from the first to the seventh seal; this interpretation of the seals became quite common in subsequent centuries. Ambrose Aupert wrote a commentary in the eighth century that was quite dependent on Primasius; in the ninth century, Haimo’s work represented an appropriation of Bede, Ambrose, and Aupert (Matter 1992: 48–49).

The message of Revelation was applied for spiritual and edificatory purposes all through history, and especially in AD 1000–1500 (C. Koester 2014: 42–44). Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202), historically one of the most influential interpreters of the book (cf. Beal 2018: 94–116), read the book mystically (see Wainwright 1993: 49–53; B. Chilton 2013: 47–58); he also read the book in terms of the future, warning that a future pope might be the antichrist.¹⁸ He advocated a historicist interpretation and thought the first five seals were fulfilled by his day and that believers were awaiting the fulfillment of the last two seals. Joachim advocated a premillennial reading and even suggested that the two witnesses “stand for two religious orders” (Wainwright 1993: 51). Scholars commonly say that Joachim thought the OT was the age of the Father, the NT the age of the Son, and his own time the age of the Spirit (Beckwith 1967: 328). But B. Chilton (2013: 54–57; see also Burr 2019: 55) says it is more accurate to think of *status* (Latin), or condition, where there is overlap among the various persons of the Trinity. Joachim did see a “new effulgence of Spirit” in the sixth century with the monastic order of Benedict, and he believed there were further advances with the Cistercian reform of the order (B. Chilton 2013: 57).

Eschatological enthusiasm increased under the Dominicans and Franciscans; the Franciscan ideal of poverty led some to the conclusion that a false pope with his materialism would be the antichrist (C. Koester 2014: 45–46). It became increasingly popular to read Revelation in chronological terms as a chart of church history (see Wainwright 1993: 53–56), and some naturally tried to determine the place they occupied on the timeline. The Franciscans and Dominicans hoped to imbue the church with a new spirit and fresh devotion to the ways of Jesus. It is not surprising that some saw the Franciscans as playing a vital role in bringing in the new Jerusalem. Those who lived corruptly or who were deemed to be corrupt were charged with being the antichrist. For instance, the emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen (d. 1250) identified Pope Innocent IV, who commenced as pope in 1243, as the antichrist, drawing such a conclusion

18. For discussion of Joachim of Fiore and some apocalyptic selections of his writings, see McGinn 1979: 126–41; cf. also Daniel 1992. See “Excursus: The Beast and the Antichrist” after the comments on Rev. 13:1 (below).

from the number 666. Countercharges filled the air, and thus the same charge was leveled against Frederick himself (McGinn 1979: 168–79). Along the same lines, John Wyclif (d. 1384), in England, claimed that the papal office was the antichrist since the papacy took on more political power and was immersed in wealth. Yet Wyclif didn't innovate in using the term “antichrist” with reference to the papacy since the question of whether the papacy should be identified as the antichrist had been in the air since Joachim of Fiore. Some Franciscans believed there would a “Mystical Antichrist, a coming false pope” (McGinn 1979: 205, 210–11). Jan Hus (d. 1415) walked a tightrope in his own reflections on the papacy, distinguishing between the true and false church, claiming not that the papacy itself was the antichrist but that some popes filled that role with their political ambition and worldly lifestyles. His careful expression of the issues didn't spare him from being burned at the stake for heresy.

During the time of the Reformation, Erasmus raised questions about apostolic authorship and the book's canonical status, and we see Erasmus's influence in Luther's preface on Revelation. Rather early, Martin Luther struggled with Revelation since he didn't think it presented Christ clearly (LW 35:398–99). He complained that since the visions obscured the message, the book lacked the clarity about Christ that we see in the writings of Peter and Paul. As time passed, Luther read the book as an outline of church history, which was common in the medieval period, and he grew more enthusiastic about the book while identifying the pope as the antichrist. Some scholars in this period questioned the canonical status of the book, and Ulrich Zwingli even claimed that it wasn't biblical (Roloff 1993: 2). John Calvin wasn't entranced with Revelation either; it was the only NT book on which he didn't write a commentary. Still, he didn't reject Revelation and agreed with Luther in seeing the papacy as the antichrist.

The view from the Middle Ages that Revelation was a prophecy of church history continued to be popular, as did the view that the pope was the antichrist. Thomas Müntzer (d. 1525) claimed that he received dreams and revelations, arguing that believers should take up arms against the present social order, and he died for his ill-fated cause (in the Peasants' War). Other Anabaptists, such as Hans Hut (d. 1527) and Melchior Hoffmann (d. 1540s), read Revelation along similar lines, seeing the fulfillment of all prophecies as imminent, even setting dates for the second coming (1528 and 1533, respectively) and for the start of the millennium (J. Thomas and Macchia 2016: 44–45; Wainwright 1993: 90–91). Other Anabaptists who renounced the use of all violence rejected such readings of Revelation. Jesuits responded to Protestants, who were regularly appealing to Revelation to denounce the pope as the antichrist, by emphasizing that the prophecies in the book were to be fulfilled in the future or that they related to the first century of the church. Thus they advocated either futurist or preterist readings of the book, blunting Protestant voices naming the Roman Catholic Church or the pope as the antichrist.¹⁹

19. For sixteenth-century apocalyptic conceptions in England, see Bauckham's 1978 study.

A gradual shift took place beginning in the 1600s, as postmillennial readings of Revelation began to gain ground.²⁰ Many Puritans read Revelation with optimism and hope for a future golden age (Murray 1971), and Jonathan Edwards followed in their train.²¹ The Baptist Benjamin Keach (1640–1704) saw the displacement of James II by William of Orange as the inauguration of the millennium, which would be consummated in 2688 (Morton 2014: 6). Many Protestants thought the Apocalypse foretold the demise of the papacy and the spread of the gospel worldwide. The great textual critic Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752) believed the millennium would begin in 1836 (Morton 2014: 7). Not everyone concurred: the famous jurist and scholar Hugo Grotius (d. 1645) read the book in preterist terms, seeing the church in John’s day in conflict with the rule of Rome. Preterist readings became more popular in Catholic circles, as we see in the work of Luis del Alcázar (1554–1613), and one reason for their ascendancy, as noted above, is that preterist interpretations fended off the notion that the pope was the antichrist.²²

Gradually the scene started to change.²³ On the one hand, historical criticism became more popular and led to new readings of Revelation. At the same time, optimism declined, especially as the twentieth century dawned, and postmillennial readings became less and less popular. Futuristic views of Revelation sprang up, with the expectation that the end would come suddenly. Edward Irving (d. 1836) propagated this way of thinking, and William Miller (d. 1849) set a date for the second coming in 1844 (B. Chilton 2013: 111–12). Dispensationalism, inaugurated by John Nelson Darby (d. 1882), became very popular and came close to dominating the evangelical landscape in the twentieth century. In this teaching the promises made to Israel in the OT will be fulfilled literally, believers will be raptured before the seven years of tribulation, Jesus will return to reign on earth in Jerusalem, and the Jewish people will rule with Christ in the land of Israel. Historically, dispensationalists claimed that Revelation should be interpreted as literally as possible, though recent writers and commentators from this school of interpretation are more nuanced. The movement advanced in Bible schools and churches and was promoted by Dallas Theological Seminary. Popular writers like Hal Lindsey (1970), along with the novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins (1995–2004),

20. For Isaac Newton’s understanding of Revelation, see Mamiani 2002: 387–408. Newton believed the book was marked by recapitulation and engaged in serious study of the book throughout his life (see Hutton 1999). For some reflections on Newton’s view of the end of history, see Smolinski 1999 and B. Chilton 2013: 91–94. As Chilton points out, Newton didn’t use Revelation to predict the future but, from his study, emphasized divine providence in history.

21. Firth (1979) tells the fascinating story of the reception of apocalyptic in Britain from 1530 to 1645.

22. For preterist readings in England from 1560 to 1830, see Brady 1983: 157–70. Preterist readings began with Henry Hammond in the 1600s.

23. Abrams (1988) considers the influence of Revelation on poets and philosophers and modern culture.

advanced the cause.²⁴ More scholarly commentaries on Revelation by Walvoord (1966), Robert Thomas (1992, 1995), Patterson (2012), and Fanning (2020) also support dispensational readings. Eschatology and belief in Jesus's coming was in the air, and Jehovah's Witnesses, under the leadership of Charles Taze Russell (d. 1916), predicted that the end would come in 1914; they also pointed to the arrival of the millennium in 1975.

At the same time, historical-critical readings of Revelation began to dominate the scholarly scene. In the nineteenth century, commentaries were written by scholars such as Heinrich Ewald, E. W. Hengstenberg, F. W. Farrar, William Milligan, and Moses Stuart. The early part of the twentieth century dawned with outstanding commentaries on Revelation by scholars such as Wilhelm Bousset (1895/1999), Isbon Beckwith (1919/1967), R. H. Charles (1920a, 1920b), and Henry Swete (1922). In the contemporary era, studies, commentaries, monographs, and books have been written from a diversity of perspectives. One interesting recent reading is proposed by Moloney (2020). Inspired by the work of Eugenio Corsini, he argues that Revelation doesn't communicate the eschatological triumph of Christ but the victory accomplished in his death and resurrection. There is not space in this commentary to interact in full with this reading, but I am not convinced, as my exegesis of texts like 6:12–17; 7:15–17; 11:15–19; 14:1–5, 9–11; 16:17–21; 19:11–21; and chapters 20–22 will demonstrate. Certainly the death and resurrection of Christ are fundamental to John's message and the key to history, but Revelation also celebrates the eschatological consummation that is coming.²⁵

Author

The book of Revelation is given by Jesus Christ to an angel, and the angel in turn conveys to John what was revealed to him (1:1). At the conclusion of the book John claims that he saw the visions and heard the words that accompanied the visions (22:8), which he in turn communicated to his readers. Boxall (2006: 4) rightly emphasizes the visionary character of the book, noting that “the author resorts to simile upon simile, as if struggling to articulate a profound visionary experience.” Throughout the book, John often emphasizes what he saw and heard, which “reinforces the story's verisimilitude” (Ureña 2019: 51); we can add that it underscores its reliability as well. John points us to what he saw forty-five times in the book and to what he heard forty-three times (see Ureña 2019: 53, 55). Also, John “presents himself not simply as witness to his visions, but as an active participant within them (5:4; 10:10; 11:1; 17:3)” (Boxall 2006: 4). John identifies himself as the author in 1:4 and reports that he was on the island of Patmos (see 1:9) when he received the content of the book. Most apocalypses are pseudonymous, but Revelation

24. See O'Leary (1994) for a helpful analysis of Hal Lindsey's apocalyptic theology; he also has an insightful discussion of the eschatological views of William Miller.

25. For other recent research on Revelation, see Morton 2014.

stands out (most interpreters agree) as an exception.²⁶ After all, if the book were pseudonymous, we would expect the author to identify himself as an apostle (cf. A. Collins 1984a: 26–27). The question that arises pertains to the identity of the John who wrote the book. The name John was common in Palestinian Judaism, the fifth most common name (Bauckham 2017: 67–74, 85–91). The Palestinian origin of the author is confirmed by four pieces of evidence (see Aune 1997: 1). First, the author is amazingly conversant with the OT: the book is infused with allusions from the OT. Second, the genre “apocalypse” is limited to Palestinian Judaism, though it has roots, according to Gunkel, in the ancient Near East. Third, the writer is familiar with the Jewish temple and cult. Fourth, the book is written in a kind of “Semitizing Greek,” though some scholars disagree with the last observation.

Most scholars today reject the idea that John the apostle was the author. Ford (1975: 28–37) posits John the Baptist, but this view hasn’t gained traction (cf. A. Collins 1984a: 31). The most common view is that the author is an unknown John, a leading prophet.²⁷ Roloff (1993: 11) says the author can’t be the apostle since he has a different style, eschatology, and Christology from what we find in the Gospel of John. Most writers in the early part of church history believed that the apostle John wrote the book (as we shall see), but scholars note that early fathers in the church were known to make mistakes and had their own biases, and thus their judgments on these matters may have been mistaken (cf. A. Collins 1984a: 26, 28–29; Fanning 2020: 26–27; Caird 1966: 4). In any case, many think it is telling that the author does not identify himself as an apostle (cf. Fanning 2020: 28) or as John the son of Zebedee.²⁸

I hold the minority view in critical scholarship—that John the apostle wrote the book of Revelation—but my interpretation of the book doesn’t depend upon this claim since it can only and always be a hypothesis. Nor is there space to defend such a view in detail; I can only sketch in some reasons for the view preferred here. Contrary to many, an unattributed reference to John most naturally refers to the apostle John. It seems likely that no other John could refer to himself without further description of his person.

The tradition of the church supports the notion that John the apostle penned the book.²⁹ In fact, the early tradition supporting apostolic authorship

26. For exceptions, see C. Koester 2014: 67–68.

27. See R. Charles 1920a: xliii–xliv; A. Collins 1984a: 34; Boring 1989: 34–35; Harrington 1993: 8–9; Aune 1997: lvi; Murphy 1998: 33–36; Reddish 2001: 17–19; Witherington 2003: 3; C. Koester 2014: 68–69; Roloff 1993: 8–9, 11–12; Satake 2008: 38–44; Lichtenberger 2014: 47–48; J. Thomas and Macchia 2016: 35–43; Karrer 2017: 43–49; Fanning 2020: 28; L. Thompson 1998: 22; deSilva 2021: 30–31.

28. Barker (2000: 56–58, 62, 76) claims there was more than one author, attributes the book to temple visions and to priestly writers, and says it was written over a number of years.

29. Kruger (2016; cf. also Stonehouse 1929: 1–13) documents that Revelation was received well initially but began to be questioned as time elapsed. Thus we see positive reception in Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, the Muratorian Fragment, Hippolytus, Melito of Sardis, Theophilus of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. Some in the third century, probably including Gaius of Rome, rejected Revelation as a forgery, claiming that it was penned by Cerinthus. We

of Revelation is among the strongest among the NT books (Carson, Moo, and Morris 1992: 468; Guthrie 1990: 933). Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165) identified John the apostle as the author (*Dial.* 81.4).³⁰ Irenaeus (d. ca. 202) goes even farther, declaring that the same John who wrote the Gospel and 1 and 2 John also wrote Revelation (cf. *Haer.* 1.16.3; 3.11.1; 3.16.5, 8; 4.20.11; 5.26.1).³¹ Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 5.20.4–8), quoting Irenaeus, says that Polycarp was a disciple of John the Apostle, and Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, which is likewise attested by the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (22.2). Irenaeus remarks that he knew Polycarp as a boy and emphasizes that events and experiences when we are young are often impressed on our minds more distinctly than experiences we have as we grow older. C. Hill (2004: 353–54) notes that imperfect verbs are used to describe Irenaeus listening to Polycarp’s discourses, suggesting that he regularly heard Polycarp’s teaching. C. Hill concludes that it isn’t convincing to relegate Irenaeus’s relationship with Polycarp to “fleeting contact” at a “tender age.” In fact, Irenaeus emphasizes that he memorized some of what Polycarp taught and often meditated upon the latter’s teaching. The chain of tradition from John to Irenaeus is striking. Irenaeus’s musings on the authorship of the book can’t be dismissed easily if we accept the tradition that Irenaeus knew Polycarp, who knew John (see Kruger 2016: 163–64).³²

We have other evidence supporting the apostle John as the author. C. Hill (2004: 88–90) argues that Hegesippus, who wrote later in the second century (AD 170–80), identified the author of Revelation as the apostle John. Such a testimony, if accepted, is significant since he predates Irenaeus.³³ The apostolic authorship of the book was also held by Clement of Alexandria (*Quis div.* 42; d. ca. 215), Tertullian (*Praescr.* 33:10–11; 36.3; *Marc.* 3.14, 24; d. ca. 240), Origen (*Comm. Jo.* 5; d. ca. 253), and the *Apocryphon of John* (1.7–8; 1.30–2.16), which was written before Irenaeus’s death. The earliest tradition concurs, then, in seeing the book as the product of the apostle John, the son of Zebedee.³⁴

hear about this from Dionysius of Alexandria, but Dionysius himself doesn’t reject Revelation. He receives the book but argues that it wasn’t written by the apostle John. The Alogoi also rejected Revelation (see n. 13 above), but they also rejected John’s Gospel. Kruger says that the rejection of the book was partially due to a reaction to Montanism and also centered on doubts about who wrote it.

30. For further observations on Justin’s use of Revelation, see C. Hill 2004: 342–43; for a different reading, see Nicklas 2011: 36–38.

31. For Irenaeus’s use of texts in Revelation, see C. Hill 2004: 99–100.

32. J. Wilson (1993: 597–98) dismisses Irenaeus’s testimony about the book being dated during Domitian’s reign on the basis that Irenaeus was wrong about apostolic authorship. I argue (see above), however, that Irenaeus was not mistaken about apostolic authorship. The received critical position on authorship is not as secure or certain as many claim.

33. But Nicklas (2011: 43–44) urges caution.

34. See Swete 1922: clxxiv–clxxxv (tentatively); Morris 1969b: 25–34; Mounce 1977: 25–31 (tentatively); Robert Thomas 1992: 2–19; Carson and Moo 2005: 705–7; Keener 2000: 54–55; Osborne 2002: 2–6; Smalley 2005: 2–3; Boxall 2006: 5–7; Fee 2011: xviii–xix; Hoskins 2017: 13–21; Leithart 2018a: 74–77; Tonstad 2019: 30–34.

Marcion rejected apostolic authorship, according to Tertullian (*Marc.* 4.5), which is hardly surprising given the Jewish character of Revelation. The Montanist movement, with its excesses, provoked a reaction against apocalyptic speculations, with the result that some even questioned the authenticity of Revelation. Those reputed to be the Alogoi claimed that the book was written by the heretic Cerinthus (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 51.3.1–6). It seems that Gaius also ascribed the book to Cerinthus, though he was motivated by his rejection of the millennium as an earthly paradise (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.28.1–2). The most serious challenge came from Dionysius of Alexandria (d. ca. 264; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.25.1–27), who contested apostolic authorship on the basis of the literary style of the book and its content, claiming that Revelation diverged remarkably from the Gospel of John and the Johannine Epistles. Dionysius anticipates historical-critical scholarship in a number of ways. He points out that the grammar of Revelation isn't consistent with the Fourth Gospel or the three Johannine Epistles and that the author doesn't call himself an apostle. Finally, many of the themes in the Gospel and the Epistles are absent in Revelation—for example, realized eschatology, eternal life, and being born again.

Dionysius seems to be the first to suggest another John in distinction from the apostle (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.25.7–16). Eusebius of Caesarea (d. ca. 340) picked up this theory and attributed the book to John the Elder on the basis of Papias's (d. ca. 130) testimony (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.4–7), though there is some evidence that he originally thought it was apostolic (Kruger 2016: 169). Eusebius said there were two different tombs in Ephesus: one for the apostle John and one for the elder John. Also, Eusebius finds a second John distinct from the apostle in the words of Papias:

And I shall not hesitate to append to the interpretations all that I ever learnt well from the presbyters and remember well, for of their truth I am confident. For unlike most I did not rejoice in them who say much, but in them who teach the truth, nor in them who recount the commandments of others, but in them who repeated those given to the faith by the Lord and derived from truth itself; but if ever anyone came who had followed the presbyters, I inquired into the words of the presbyters, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any of the Lord's disciples had said [εἶπεν, *eipen*], and what Aristion and the presbyter John, the Lord's disciples, were saying [λέγουσιν, *legousin*]. For I did not suppose that information from books would help me so much as the word of a living and surviving voice. (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.3–4)

Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.5–7) reflects on the words of Papias, remarking that the name John occurs twice and that in the second instance John isn't placed with the apostles but with Aristion the Elder (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.5). Then Eusebius launches into the tradition that there were two tombs in Ephesus, ascribing the second tomb to the John who saw the visions in Revelation. Thus the tradition that Revelation was written by John the Elder was born, and it has attracted scholars up to our very day (Gunther 1981). Hengel (1989:

127) suggests that John the Elder wrote an earlier draft of Revelation, and its content was reworked by later editors.

The notion that John the Elder wrote the book should be rejected. Eusebius probably misinterpreted Papias's words—Papias wasn't speaking of two Johns. If we read Papias carefully, we see that he doesn't use the word "apostle" but "elders" or "presbyters" (πρεσβυτέρων, *presbyterōn*) when he refers to apostles (see Gundry 1982: 611–13; Paul 2018: 8). He doesn't identify Aristion as an elder when he calls John an elder a second time, and thus Aristion isn't placed on the same level as John or the other apostles. But why does he mention John twice? The verb tenses are important and should be observed carefully. First, Papias refers to what all the elders "said" (εἶπεν, *eipen*), but when John comes up the second time, along with Aristion, he refers to what "they say" (λέγουσιν, *legousin*). Then Papias says how much he prizes "the word of a living and surviving voice" (*Hist. eccl.* 3.29.4). Papias refers to what John the Elder "said" and what he "says" because John was the only apostle he heard in person: he heard John's living voice. There are no grounds for distinguishing John the Elder and John the apostle on the basis of Papias's words because John the Elder and John the apostle are the same person. If I am correct in saying that the apostle wrote 2 and 3 John, we see in those epistles as well that John doesn't introduce himself as the apostle but as John the Elder (2 John 1; 3 John 1). To sum up: we have no clear basis from Papias for thinking there was another John in distinction from the apostle who was the author of Revelation.

We also need to remember that Eusebius had personal reasons for wanting to distance the apostle John from Revelation since he was somewhat biased against the book. Eusebius disliked the chiliastic view of Revelation propounded by Papias, and we see this clearly when he says, "Among them he [Papias] says that there will be a millennium after the resurrection of the dead, when the kingdom of Christ will be set up in material form on this earth. I suppose that he got these notions by a perverse reading of the apostolic accounts, not realizing that they had spoken mystically and symbolically. For he was a man of very little intelligence, as is clear from his books" (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.12–13). Still, eventually Eusebius himself seems to accept the book as canonical (Kruger 2016: 170). The argument made here, then, is that the evidence for a John the Elder who is distinct from the apostle John isn't convincing because it isn't clear that John the Elder even existed. The most convincing reading of Papias leads to the conclusion that calling John "the Elder" is another attribution for the apostle John (cf. 2 John 1; 3 John 1).

For most modern scholars, however, dispensing with "John the Elder" as author doesn't lead to the conclusion that John the apostle wrote the book. They believe that an unknown John who was prominent in the early church, or at least well known to the churches in the province of Asia, wrote the book. The name John is extremely common, and thus it is not surprising, according to these scholars, that another John, someone unknown to us, was the author. As I said before, we can't be certain that John the apostle wrote

the book. It is possible that it was written by an unknown John. We face the balance of probabilities. Still, it seems that an unknown John would describe himself further, and that the apostle John, of all people, could refer to himself merely by name since there was one and only one John who would be known by name in Christian circles without further description. As Weima (2021: 12–13) says, “It seems highly implausible that there were two ‘Johns’ in Asia Minor—one a well-known disciple of Christ, whose presence in that region is widely attested, and the other an unknown person who, despite never being mentioned in these abundant sources, nevertheless had enough stature to write the canonical book of Revelation under his own name and without needing to clarify for readers that he should not be confused with his much more famous namesake.” In the Gospel the author doesn’t name himself, nor do we find an identification of authorship in 1 John, while in 2 and 3 John he calls himself “the elder” without giving his name. Of course, the authorship of all these books is disputed as well, and our arguments travel in merry circles. I suggest, along with others (e.g., Carson 1991: 69–81; Yarbrough 2008: 5–15), that the apostle John wrote them all, and he doesn’t follow any pattern in terms of identifying himself as the author.³⁵

All that has been said above in favor of the apostle John as author doesn’t touch on the fundamental and most significant objection to authorship. Most doubt or reject apostolic authorship because the style of Revelation departs significantly from the Gospel of John (e.g., Aune 1997: clx–ccvii; Schüssler Fiorenza 1985: 93–101; cf. Mussies 1971: 351–52; Witherington 2003: 3). The matter is complex and can’t be adjudicated sufficiently here. I am scarcely claiming to prove that John the apostle is the author. The differences between Revelation, the Gospel of John, and the Johannine Epistles, first noticed by Dionysius, are acknowledged, especially the grammatical irregularities that characterize the book of Revelation.³⁶

The objection doesn’t carry the day because the different style may be explained by the apocalyptic cast of the work. Remarkable differences between the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation exist, but the simple Greek style of Revelation fits with what we find in the Gospel of John and the Johannine Letters.³⁷ Poythress (1985) compares the use of conjunctions in John’s Gospel and the three Johannine Epistles with their use in Revelation, and he concludes

35. Farrer (1949: 22–35) sees a common author but shrinks back from seeing the author as the apostle.

36. See Mathewson 2010 and 2016 for his detailed analysis of the style and grammar of the book. For an early assessment of evidence, leading to the conclusion that the same author could not have written the Gospel and the Apocalypse, see R. Charles 1920a: xxix–xxxiii and cxvii–clix). Swete (1922: cxx–cxxx) thinks that, despite the differences between the Gospel and the Apocalypse, there is “a strong presumption of affinity” between the two. From the disagreement between Charles and Swete, we see that outstanding scholars interpret the same evidence in remarkably different ways.

37. Whitaker (2015: 19) is too sanguine about John’s educational level and his knowledge of rhetoric, though the book certainly has a rhetorical force and punch, even if John wasn’t educated in Greek rhetoric.

that the way conjunctions are used in Revelation accords with what we see in the Gospels and the Epistles. It has also been observed by scholars that the Gospel of John has some points of contact with the book of Revelation (e.g., Mounce 1977: 30–31; Osborne 2002: 4–5).

John's style and grammar have been explained in various ways. In the past some attributed the style to John's ecstatic state on receiving the vision. Others claim his Hebrew background shaped the way he wrote (e.g., R. Charles 1920a: xxi, cxlii–clii; Turner 1976: 146–58; D. Schmidt 1991; Roloff 1993: 12; S. Thompson 1985). Still others maintain that John's Greek accords with the Hellenistic Greek of the day (Porter 1989a; Moç 2015; Whiteley 2007; Mathewson 2020). Thus what we see in the book doesn't depart from what we find elsewhere in Greek writers. Sometimes it seems that the style of the book gives birth to rather improbable theories. Thus Callahan (1995; see also Hurtgen 1993; Maier 2002: 110–12; Resseguie 2009: 48–49; Boxall 2006: 31) says that John's solecisms represent a protest against the hegemony of Rome. Perhaps we can be forgiven for thinking that Romans and even John's readers would find the slight to be rather trivial and perhaps even a bit juvenile. Such a view also seems highly unlikely since it is remarkably subtle, and it is hard to imagine readers recognizing that the deviant grammar represents an unmasking of imperial pretensions (Fanning 2020: 57). But others find this suggestion promising. C. Koester (2014: 141) thinks the grammar fits with the "nonconformist" nature of the message. More plausibly, A. Collins (1984a: 47) maintains that John was at least bilingual. She claims that John wrote "Semitizing Greek on purpose." Beale (1998: 318–55; 1999: 100–105), in his mammoth and fascinating commentary, suggests that the grammatical irregularities may be traced to OT allusions. Perhaps the grammar and style are best accounted for by the apocalyptic genre and the visionary character of the revelation. Alternatively, perhaps John didn't have a secretary when writing Revelation, as he perhaps did when he wrote the Gospel and three epistles (Fee 2011: xix). On Fee's own terms, it seems that the secretary hypothesis isn't necessary since he (2011: xix) thinks the differences between Revelation and the other Johannine writings aren't greater than what we find between Romans and Galatians.

The matter of style is difficult to resolve. Thus the answer probably has more than one dimension, and we need to admit that certainty eludes us. Part of the answer, as some scholars point out, is that John's Greek isn't as deviant as some claim. Still, in some places John seems to depart from standard grammar (see comments on 1:4 and 1:13) to make a particular point. Perhaps part of the answer is that John consciously adopted an OT style, mirroring the LXX, though dependence on the LXX doesn't explain all the differences (Fanning 2020: 56). Beale (1999: 100–107) thinks OT allusions exert an influence, but his theory doesn't explain all the evidence either; some of the alleged allusions aren't evident on a close examination (Fanning 2020: 56–57). Jauhiainen (2005b: 21) raises some critical objections to Beale's view. For instance, the small number of solecisms that allegedly represent allusions may be a coincidence since John

alludes to the OT so often, and we wonder why only some OT allusions (very few, actually) are signaled by solecisms. Further, Beale doesn't explain the presence of solecisms where there is no OT allusion. How do we explain the solecisms in these instances? Perhaps Jauhainen's most important objection is that the OT allusion is often quite obvious when there is a solecism, as in Rev. 1:4. If the allusion is obvious, we don't need a solecism to indicate a use of the OT. Fanning (2020: 53–58), like Collins above, argues that what we see here fits with someone whose second language is Greek. Tonstad (2019: 32) says, "The differences between the Gospel of John and Revelation can be accounted for by circumstances, resources, type of writing, and not to be left out—actual *revelation*." The difference in genre may account for the variant style. The conclusion here is that the differences in style aren't weighty enough to preclude apostolic authorship.

In my judgment, the stylistic argument raises the most questions about apostolic authorship, but it is also common for scholars to reject John the apostle as the author for theological reasons. No one doubts that many themes and words dominating the Gospel and 1 John are missing in Revelation. Some insist, for example, that the theology of Revelation contradicts John's Gospel since the Apocalypse features judgment on God's enemies while the latter proclaims God's love. In this specific case, the dichotomy erected between love and judgment is false since judgment is threatened in the Gospel as well (John 3:36; 5:22, 29; 12:48), and Revelation promises salvation to those who repent and wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb (3:19–21; 7:13–14; 9:20–21; 22:14). Almost all the arguments based on theology and vocabulary can be accounted for by the different purposes that inform the two works. Thus the theological arguments aren't terribly weighty because authors may emphasize different themes in different works. Some say that the Gospel of John stresses realized eschatology and Revelation features future eschatology, but the accent on the future fits with the purpose and function of Revelation. The so-called theological antinomies are often a straitjacket since they demand that an author present the same themes in every work.

Here it is not my purpose to detail and discuss the various theological questions that are raised. What is argued in the commentary doesn't depend on Johannine authorship; the discussion could be very long and has often been conducted rather tediously. There are some rather striking and unusual points of contact between the Gospel and Revelation. In both, Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1, 14; Rev. 19:13)—though the emphasis is admittedly different since the context in which the phrase appears is distinct. He is also identified as the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36; Rev. 5:6; 19:7, 9; 21:9) in both, but different words are used for lamb (ἀμνός, *amnos*, in John 1:29; ἀρνίον, *arnion*, in Rev. 5:6). In both, Jesus is also said to be "the Son of Man" (John 1:51; 3:13, 14; Rev. 1:12–16; 14:14). Both books teach that Jesus atoned for the sins of all by his death and that believers are to be witnesses. The differences and similarities are weighed and assessed in various ways. In my judgment,

nothing here precludes authorship by John the apostle, and I think authorship by the apostle is most persuasive.

Date

When we read Revelation, we are struck by its vagueness in terms of the historical setting.³⁸ Despite the claims of some scholars, nothing in the book itself indisputably points to life under a particular emperor, whether we think of Nero (AD 54–68), Domitian (AD 81–96), Trajan (AD 98–117), or even Hadrian (AD 117–38). Such a situation suggests that we should not rigidly tie our interpretation of the book to any particular period or to the actions of a specific emperor. Obviously, the book was written at a specific time and addressed to churches in the province of Asia, but we lack definitive evidence for positing a definite date. I am not rejecting the attempt to posit a time for the composition of the book. I argue, in fact, for a date in the 80s or 90s.³⁹ Yet no interpretation should be accepted that *demand*s a particular date. J. Thomas and Macchia (2016: 26–35) rightly observe that the date of the book can't be drawn clearly from external or internal evidence. We can immediately draw an important hermeneutical conclusion from the imprecision of the historical situation. Interpretive views *insisting* that Revelation was written before or after AD 70 should be rejected. Any interpretation that *requires* a particular historical setting imposes constraints in reading that can't be verified. Another hermeneutical conclusion provides guidance as we explore the book. The lack of specificity in the book is instructive for us as readers. We must avoid the rabbit hole of binding our view of Revelation to a specific historical reconstruction.

If any date is chosen, it most likely falls in the reign of Domitian (AD 81–96).⁴⁰ Nevertheless, there has also been a long tradition that puts the date in the later part of Nero's reign (AD 54–68) and before the Jerusalem temple was destroyed (in AD 70), though Rojas-Flores (2004) posits a date between AD 54 and 60.⁴¹ Placing the book in the time of Nero accounts for the references to persecution in the book (K. Gentry 1997: 285–99; Leithart 2018a: 38–40), particularly if Revelation was written after Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44).⁴² Leithart (2018a: 38–40) thinks an earlier date

38. Much of what is written in this paragraph and in the fifth paragraph below comes from my earlier discussion of the date of Revelation (see T. Schreiner 2021: 19–20) but with some additions and changes.

39. For the dating, see the outstanding discussion in Wood 2016: 110–85.

40. Fee (2011: xx) says late first century or early in the second. H. de Jonge (2002: 128–29) suggests it was written during Trajan's reign, and that 666 may even refer to Trajan.

41. Supporting an early date are J. Wilson 1993; D. Chilton 1987: 3–6; K. Gentry 1997; J. Robinson 1976: 221–53; Bell 1978; Briggs 1999: 23–39; Kelly 2012: 19–21, 120; M. Wilson 2005; van Kooten 2007; Rojas-Flores 2004; Slater 2003, 2017; Moberly 1992; and Boxall 2006: 7–10.

42. Aune (1997: lvii–lxx) thinks the first edition of the book was composed during the time of Nero and the final edition was completed during Domitian's reign, but most scholars today reject the notion that Revelation was composed in stages and that we can parse out the various sources used.

is supported by the nature of the persecution under Nero, which he claims was more intense under Nero than under Domitian.⁴³ But such an argument from the intensity of the persecution under Nero isn't compelling because persecution in Rome doesn't necessarily mean that the same kind of persecution was being felt by the seven churches addressed by John in Revelation. We have no evidence that Nero's persecution of Rome's Christians spread to the province of Asia (L. Thompson 2003: 35). Thus there is not a clear connection between Nero and the sufferings experienced in the seven churches.

One could assign the date to Nero's reign or shortly thereafter by identifying the sixth king as Nero if one starts with Julius Caesar (J. Wilson 1993: 599–604). Or we could say that the sixth king is Galba if we begin with Augustus (Rev. 17:9–10; cf. K. Gentry 1997: 146–64). Other scenarios are discussed in the interpretation of 17:9–10. Determining the date on the basis of the seven kings is scarcely clear, as Beale (1999: 21–24) shows and as I argue in commenting on those verses. It is better, actually, to read the list of rulers in 17:9–11 symbolically instead of trying to assign them to particular emperors. The meaning of 17:9–10 challenges the most confident interpreters, and they are not a secure basis for assigning a date to the composition.

Others argue from 11:1–2 that the temple was still standing when the Apocalypse was being written, and thus the book was written before AD 70 (Briggs 1999: 24; J. Wilson 1993: 604–5; J. Robinson 1976: 221–53). Some scholars claim that John would have mentioned the temple's destruction if it had already occurred (K. Gentry 1997: 165–92).⁴⁴ When we examine the use of the word “temple” in Revelation (cf. Wood 2016: 117; deSilva 2021: 36), it never refers to an earthly temple (see comments on 3:12; 7:15; 14:15, 17; 15:5, 6, 8; 16:1, 17; 21:22). Similarly, the reference to the temple in 11:2 should not be interpreted literally and thus can't be used to posit a date for the book. Along the same lines, “the holy city” in Revelation (21:2, 10; 22:19) never refers to the earthly Jerusalem (11:8; see Wood 2016: 118–19). Thus we have no indication here that the book was written before Jerusalem fell to Titus (against Smalley 2005: 3).

The earliest evidence we have for the date comes from Irenaeus, who wrote about this issue late in the second century: “We therefore will not take the risk of making any positive statement concerning the name of Antichrist. For if it had been necessary for his name to have been announced clearly, at the present time, it would have been spoken by him who also saw the Revelation; for it was not even seen a long time ago, but almost in our own generation towards the end of the reign of Domitian” (*Haer.* 5.30.3; cited by Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.8.6). Irenaeus's meaning is contested, and his words don't indubitably point to the time of Domitian; yet the most natural reading suggests that John

43. B. Shaw (2015) argues that a careful analysis of the evidence demonstrates that Nero didn't actually persecute Christians, but his reading of Tacitus is too skeptical and doesn't represent the view of most scholars (rightly, C. Jones 2017).

44. Marshall (2001: 2, 87–97; see also Marshall 2009: 19–20) places the writing of Revelation between AD 68 and 70.

penned Revelation while Domitian was the emperor (Aune 1997: lix; Beale 1999: 19–20; Wood 2016: 115–16; against Leithart 2018a: 37; Rojas-Flores 2004: 375). The subject of the verb “was seen” (ἐωράθη, *heōrathē*) in this quote could possibly be “John,” and such a reading could support a pre-AD 70 date. Yet speaking of John doesn’t specify when Revelation was written but only records when John himself was last seen. Seeing John as the subject of the verb is possible but quite awkward, and the syntax reads much more naturally if the subject is the revelation that John saw on Patmos (rightly, Swete 1922: cvi), and most have interpreted the statement this way. The English translation cited here supports this reading by supplying the subject “it.” The earliest external evidence, then, supports a date during Domitian’s reign.

Ephiphanius (*Pan.* 51.12; d. ca. 403; see also Apringius [Weinrich 2011: 26]) supports a date during the reign of Claudius (AD 41–54), but such an early date is improbable. The remaining evidence from early tradition seems to support a later date, although in some instances the tradition itself lacks clarity. Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. AD 215) remarks that John returned from the isle of Patmos “after the tyrant was dead” (*Quis div.* 42); this tyrant could be Nero, and thus Clement possibly supports an early date. But since the remainder of the tradition points us in another direction, it seems probable that the tyrant Clement had in mind was Domitian. In support of such a conclusion, Eusebius identifies the emperor as Domitian (*Hist. eccl.* 3.23.1), concurring with the most natural reading of Irenaeus. Victorinus (Weinrich 2011: 14–15; d. ca. 304) also traces the book to the reign of Domitian:

When John saw this revelation, he was on the island of Patmos, having been condemned to the mines by Caesar Domitian. There, it seems, John wrote Revelation, and when he had already become aged, he thought that he would be received into bliss after his suffering. However, when Domitian was killed, all of his decrees were made null and void. John was, therefore, released from the mines, and afterward he disseminated the revelation that he had received from the Lord.

Jerome (d. ca. 420) advocates the same background: “In the fourteenth year then after Nero, Domitian, having raised a second persecution, [he—John] was banished to the island of Patmos and wrote the Apocalypse” (*Vir. ill.* 9).

The tradition, as far as we can tell, was unanimous in positing a late date for Revelation. It is possible, of course, that Irenaeus was mistaken and that subsequent sources relied on Irenaeus instead of having firsthand knowledge about when Revelation was written (C. Koester 2014: 66–67; cf. Witulski 2016: 202–3).⁴⁵ After all, the early historians are not entirely reliable and are clearly guilty of mistakes in some instances. Again we face the problem that we can’t

45. A. Collins (1981: 33–34 and 1984a: 57) thinks Irenaeus was wrong about authorship but correct about the date since no external evidence contradicts his testimony. For skepticism about Irenaeus’s dating of the book, see also Friesen 2001: 143. Witetschek (2012: 119) thinks it is methodologically suspect to reject apostolic authorship, which Irenaeus accepts, and then to turn around and accept Irenaeus’s date for the book.

know for certain when the Apocalypse was written. If the tradition is mistaken, it is probably safe to say that Revelation was written somewhere in the period between AD 60 and 100. I incline, however, to the judgment that Irenaeus is correct on the dating of the book. After all, Irenaeus knew Polycarp, and Polycarp knew John, and thus the tradition has a clear line of succession.⁴⁶ Also, as A. Collins says (1981: 34), for Irenaeus to put forth John as the author late in Domitian's reign, when John would be advanced in age, suggests that "he had independent and strong evidence for the date." C. Hill (2004: 109) claims, with good reason, that Polycarp was Irenaeus's source for the notion that the Gospel and the Apocalypse were written by the apostle John. The case from tradition isn't indisputable, but the link from John to Polycarp to Irenaeus is stronger than is often alleged. To sum up, the internal evidence doesn't clearly point to a specific date. The external evidence, if we assume that it is reliable, points to a date when Domitian was the emperor.

Some argue that identifying Rome as Babylon supports a late date since texts that describe Rome as Babylon are post-AD 70 (2 Esd. [4 Ezra] 3:1–2, 28–31; 2 Bar. 10.1–3; 11.1; 67.7; Sib. Or. 5.143, 159–60; Beale 1999: 18–19). But for those who think 1 Peter was written in the 60s and that "Babylon" in the letter refers to Rome (1 Pet. 5:13), such an argument isn't decisive (T. Schreiner 2020: 4–18).

I have argued that Revelation was likely written near the end of Domitian's reign, and this view still seems to be the most common (cf. R. Charles 1920a: xci–xcvii; Sweet 1979: 21–27; Satake 2008: 53–58; Lichtenberger 2014: 48–52; Karrer 2017: 50–56; Murphy 1998: 42–47). Some suggest AD 90–95 (Roloff 1993: 10–11; Harrington 1993: 9) or AD 90–96 (Swete 1922: civ), while others settle on a date around AD 95 (Caird 1966: 6; Morris 1969b: 35–40; Beasley-Murray 1978: 38; Robert Thomas 1992: 23; Walvoord 1966: 14; Reddish 2001: 17; Patterson 2012: 23). Paul (2018: 11–16) and Hoskins (2017: 21–24) don't posit a specific date but put it in Domitian's reign. Lupieri (2006: 44) dates it between AD 70 and 100. L. Thompson (1990: 15) suggests AD 92–96. Friesen (2001: 150) argues that the date of Revelation isn't clear and leans toward a date between 80 and 100, though he thinks it possibly could be assigned to the time when Trajan (98–117) was emperor. Witulski (2007, 2012, and 2016) argues for a nonconventional view in dating the book during Hadrian's reign, particularly between AD 132 and 135.⁴⁷ I

46. Slater (2003: 253 and 2017: 249) objects that Irenaeus is known to make mistakes, that Polycarp was very young when the apostle John died, and that likewise Irenaeus was very young when Polycarp died. But the argument is flawed regarding age because Polycarp was born around AD 70 and would have been around twenty-five if we accept an AD 95 date for Revelation. Similarly, Irenaeus was probably born around AD 130 and thus would have been around twenty-five when Polycarp died (AD 155), and he could have heard and remembered the teaching of Polycarp when he was in his later teens (see C. Hill 2012: 97–102). Thus both were sufficiently old to remember well the facts of the case. As C. Hill (2004: 108) says, "The lives of John and Polycarp must have overlapped by a good thirty years or so."

47. For some problems with Witulski's dating, see Witetschek 2012: 140–44.

put the date within the rule of Domitian, at any time between AD 85 and 95 (cf. also deSilva 2021: 35–39).

Situation in the Churches

The date of the book is linked to the situation of the churches in the province of Asia (1:11; 2:1–3:22). Various theories are adduced as to why churches at these seven cities are addressed (see Worth 1999: 100–108), such as these: (1) the significance of the number seven; (2) the prominence of the imperial cult near these churches; (3) the particular importance of these cities in the province, politically or religiously; (4) the special relationship these cities had with John; (5) the circular route by which the cities could be visited. Probably more than one of these reasons, and perhaps all of them, capture the situation; it is difficult to establish any of them with certainty.

According to John, some Christians in the province of Asia faced the prospect of being put to death for the sake of their faith. John warns believers that they should be prepared to die for the sake of their faith (2:10), reminding readers of the death of Antipas as a witness for Christ (2:13). The martyrs under the altar, slain for Christ's sake, cried out for justice (6:9–11), confirming that believers were being put to death, and presumably the readers were familiar with this state of affairs. The two witnesses (11:3–13) are slaughtered by the beast (11:7); in due course I will argue that the witnesses represent the church, and thus we have further evidence that believers were suffering martyrdom. The beast from the sea, representing the Roman Empire, overcomes believers by slaying them (13:1, 7). Babylon, a cipher for Rome, is indicted for spilling the blood of saints and prophets (17:6; 18:24; 19:2; cf. 16:6); the beheading of believers is mentioned at the close of the book (20:4). The martyrdom of believers, then, is a prominent theme in the book, showing that the churches faced external threats to their safety and security.

The problems in the church, however, were not only external.⁴⁸ Tensions bubbled up inside the churches as well. By the 80s and 90s, enough gentiles had become Christians in the Greco-Roman world that the issue of eating food offered to idols had become contentious (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; 1 Cor. 8:1–11:1). The matter was also debated in Pergamum (Rev. 2:14) and Thyatira (2:20). Eating meat from animals sacrificed in pagan temples and sold to the public was particularly tempting for gentile believers, who were accustomed to such a practice. Furthermore, trades of various kinds were common, and such trades participated in social and religious events where the gods were honored with sacrifices. Eating food offered to idols bound together trades socially, culturally, and religiously. Christians who refused to go along would feel alienated from their coworkers and society if they abstained. It is evident from Revelation that Christians disputed the legitimacy of eating such food. We also see internal church conflicts with false apostles (2:4), the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15), those who

48. Satake (2008: 50–51) rightly says that the problems in the churches are both from without and from within.

endorse the teaching of Balaam (2:14), and with the prophet Jezebel (2:20–23). The struggle with these prophets and teachers doubtlessly included the issue of food offered to idols; yet other issues were also probably the subject of debate. In Revelation, in any case, we have clear evidence that John addresses not only persecution from without but also the danger of compromise and accommodation from within (rightly, Stevenson 2020).

DeSilva (2009: 112) captures well one of John’s purposes in writing, noting that the disciples would be inclined to accommodate to the society in which they lived as long as they “remained focused on the challenge of their neighbors’ pressure” or the suffering they might face or their economic privation. But John puts before believers “the ultimate crisis,” which is not the first death but the second death. The judgment of Babylon described in chapters 17–18, then, functions as a warning to believers: they must not throw their lot in with those who are the social elite, with those who enrich themselves at the expense of the poor, with those who oppress others to ensure that their lives are more comfortable (cf. Bauckham 1993b: 15). John warns and admonishes his readers not to compromise, while also consoling and comforting those who are suffering (Bauckham 1993b: 16).

Scholars have discussed and debated what was going on in the seven churches, both in terms of the external threat relative to the lives of believers and also with respect to the internal tensions in the churches. In reading the letters, we see clearly that the churches faced various situations, and thus it would be simplistic to conclude that all the churches were facing the same issues (Koch 2017: 97). Discussion has centered especially on the imperial cult and whether persecution was mandated by Rome.⁴⁹ We know that the imperial cult was popular in the province of Asia (Price 1984: 120). Price says, “It was not simply a game to be played in public”; it would be difficult to avoid its influence in one’s everyday life. Friesen (2003: 52–59) shows that the imperial cult was part of everyday life in the provinces addressed in Revelation, and participation and interest in the cult can’t be limited to the wealthy elite. According to Friesen (2003: 59), “Imperial cults were also bullfights, footraces, wrestling, public baths, concerts by male choruses, and festivals for a city’s ancestral divine protector. Imperial cults were inscribed on public buildings, on altars, on statue bases, in gymnasia, in temples. . . . In short, the worship of the emperors was a crucial part of Asian society in the first century C.E.” Pergamum was the first city in the province of Asia that built a temple to venerate Rome and Augustus, in 29 BC, and thus the impetus for the cult came from Asia (Friesen 1993: 7–15; Frey 2006: 243–44). Smyrna, a half century later (AD 26), received permission to erect a temple devoted to Tiberius, Livia, and the Senate (Friesen 1993: 15–21). In Ephesus another temple for the imperial cult was built (ca. AD 90) for the Flavian family, and Domitian was included in the veneration (Friesen 2001: 43–52). The League of Asia was asked to

49. For an excellent survey of scholarship on the imperial cult until 2010, including studies in both classics and NT studies, see Naylor 2010.

honor Augustus by making the latter's birthday the first day of the new year, and Augustus was honored as the deliverer and beneficiary of human beings (Winter 2015: 33–43). An inscription from Sardis (Winter 2015: 49–50), where prayers were offered to Augustus, shows how the emperor was venerated.

Traditionally, scholars have argued that the book was written during Domitian's reign and that he persecuted the church aggressively (e.g., Ramsay 1905: 93–113; Mounce 1977: 32–34). Domitian insisted, according to Suetonius (*Dom.* 13.2), that he be called “lord and god.” Cassius Dio (*Hist.* 67.4.7) also says that he was called master and god (δεσπότης καλούμενος καὶ θεός, *despotēs kaloumenos kai theos*). In the history of interpretation, many scholars have argued that the imperial cult became especially prominent under Domitian as he went beyond his predecessors in exalting himself (cf. Juvenal, *Sat.* 4.38; Pliny the Younger, *Pan.* 53.4; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 7.4.1). In this scenario, Domitian was a tyrannical ruler who killed many believers (R. Charles 1920a: xciv–xcv; Swete 1922: lxxxv–xcii; Beckwith 1967: 204–5; Robert Thomas 1992: 22–23). The two beasts in Rev. 13 could furnish support for this reading, reflecting the rule of the emperor and the priesthood that supported the imperial cult.

More recent scholarship has challenged on a number of levels this traditional conception of Domitian's role in Revelation (J. Cook 2010: 117–37; Trebilco 2004: 343–47). The imperial cult, after all, didn't originate with Domitian but began during the reign of Augustus, and there is no evidence that the cult intensified under Domitian (Friesen 2001: 149; Frey 2006: 233–34). The emperor cult was popular in the province of Asia and was not required by Rome but represented the will and desires of the residents of the province (C. Koester 2014: 93–94). Thus the propagation of the imperial cult wasn't at the behest of Rome but can be attributed to the desires of those living in the province of Asia, both the common people and the elite (Friesen 1993: 165–66; cf. Price 1984: 62–65, 98–121, 234–48). The citizens of the province of Asia were themselves eager to promote the cult since sponsoring and fostering the cult could bring social and political advantages. People may have addressed Domitian as “lord” and “god,” but no inscriptions or coins have such appellations, and contemporary writers don't provide evidence that Domitian was addressed as such. Friesen (2001: 148) wonders if Suetonius fabricated the charge, saying that if the titles played a role in Rome, they were irrelevant in Asia.

We also need to be careful about attributing all the problems faced by the churches in the province of Asia to the imperial cult because the latter wasn't the only game in the towns since many religious cults were practiced in the ancient world. Worship of and devotion to gods such as Zeus, Apollo, Artemis, and Athena were also common (cf. C. Miller 2010). In some detail, Friesen (2001) explains that it is difficult to disentangle the imperial cult from local cults since the same space was used for offerings and worship. Friesen (1993: 75) remarks, “The gods and goddesses of the peoples supported the emperors; and conversely, the cult of the emperors united the cultic systems, and the peoples of the empire.” Price (1984: 130) says that the “imperial cult . . . was probably the most important cult in the province of Asia.” But he also

notes that the emperor “was subordinated” to the local deity when a sanctuary was shared (Price 1984: 232; cf. also p. 147). Friesen (1993: 74–75) disputes the matter of the imperial cult being subordinated and argues that the cults were complementary and noncompeting. To sum up, the imperial cult played an important role in the churches, the cult was promoted and endorsed in the Roman province of Asia, and Domitian didn’t play a significant role in the propagation of emperor worship.

Others take a more radical position, claiming that the evidence for any significant persecution is questionable, even locally in the province of Asia, though they also counter the notion that Domitian sponsored persecution of the church. The work of L. Thompson (1990) stands out, and many scholars have been influenced by his understanding of the situation, so a brief review is fitting. L. Thompson (1990: 95–197) says that Christians in Asia weren’t threatened by Domitian and that John was actually the one who saw a radical disjunction between Rome and believers. Suetonius (*Dom.* 8.1–12.3) claims that Domitian became more tyrannical the longer he ruled, but L. Thompson (1990: 107–9) argues that he wasn’t worse than other emperors. Domitian didn’t conduct a persecution campaign against believers or anyone else. The Roman sources that criticize Domitian were biased against him, and their bias stemmed from their desire to ingratiate themselves with the emperors succeeding Domitian (L. Thompson 1990: 96–103). When we look at the evidence closely (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.30.3; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.17.1; 3.20.1–9; 4.26.9), the assertion that he conducted an intense campaign of persecution can’t be verified (cf. A. Collins 1984a: 69–73).

Some have claimed that Domitian was especially violent against Christians, appealing to the testimony of Roman writers who spoke negatively about his rule. Several Roman writers also assert that Domitian turned to evil in the latter part of his reign (Suetonius, *Dom.* 2; Cassius Dio, *Hist.* 67.1; Tacitus, *Agr.* 44), and, according to Cassius Dio (*Hist.* 67.11.2–3), he executed many. It would fit with Revelation to say that Christians were included among the slain (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.17; 3.18.5; Brent 1999: 142). But L. Thompson argues that this picture of Domitian is skewed, that he was a relatively good emperor, and that the attacks on Domitian by Suetonius, Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and others stemmed from their desire to curry favor with later emperors by trashing Domitian (L. Thompson 1990: 95–115). Thompson says we should contrast these writers who vilified Domitian with Quintilian and Statius, who wrote when Domitian reigned and had positive perceptions of Domitian’s reign (L. Thompson 1990: 103, 105–7). Furthermore, numismatic and prosopographical data don’t support the negative picture of Domitian (L. Thompson 1990: 109) fostered by Martial (*Epigr.* 5:5; 7:2; 7:5; 7:34; 9:28), who identified Domitian as a lord and god. Thompson emphasizes that Statius and Quintilian show no evidence that Domitian insisted that people identify him as divine (L. Thompson 1990: 105–6, 109), suggesting that Martial wasn’t accurate in his representation of Domitian. Domitian’s persecution of believers is supported by some evidence since he executed Flavius Clemens and banished Flavius’s

wife, Flavia Domitilla (Cassius Dio, *Hist.* 67.14.1–3; Suetonius, *Dom.* 15.1; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.18.4). On the other hand, Flavius Clemens and his wife may not have been Christians; many scholars think they were Jewish (e.g., J. Cook 2010: 128–31).

Thus far we have seen that L. Thompson vigorously contests the notion that Domitian was responsible for the persecution of Christians. Such a reading is compatible with what was presented earlier, where the impetus for persecution came from the province of Asia, from the cities that John addressed instead of from the emperor himself. Still, A. Collins (1984a: 69–73) and L. Thompson (1990) take a further step, concluding that persecution was actually a minor factor in the Apocalypse. Collins says that the references to persecution in Revelation don't reflect the historical circumstances. John *perceives* a crisis and tries to stab the readers awake so that they don't accommodate and compromise with their society. Collins's reading (1984a: 84–110) is nuanced since she sees conflict emerging from local issues in the cities of the province of Asia, including conflicts with Jews in the region. Her point is that the issues the churches faced didn't come fundamentally from the outside. Even locally, however, John exaggerates the problem since his expectations "clashed" with the way things were, and he expected conflict in the future (A. Collins 1984a: 141).

Other scholars point to imperial persecution because John was sent to Patmos for preaching the gospel. L. Thompson (1990: 172–73; 2003: 33–34) counters, however, that John wasn't actually banished to Patmos but went there of his own accord to preach. Nor was Antipas's death (2:13), according to Thompson, necessarily due to the imperial cult but should likely be traced to his local situation since there was an altar to Zeus and devotion to Asclepius in Pergamum (L. Thompson 1990: 130–32). Thompson claims, as we have seen, that the imperial cult wasn't particularly prominent, nor did Domitian demand greater devotion and honor than other emperors (L. Thompson 1990: 135, 159). Despite the death of Antipas, the local situation in the province of Asia wasn't difficult for believers in Christ, according to Thompson. Christians didn't experience significant tension in their local communities but lived rather peaceably in their midst (L. Thompson 1990: 191–92). How do we account for what John has written then? L. Thompson (1990: 174–75) says that John, with his apocalyptic vision of the world, constructed an alternative universe, an alternate mythology for his readers. The persecution, according to Thompson, wasn't in the real world but was a product of John's mind. Both A. Collins and L. Thompson, then, claim that any persecution in the province of Asia was minimal, that the persecution reflects John's mental construct instead of reflecting the actual situation of the churches.

The reading promoted by L. Thompson and A. Collins—that neither Rome nor the local communities in the province of Asia persecuted Christians significantly—has influenced other scholars (cf. W. Carter 2020). According to this interpretation, the conflicts arose within the churches, and John tried to maintain or establish his own authority. Royalty (1998) claims that the tensions were *within* the churches, and thus John exhorts his readers to turn

away from the wealth of the empire for the riches promised to them through Christ.⁵⁰ Duff (2001) doesn't see external problems but "social conflict" among the churches (so also Kraybill 1996: 37–38). John writes to further his authority against Jezebel and others who resist his prophetic vision (see also Pippin 1992a; cf. also Lester 2018: 32–41). In other words, according to some, the book was written fundamentally for John's sake, so that he could continue to exercise his authority over the churches.

There is some truth in the reading of the situation defended by L. Thompson, A. Collins, Kraybill, and others. Still, such a reconstruction also has serious flaws, and the notion that the churches faced persecution both locally (as I argued earlier above) and from Rome is probable. We can begin with the notion that John fundamentally writes to assert his authority. The self-claimed authority of John can be overstated since he introduces himself as a slave of Christ instead of stressing his authoritative status (1:1). He doesn't emphasize his status and position but identifies with the readers by calling himself a brother (1:9). John doesn't present himself as the all-knowing writer but stresses his own weakness and fallibility. Twice John needs assistance from angels to understand what he has seen (7:14; 10:4), and twice he is corrected for worshipping an angel (19:10; 22:8–9; see Perry 2020: 327). The criticism of John—that he wrote to substantiate his authority—fits with the postmodern and postcolonial mood. We are suspicious of those who exercise authority and power, recognizing that they often employ it to subjugate and oppress others. Postcolonial and postmodern readings help us recognize the pretensions and errors of previous eras. But such approaches are also not free from criticism. Postcolonial and postmodern readings of Revelation remind us that there is no neutral Archimedean point by which to interpret the Apocalypse. The claim to be able to validate truth independently of God's self-revelation is finally self-defeating and ends up contradicting or opposing transcendent revelation (see Frame 1994). On the other hand, postmodern and postcolonial readings also claim (at least implicitly) to render authoritative verdicts. They rightly affirm that the human subject can't successfully articulate or propound a metanarrative autonomously. But John suffered along with his readers (1:9), and he claims to convey a transcendent word, a divine message, one that comes from God and Jesus Christ. If one accepts John's claim, God breaks through the confusion of human so-called autonomy and reveals the true state of affairs in the world.

My reading of the evidence is that we have both persecution from without, threatening the churches, and also compromise within the churches.⁵¹ Friesen and others are probably correct that the impetus for the imperial cult came especially from the provinces, and thus Bandy (2013) rightly suggests that it was often precipitated by accusations against Christians before provincial

50. Though Royalty (1998) thinks John mimics the empire in his stance toward riches, and thus he doesn't offer an alternative ethic.

51. Witulski (2016: 206–11) points out that seeing the crisis only as internal, in the churches, doesn't account well for chaps. 4–22.

magistrates. A sustained empire-wide persecution wasn't mandated by Domitian, but the evidence that Domitian persecuted the church is stronger than most modern scholars allege. More seriously, L. Thompson, A. Collins, and others (cf. Blount 2009: 11–12) wander from the best reading of the evidence in diminishing the presence of any persecution. Scholars who emphasize internal conflicts in the churches and the danger of compromise are on target, but they err when they conclude that there was no external conflict. Schnabel (2018b), in his survey of persecution, demonstrates that persecution was a common experience in the churches in the first century. Thompson and Collins underestimate the local persecution faced by the churches in the Apocalypse, and the texts cited at the outset of this discussion (2:10, 13; 6:9–11; 11:7; 13:7; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4) should be given more weight in determining the situation of the churches. These texts demonstrate that, to some extent, the churches were suffering from threats of martyrdom and from actual martyrdom as well.

Thus far I have argued that we have evidence of both internal and external problems in the churches and that the persecution didn't primarily come from Rome but from the provinces themselves. Still, this is not to say that Domitian didn't play any role in the persecution of the church. Some scholars have recently minimized such, but Wood's (2016) reading of the evidence is particularly helpful, showing that Domitian was more culpable than is often alleged.⁵² We begin with discussion of L. Thompson's construal of Revelation since it is so influential. When we begin to pick at the details, Thompson's impressive work is shown to be flawed. For instance, Wood (2016: 137) points out that Thompson's reconstruction suffers because he paints Trajan as consistently anti-Flavian, but such an interpretation doesn't fit with Trajan's notion that the Flavian dynasty was "the redeemer of Rome." Indeed, Suetonius (*Vesp.* 1.1), who criticizes Domitian strongly, praises the previous Flavians. The Senate, after Domitian's death, distinguished Domitian from the other Flavians and singled out Domitian for criticism (Wood 2016: 138).

We must also recognize that the positive depiction of Domitian by Quintilian and Statius could also be explained by their being contemporary with him (deSilva 2009: 52; Beale 1999: 6; Wood 2016: 138–39). In other words, they wanted to keep Domitian happy since their fortunes were tied to his approval. Statius's excessive praise of Domitian (*Silvae* 4.1) shows that Statius was not an objective and impartial historian. Indeed, Statius claims that Domitian is near to being a god (*Silvae* 1.1.62; 5.2.7; see Slater 1999: 29–30). We also have evidence that Martial (*Epigr.* 5.5; 6.87; 7.2.2; 7.2.5–6; 13.74) and Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 45.1) identified Domitian as a god (cf. Brent 1999: 170).⁵³ Pliny (*Pan.* 2.2–3)

52. I draw my own inferences and introduce other evidence, so I am not claiming that Wood (2016) would agree with what I have written here.

53. L. Thompson (1990: 106) explains Martial's praise as the latter's attempt to gain favor with the emperor, not a requirement from Domitian himself. Still, here we have an admission that Martial's rendition of Domitian is influenced by his desire to advance himself and isn't a neutral report.

notes that, in contrast to Trajan, Domitian was flattered as a god and says that Domitian was called “lord” and “god” by both Greeks and barbarians (see Brent 1999: 170–71). Indeed, Domitian identified himself with the god Jupiter in a way that was repudiated by Trajan (Pliny, *Pan.* 52.6–7; Brent 1999: 174). Quintilian (*Inst.* 4, preface, 2 and 5) also describes Domitian in a way that suggests divinity, even if he doesn’t identify him as a god (see Slater 1999: 30). Thompson claims that Martial flourished under Domitian’s reign, even though the former has positive comments about opponents of Domitian, but Slater (1999: 31) notes that the comments didn’t involve any criticism of Domitian himself, and thus they should not be overestimated.

I am not claiming that persecution in the Roman world was empire-wide or state-sponsored, only that some of the attempts to say that Domitian was like all the other emperors are suspect. The early evidence that he was tyrannical fits with a careful reading of the evidence (see Wood 2016: 139). A crucial point on the whole matter has been made by Wood (2016: 140–41), an insight often neglected or missed when persecution is defined in terms of an imperial edict or “mass persecution.” But in the eyes of the church, the death of one out of five hundred would be earthshaking. Indeed, persecution isn’t limited to killing but also includes exile, beatings, social and economic discrimination, and verbal abuse (cf. Wood 2016: 142–43). In Pliny the Younger’s letter (ca. AD 112) to Trajan (*Ep.* 10.96.1), he mentions those who were Christians twenty years previously but who had abandoned the faith.⁵⁴ If they were abandoning their faith twenty years earlier, they were likely under pressure to capitulate when Domitian was the emperor, which fits with the book of Revelation being composed while Domitian was emperor. Furthermore, as Slater (1998: 248–49) points out, Pliny assumed that Christians were dangerous, superstitious, and criminals, and thus he felt that he was justified for executing those professing the Christian faith. Slater (1998: 248–50) concludes that such actions reflect deep-seated convictions about Christians that were common in Greco-Roman society since the Romans were deeply suspicious of new religious movements (Slater 1998: 252).

Even if Flavius Clemens and his wife, Flavia Domitilla, were Jewish (Cassius Dio, *Hist.* 67.14.1–3; Suetonius, *Dom.* 15.1; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.18.4; so J. Cook 2010: 128–31), their mistreatment could suggest that Christians were persecuted as well since Christianity wasn’t clearly distinguished from Judaism by the Romans (Beale 1999: 7–9; Wood 2016: 163–64, 176–84; Brent 1999: 142). Quintilian and Martial displayed an anti-Jewish strain in their writing that would have pleased Domitian, showing the anti-Jewish character of his reign (Wood 2016: 164–65). Wood (2016: 167–74) also carefully examines “the hidden transcripts” in the writings of Josephus, noting that his attitude toward the Romans takes on a more negative tone in the *Antiquities* than in the *Jewish War*, and the negative tone may function as evidence

54. In contrast to Royalty (1998: 35), who claims that Pliny the Younger was ignorant about the prosecution of believers.

that Domitian did not grant the Jews the same rights and justice as previous regimes did. Along the same lines, when Nerva became emperor in AD 96, he released those who were charged with “adopting a Jewish mode of life” (Cassius Dio, *Hist.* 68.1.2). Indeed, a coin Nerva struck indicated that he did not treat the Jewish people in the same way as his predecessor (Wood 2016: 174–75). The account of Cassius Dio doesn’t support a widespread and sustained campaign of persecution during Domitian’s reign, which Eusebius claimed (*Hist. eccl.* 3.17.1; 3.18.4). After all, Eusebius lived long after Revelation was written (L. Thompson 1990: 134–37; J. Cook 2010: 117–37). On the other hand, Cassius Dio points out that although many were attracted to Jewish customs, some were put to death and others lost their property. In the reign of Domitian we have some evidence of Jews being persecuted, and presumably Christians as well.

Certainly the persecution in Rome under Nero (ca. AD 64) didn’t represent a concentrated, empire-wide campaign against Christians (F. Downing 1995: 245–46). It probably was a temporary response to the fire at Rome, designed to deflect responsibility from Nero himself (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44; Suetonius, *Vitellius* 6.16.2). Pliny was the legate to Bithynia in the province of Asia, and as governor he wondered how he should respond to Christians in his province. From Pliny’s correspondence with the emperor Trajan (ca. AD 112–14), we also see that an official policy was not worked out in responding to Christians (F. Downing 1995: 235–38). Their correspondence supports the notion that Rome didn’t have a state-sponsored edict against believers (*Ep.* 10.96–97; cf. F. Downing 1995). Pliny believed he should execute Christians who refused to sacrifice to the emperor and curse Christ. On the other hand, he thought he shouldn’t punish those identified as Christians if they cursed Christ. Pliny also wondered if Christians should be actively sought out and anonymous charges accepted, or if he should only prosecute Christians who confessed their faith. Trajan responded by recommending a conservative course. The emperor didn’t want a witch hunt in which Christians were sought, since such a course of action would undermine stability. Christians who cursed Christ and sacrificed to the emperor were exempt from punishment, whereas those who were stubborn and obstinate in their devotion to Christ were to be executed. Pliny’s correspondence with the emperor Trajan reveals that an official policy was not worked out in responding to believers, although the Christian faith was certainly illegal, and believers, if charged, would be put to death for confessing Christ. Trajan’s response demonstrates that believers were not to be sought out and punished (*Ep.* 10.96). On the other hand, those who identified themselves as believers and who confessed Christ publicly were to be put to death, and thus being a Christian was definitely considered to be anti-Roman. It is difficult to know if this policy was in place in Rome when Revelation was written. Perhaps Christians who came into a public conflict with Rome were singled out for execution, while the majority, though not killed, may have suffered from fear.

Still, it is significant that Pliny thinks that the Christian faith is illegal and that believers, if charged, should be put to death for confessing Christ.

T. Williams (2012: 179–236) is probably right (in discussing 1 Peter) in saying that even though Christianity was not technically illegal, it was “effectively illegal.” Such a reading of the evidence fits with what we find in the book of Revelation, where some believers were being killed for their faith (cf. 2:13; 6:9–11; 13:7; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4). It seems that, under Domitian, sporadic instances of persecution threatened believers. The lack of empire-wide persecution doesn’t mean that there wasn’t any persecution or that no believers were being put to death (Slater 1999: 41). We need to remember that some of the churches addressed in Revelation (Slater 1999: 44) were centers of the imperial cult in the first century AD.

I conclude that the recent exculpation of Domitian suggested by L. Thompson and A. Collins is overstated (Beale 1999: 9–12). The correspondence between Pliny and Trajan suggests that the Roman policy was to put believers to death, and such a policy may have been in force—perhaps even mandated—in the reign of Domitian. F. Downing (1995: 236–37) thinks that Pliny innovates in applying the sacrifice test, but it is more likely that Pliny was aware of actions taken against Christians previously and viewed his legal decisions not as setting a precedent but as acting in accord with precedent (Middleton 2018: 43–44). Indeed, Middleton (2018: 45–63) shows that local persecution, even if it was not empire-wide, could have an imperial cast and that Christians faced circumstances where confessing Jesus could cost them their lives. Even A. Collins (1983: 742) remarks that Pliny believed “it was his duty to execute any unrepentant, adult, male Christian who was properly accused.” Thus it is likely mistaken to say that there was no imperial policy under Domitian (Beale 1999: 5). It is better to say that the policy wasn’t draconian and all-pervasive. At the same time, those who were charged with atheism, as Beale recognizes (1999: 7), could suffer persecution. Beale (1999: 7) also rightly says that, even if a relatively small number of believers were put to death, such actions would send shudders through the early church. It is difficult to nail down the nature of persecution in the local churches of the province of Asia (Witherington 2003: 6–7). We have seen that the imperial cult was warmly welcomed and celebrated in the provincial cities. Bonz (1998: 253–58) argues that Domitian worked diligently to influence the eastern provinces in cities like Pergamum and Ephesus, conceiving of himself as Zeus’s representative on earth.

The different ways of interpreting evidence for persecution in Domitian’s reign reveal a problem of method that bedevils us and always will. Which historical evidence is most pertinent for interpreting the book of Revelation (Prigent 2001: 15)? Ultimately, the evidence of the book under consideration is the most consequential. If scholars think the book itself distorts history, then the pathway for discerning the historical context in the Apocalypse is tangled with briars and thorns. There is virtually unanimous agreement that there wasn’t empire-wide persecution of believers, and the primary opposition to Christians arose in the provinces rather than from the emperor. The practice of the imperial cult in the province of Asia fits with regional persecution (Slater 1999: 32; deSilva 2009: 37–48). Christians may have been viewed

as superstitious and therefore subject to persecution (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44; Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2; Slater 1999: 36–37), and it is probable that Domitian himself was not favorable to Christians and Jews and probably discriminated against and killed some adherents.

As we have seen, some scholars argue that the problems were only internal and not external. In their view believers were not in danger of death but were susceptible to compromise, of melding with the society in which they lived. For instance, Duff consistently downplays references that point to outside opposition (by way of contrast, see Friesen 2005: 373). He rightly detects the problems within the churches, but he regularly explains away outside pressures to sustain his thesis that the problem came from within. For instance, Duff (2001: 43–44, 46) says there is no evidence that physical harm came to those in Smyrna, despite the wording of the text (2:9–10). Against Duff, there is no reason to limit the tensions to matters within the congregation since a reasonable interpretation of the evidence shows that the pressures were *both inside and outside* the churches.

We have seen, along the same lines, that A. Collins thinks the threat is *perceived* instead of being real, and L. Thompson claims that Christians lived a rather peaceable life with their neighbors. But this diagnosis isn't convincing (see also Witulski 2016: 205). First, many texts in the book claim that believers are being put to death (2:13; 6:9–11; 11:7; 13:7; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4). One may argue that these texts don't represent reality, but the text itself claims that there was opposition and persecution. Indeed, these theories postulate that John basically invented the threats against the church, but even if this is true, it is difficult to see how anyone can truly know this. Kraybill (1996: 37) says the persecution either represents the past (with Nero in the 60s) or the future. Similarly, deSilva (2009: 53; 2021: 83; cf. also Wood 2016: 145–46) thinks that most of the persecution in Revelation is in the past and that John anticipates more in the future. Such interpretations are possible, but we don't have enough information in the text to conclude that the killing of the saints should be limited to the future or the past. The evidence doesn't support a widespread institutional persecution, but neither does it indicate that martyrdom was relegated to the past or future. John warns the saints in the churches so that they will be ready to face whatever will come their way.

The mention of Antipas's death (2:13) could be interpreted as if he were an isolated case, but it more likely represents a wider problem. In the seven letters, John would not necessarily mention every case where believers were put to death. The persecution was sporadic and probably arose in local settings, but it wasn't nonexistent. The cities addressed in the book were comparable culturally and under Roman authority, and thus similar tensions would arise in the cities addressed, especially if Christians didn't show the proper deference to Rome and other local gods. It is crucial to realize that the seven letters are exceedingly brief and targeted. They don't pretend to be comprehensive treatises on all the circumstances in the churches. Thus particular issues, like the death of Antipas (2:13) and the threat of death for those in Smyrna (2:10),

are instructive for *all the churches* since John repeatedly emphasizes that the message for one church should be received by all the churches (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). This refrain means that John wasn't required to repeat a specific matter in every letter. In addition, the purpose of the seven letters must also be taken into consideration in assessing this matter because they were written to correct internal problems in the churches (Slater 1998: 239–41). They don't concentrate on outside opposition (Slater 1999: 33). This means that we can't use the seven letters to discount the remainder of the book since the remainder of the book (Rev. 4–22) also casts light on the problems facing the congregations. Thus we have both complacency within and conflict without.

Another dimension of life in the churches becomes evident when we recognize that the seven churches were probably composed of both Jews and gentiles. Jews had settled in the province of Asia by the second century BC (C. Koester 2014: 92). We also know from Acts that Paul's ministry began in the synagogues (e.g., Acts 18:19). Doubtless some Jews and likely God-fearers became believers, which supports the mixed character of the congregations. The mixed nature of the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, and Philadelphia was probably typical of all seven churches. The conflict with Jews in both Smyrna (2:9) and Philadelphia (3:9) attests to Jewish pressure, and no doubt some ethnic Jews had joined the Christian movement. The references to the Jewish synagogue attest to the tensions that existed between believers in Christ and Jews who did not confess Jesus as the Messiah. Apparently, Jews felt some pressure from Roman society (see comments on 2:9 and 3:9) to distinguish themselves from Christians. They probably claimed that Christians threatened the social cohesion of society, while they as members of the synagogue were well known for their loyalty to the empire. Perhaps they also reported Christians to the governing authorities, as we see in the book of Acts on several occasions (Acts 13:50; 14:2, 5, 19; 17:5–9, 13; 18:12–17; Boxall 2006: 53–54),⁵⁵ and this could also explain why believers were discriminated against or persecuted.

We have seen some evidence that Domitian persecuted believers. Even scattered and sporadic persecution would rivet the attention of the church. Probably most of the opposition sprang from the local authorities in the province of Asia. Pagans opposed Christians because their rejection of the imperial cult “amounted to the total negation of the normal Greco-Roman world view,” and thus they saw Christians as a threat to society and as lawless (H. de Jonge 2002: 138). Conversely, Christians saw that cult “as the absolute negation of their own Christian value system” and identified Roman rule as

55. The martyrdom of Polycarp, where the Jews informed against him, supports what is being said here. Duff (2001: 50) may be right that the account is “stylized,” but that doesn't mean it is invented. Duff (2001: 51) ends up saying that John's portrait of conflicts with the Jews should not be taken very “seriously.” Certainly, we are reading the account from John's perspective, and we can't *prove* what actually happened. Still, it seems to me that the textual evidence given to us from John should be privileged instead of the hypotheses of one separated twenty centuries from the events. We need to remember that modern historians also write from a certain social location and reflect their own worldview.

demonic (H. de Jonge 2002: 138–39). Gradl (2009) contrasts John and Philo, showing that Philo, especially in the delegation to Gaius, attempts to find points of contact so that Jews can integrate into Greek society, while holding on to their Jewish distinctives. John, on the other hand, features the conflict with the empire, emphasizing the adversarial standpoint that believers must take with respect to the imperium.

Genre

The uniqueness of Revelation among the NT books stands out since John has a vision like a “dream and conveys that vision-dream to his readers” (cf. Rowland 2011: 168). Scholars have often discussed the genre of Revelation, with the apocalyptic genre taking pride of place.⁵⁶ At the same time, they have also noted the seven letters in chapters 2–3 and the prophetic character of the book. Revelation, in other words, contains a mixture of genres: epistolary, prophetic, and apocalyptic.⁵⁷ Bauckham rightly says, “Revelation is a literary work composed with astonishing care and skill. We should certainly not doubt that John had remarkable visionary experiences [so also deSilva 2009: 121–24], but he has transmuted them through what must have been a lengthy process of reflection and writing into a thoroughly literary creation . . . designed not to reproduce the experience so much as to communicate the meaning of the revelation that had been given to him” (Bauckham 1993b: 3–4). G. Allen (2017a: 91) says that Revelation’s “careful structure and correlation of its segments suggests a controlled environment of composition and thoughtful and timely reflection on its structure, wording, and message.” Such observations do not negate the visions that John claimed to receive, but they demonstrate that “these visions were exegetically processed before inscription” (G. Allen 2017a: 92). The epistolary character of the book indicates that John addresses the situation and circumstances of his readers, and thus the message of the book must be tied to the historical location of the seven churches (cf. Aune 1997: lxxxii–lxxxv).

The book has several features characteristic of letters. For instance, we have a salutation (1:4–6) in which John identifies himself as the author, specifies the recipients of the work (the seven churches in Asia), and greets the readers, which is typical of letters (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2 Pet. 1:2; cf. Acts 15:23; James 1:1). Ramsay (1905: 191, 196) thinks the seven churches consisted of “seven postal districts” on a circular route, but no evidence for such postal districts has been found, so that view should be rejected (see Scobie 1993: 607; Friesen 1995b: 300). The conclusion of the letter has a grace prayer or benediction (22:21), which is common in the Pauline Letters (Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 16:23; 2 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 6:18; Eph. 6:24; Col. 4:18). The seven letters (Rev. 2–3) remind us that the book wasn’t written as a general tract about the

56. See the helpful surveys by Mathewson (1992) and Reddish (2020).

57. For the complications of identifying genre in Revelation, see Linton 2006 (cf. Schüssler Fiorenza 1983; Hartman 1983).

end of history but was intended for the churches in the province of Asia in the first century. As Paul does in his letters, John in these letters addresses the circumstances and situations faced by the readers (Haraguchi 2005: 271–72).

Some scholars have said what we have here are prophetic proclamations rather than letters (Aune 1990; deSilva 2009: 178–79; Weima 2021: 2–5), but there is no need for an either-or here. We have letters to the churches that are prophetic oracles. Weima (2021: 3–4) objects that we don't have features characteristic of letters, such as an appeal, disclosure, or confidence formulas. Nor do we find the phrase “now about” (περὶ δέ, *peri de*) that may introduce a topic or vocatives to indicate a change in topic. Weima rightly observes that the addresses to the churches lack many of the characteristics found in other letters, but the features he points out aren't necessary for a letter to be a letter. We have already seen that the introduction and the epilogue of the book have clear epistolary features. The messages addressed to the seven churches are prophetic oracles, but they are also letters addressed to the churches in question. Karrer (1986), coming from another perspective, says that the book is epistolary rather than apocalyptic, but epistolary features aren't evident in 4:1–22:5, and thus most scholars agree that the book is apocalyptic while also having epistolary features (cf. Reddish 2020: 26–29). The epistolary genre in the book reminds us that we should not indulge in what I call “newspaper eschatology” in reading the book. The book was written to readers who occupied a particular social location, and presumably they understood, at least mainly, what was written to them. The hermeneutical significance of this fact is massively important, for it eliminates the popular conception that modern readers interpret Revelation better than the original readers. Those who propose such readings read the book in terms of current events. All who reflect on this hermeneutical approach see that it is arbitrary since the interpretations change as events transpire. The interpretation of the book, even if one understood Revelation in accord with current events, is scarcely clear since the interpretation of Revelation shifts over time. It is wiser hermeneutically to locate the book in its historical context and to interpret it in light of the situation and the world in which the first readers lived.

At the same time, the reference to seven churches also carries symbolic significance, which suggests that the book was written for all the churches as well (Bauckham 1993b: 16; Ramsay 1905: 177; Tavo 2007: 57–60). In that sense, the message of the book applies to all churches throughout history. Still, as readers we rightly focus on the historical situation in which the book was written to decipher the meaning, while also recognizing that the book has a wider significance for the church of Jesus Christ throughout the ages.

At the outset of the book, we are told that Revelation is a *prophecy* (1:3). The book concludes with a flurry of references to prophecy (22:7, 10, 18, 19; cf. 22:6, 9). Thus the claim that the book is a prophecy clusters at the beginning and the end of Revelation, and such an *inclusio* signals to readers that the prophetic character of the book is key in understanding the Apocalypse.

As a prophecy, the book should be read out loud and heard by the churches when gathered (1:3). The oral recitation of Revelation is a constitutive element of the church's worship (Barr 1986; cf. Seal 2020),⁵⁸ indicating that the words of the prophecy were considered to be authoritative. Barr (1986: 244) says the book can be read in a bit more than an hour.⁵⁹ Indeed, John emphasizes in the strongest possible terms the divine authority of what he wrote, saying that those who add to what is disclosed will suffer the plagues threatened in the book while those who subtract from the revelation will not partake of the tree of life and will be excluded from the holy city (22:18–19). John echoes Moses's words in which he warns his hearers not to add to or subtract from the commands given from Mount Sinai (Deut. 4:2), and the echo indicates that John believes his words are as authoritative as the words of Torah given through Moses. John also, like the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:8–3:11), prophesies after eating the words of the scroll given to him (Rev. 10:8–11).⁶⁰

The introduction of the book resembles the words of the prophets (cf. C. Koester 2014: 108), which begin by rehearsing the visions Isaiah or Ezekiel saw (Isa. 1:1; Ezek. 1:1), the words that came to Jeremiah (Jer. 1:1), Hosea (Hosea 1:1), Joel (Joel 1:1), and so on. Revelation begins with the claim that the revelation of Jesus Christ has been transmitted to John (1:1). The prophets of Israel were moved by the Spirit to speak to their contemporaries (Ezek. 2:2; 3:24; Mic. 3:8; cf. 1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 19:20, 23; 1 Kings 22:24; 1 Chron. 12:18; 15:1; 2 Chron. 20:14; 24:20), and so too the Spirit spoke through John (Rev. 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:9). Similarly, the Spirit was behind specific words communicated by John (14:13; 22:17). This is most evident in chapters 2–3. All the words in these letters are from Jesus Christ (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14), and thus the words of Christ are prophetic. The prophetic character of Jesus's words is particularly evident from the formula “he says these things” (τάδε λέγει, *tade legei*), which is repeated in every instance when Jesus addresses the church (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). This same formula (τάδε λέγει) is a common introductory formula in the prophets, occurring hundreds of times in the LXX (e.g., Isa. 1:24; 3:16; Jer. 2:5; 4:3; Ezek. 2:4; 3:11; Amos 1:11; Mic. 2:3; Obad. 1; Nah. 1:12; Hag. 1:2; Zech. 1:3; Mal. 1:4). We see the same phrase used with reference to the prophet Agabus in Acts (21:11). The words of Jesus Christ in the seven letters are also the words of the Holy Spirit. Every one of these letters affirms that the words spoken by Jesus Christ are also the words of the Holy Spirit (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), indicating that the Spirit in Revelation

58. It is not as clear, however, as Barr (1986: 253–56) claims, that it was read in a eucharistic setting, though this is certainly possible.

59. A. Collins (1984a: 144) says that we should speak of “the first ‘hearers’” instead of the first “readers.”

60. Bandy (2010) says that the prophetic lawsuit informs Revelation, particularly with oracles of judgment and oracles of salvation. We see several parallels between OT lawsuit texts and Revelation, but one wonders if John was aware of the prophetic lawsuit as a formal genre (so Morton 2014: 67–68). Still, the notion that the covenant informs the judgments is attractive (see also G. Campbell 2004b).

is the Spirit of prophecy (cf. 19:10). These features underscore the prophetic character of the book.⁶¹

The content of the prophecy is discerned by reading the entire book, but John tells us that, as a prophecy, the book “discloses what must soon take place” (22:6). At both the beginning and the end of the book, John declares one of the key elements of his prophecy: “The time is near” (1:3; 22:10), a theme that must be considered in due course. Since we have a divine disclosure of what must occur soon, what is prophesied must not be sealed up but announced to the churches (22:10). The prophecy, however, isn’t written merely to convey information, for the purpose is ethical formation and transformation since genuine hearing leads to obedience, to keeping the words of the prophecy (1:3, 22:7). Numerous calls to repent, to endure until the end, and to resist compromise permeate the book (e.g., 2:5, 7; 8:13; 9:21; 11:13; 13:9–10; 14:12; 16:15). The prophetic vision has a pragmatic purpose that is intended to shape the thinking and to transform the behavior of the readers. We could say in general terms that Revelation has a wisdom purpose and thus is intended to shape the character of the readers.⁶²

Nowhere does John say that he is writing a book in the apocalyptic genre, though the first word of the book is Ἀποκάλυψις (*apokalypsis*, revelation), which is probably intended to tell us something about the nature of the book.⁶³ We also have apocalyptic writings in Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, and thus readers of Revelation would not find the book to be completely foreign or a radically new way of writing. Scholars agree that other books or parts of a book are apocalyptic in genre, including Isa. 24–27, parts of Daniel, Zech. 9–14, 1 and 2 Enoch, 2 and 3 Baruch, 2 Esdras (4 Ezra), Jubilees, the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, and some testamentary literature as well. John is also informed by Jesus’s eschatological discourse in Matt. 24–25 (cf. Mark 13; Luke 21). Betz (1969) argues that the Hellenistic background plays a significant role in apocalyptic since apocalyptic should be distinguished from prophecy. But, as will be noted further below, the distinction between prophecy and apocalyptic isn’t as pronounced as is often claimed. Further, the specific Hellenistic elements that Betz sees in 16:4–7 are not evident (cf. A. Collins 1977: 374–79; cf. Grabbe 2003a: 33), though this doesn’t lead to the conclusion that Hellenistic elements are completely absent.

Genres are fluid, and specifying what is apocalyptic isn’t discerned easily (cf. E. Sanders 1983; Hartman 1983; J. Collins 1983; see esp. the helpful survey and analysis of DiTommaso 2007a; 2007b), and most agree today that we can’t pin down perfectly what constitutes apocalyptic (Morton 2014: 18). Because of this some want to abandon the designation completely, but most scholars agree that, broadly speaking, the generic designation is useful. Some fuzziness and blurring of boundaries between various types of literature is

61. For a helpful survey of the role of the Spirit in Revelation, see J. Thomas 2020.

62. Supporting such a general conception of wisdom, see Dryden 2018; cf. also Tabb 2022: 3–7. For a discussion of the role of wisdom in apocalypticism, see Goff 2014.

63. See J. Collins (2017), who defends reading Revelation as apocalyptic.

to be expected, but we should not draw the conclusion from such fuzziness that apocalyptic isn't a distinct genre (J. Collins 2017: 35–36). In any case, most agree about the apocalyptic character of Revelation.⁶⁴ A group from the Society of Biblical Literature in the 1970s studied apocalyptic literature from 250 BC to AD 250, and in 1979 they proposed a working definition (J. Collins 1979a: 9): “‘Apocalypse’ is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendental reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.” Further discussion ensued, including the work of John J. Collins (1983), David Hellholm (1986), and David Aune (1986), and the following expansion was added. Apocalypses are “intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority” (A. Collins 1986a: 7).⁶⁵ Certain characteristics are typical in apocalypses, but the pragmatic and practical element should be especially stressed here.

Christopher Rowland (1982: 14) says that apocalyptic isn't fundamentally a type of literature, nor does it even focus on particular subjects. Instead,

we ought not to think of apocalyptic as being primarily a matter of either a particular literary type or distinctive subject-matter, though common literary elements and ideas may be ascertained. Rather, the common factor is the belief that God's will can be discerned by means of a mode of revelation which unfolds directly the hidden things of God. To speak of apocalyptic, therefore, is to concentrate on the theme of the direct communication of the heavenly mysteries in all their diversity.

Rowland (1982: 38) also emphasizes that apocalyptic isn't necessarily associated with pessimism about this world, as if the present world will not be transformed. One criticism of Rowland is that he understates the eschatological character of apocalypses (DiTommaso 2007a: 243), and it seems too limiting and confining to say that the crucial issue in apocalyptic is the revelation of divine mysteries. This is one dimension in apocalyptic literature, but it isn't the only characteristic, and perhaps not even the central characteristic.

Aune (1993: 25) describes the apocalyptic worldview as “centered on the expectation of God's imminent intervention into human history in a decisive manner to save his people and punish their enemies by destroying the existing

64. J. Collins (1979b) rightly maintains that Revelation is still apocalyptic even though it (1) is not pseudonymous, (2) does not venture into prophecies after the event, and (3) has epistolary features.

65. See also J. Collins's further discussion (2015: 1–20), in which he acknowledges that genre is a tool that critics use, not one that was devised by authors of the works in question. Collins also says that genre classification doesn't mean that there is only one genre. According to Collins, we need to recognize that a particular writing “modifies generic conventions” (2015: 7). For a very helpful semipopular introduction to Revelation, see Gorman 2011.

fallen cosmic order and by restoring or recreating the cosmos to its original pristine perfection.” Aune (1997: lxxxii), taking into account the work of many scholars, sets out a long definition:

(1) *Form*: an apocalypse is a first person prose narrative, with an episodic structure consisting of revelatory visions often mediated to the author by a supernatural revealer, so structured that the central revelatory message constitutes a literary climax, and framed by a narrative of the circumstances surrounding the purported revelatory experience. (2) *Content*: the communication of a transcendent, usually eschatological, perspective on human experiences and values. (3) *Function*: (a) to legitimate the transcendent authorization of the message, (b) by mediating a reactualization of the original revelational experience through a variety of literary devices, structures, and imagery, which function to “conceal” the message that the text purposes to “reveal,” so that (c) the recipients of the message will be encouraged to continue to pursue, or if necessary to modify, their thinking and behavior in conformity with transcendent perspectives.

Aune’s definition, though longer than that proposed by J. Collins, fits generally with that definition as it was supplemented by further discussion.

Bauckham (1993b: 9–10) remarks that Revelation differs from other apocalypses in that the amount of visual imagery exceeds what we see in other apocalypses; and Revelation doesn’t have the longer conversations between the mediator of revelation and the one who receives it, which is quite common in other apocalypses (so also Frey 2001: 162). Bauckham observes that the lack of explication creates “a symbolic world” that we enter as readers; thus the book is akin to a drama, shaping and changing the way we view and experience the world, and in turn altering the way we live. As readers we wish that further explanation and interpretation were offered, for they would presumably solve some of the interpretive puzzles that bedevil us.

The Apocalypse contains a revelation communicated in a narrative that rehearses the Lord’s triumph over the forces of evil; we are informed about the end of history and the coming new heavens and new earth. An “otherworldly being,” an angel, communicates the revelation to a “human recipient”—namely, John. We have a transcendent reality—a heavenly perspective of what is taking place on earth—and yet the story is also linear in that it forecasts the final outcome of events taking place on earth. The mysteries of the cosmos, hidden from ordinary mortals—the transcendent realities obscured from our vision—are relayed to God’s people. Often in apocalyptic there is a heavenly journey (cf. 1 En. 1–36; 3 Baruch), and we see this in 4:1–2, where John (at least in a visionary state) ascends to the divine throne room. Via his visions, John clearly interprets events occurring on earth and heaven, informing us about evil and good from a heavenly perspective so that believers will refuse to join forces with evil and will persevere in faith and hope until the end. Tabb (2019: 5) says that apocalypses have two purposes: (1) “to encourage and comfort believers” in their suffering and (2) to “challenge believers to adopt a new perspective on reality” in light of the end. I add that, in Revelation, the

readers are exhorted to remain faithful to God and Christ, to endure until the final day by not assimilating to the pressures imposed on them from the world.

Apocalyptic typically has certain characteristics, though scholars no longer designate whether a book is apocalyptic or not by listing certain traits since some or many of these features are lacking in works often identified as apocalyptic, and thus many scholars are reluctant to identify apocalyptic by typical characteristics (Betz 1969: 135–36; S. Cook 2003: 22). Roloff (1993: 5–6) notes that metaphorical language, numerology, interrelation of visions, and interpretations are common in apocalyptic works. A helpful resource in this regard is Leon Morris’s (1973; see also Hellholm 1986: 22–23) work (cf. Aune 1997: lxxvii–lxxviii, who notes the weaknesses of concentrating on specific features).⁶⁶ J. Collins (2017: 34–35) doesn’t solely rely on a list of features but rightly says, “There has been a lot of resistance to the idea of defining genres by making lists of characteristics, but in fact some such listing is necessary if a genre is to be identified at all.” Scholars rightly emphasize that selecting specific characteristics doesn’t necessarily make something apocalyptic in genre since works that aren’t apocalyptic can share these features. With this caveat in mind, it is still useful to list some of the common characteristics found in apocalyptic literature:

- historical dualism
- visions
- interpretation of visions
- pseudonymity (Revelation excepted)
- symbolism
- numerology
- angelology
- demonology
- predicted woes
- otherworldly journey
- cosmic conflict
- narrative framework

If we consider this list in terms of the book of Revelation, we see that the book fits quite nicely. We don’t have ontological dualism, in which God and Satan are equally powerful, as in Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism, but we do have *historical dualism*, in which there is a *cosmic conflict* between God and Satan.⁶⁷ We also recognize that much of the book stems from visions John

66. Bauckham (1993b: 8) also mentions transport to heaven, visions of the heavenly throne room, angelic interpreters, symbols of governing authorities, the final judgment, and the world to come.

67. On the importance of cosmic conflict in Revelation, see, e.g., Tonstad 2006; Grabiner 2015.

received and then communicates to his readers. Many apocalypses, such as 1 Enoch or 2 Esdras/4 Ezra, are obviously pseudonymous, but in identifying John as the author, Revelation stands out as an exception, as virtually all scholars agree, even though they do not agree about the identity of John. Other lists of characteristics are suggested. For example, E. Sanders (1983: 448)⁶⁸ notes that Philipp Vielhauer includes “pseudonymity, account of the vision, surveys of history in future-form, doctrine of the two ages, pessimism and hope of the beyond, universalism and individualism, determinism and imminent expectation, lack of uniformity in expression.”

We should especially note that numbers are often used symbolically in Revelation (Swete 1922: cxxxv–cxxxviii; Paul 2018: 34–39; Beale 1999: 58–64; Bauckham 1993a: 29–37).⁶⁹ As we shall see, the numbers four, seven, and twelve stand out particularly for their symbolic value. Other numbers, however, are used symbolically as well and should not be read as if they are literal. We have some remarkable examples of the use of seven in the book: seven churches (1:11; 2:1–3:22); seven seals (6:1–17; 8:1–5), seven trumpets (8:6–9:21; 11:15–19), and seven bowls (16:1–21); seven macarisms (blessings) and seven uses of the phrase “Lord God almighty” without the genitive; the elders and living creatures are put together seven times; seven spirits (1:4) and seven torches (1:12); seven horns and seven eyes of the Lamb (5:6); seven thunders (10:3–4) (Paul 2018: 35; Aune 1997: xciii–xciv). A. Collins (1996: 122–27) thinks John is influenced by Hellenistic writers like Aristobulus and draws on apocalyptic Judaism as well. Space is lacking to adjudicate this matter in detail, but it isn’t evident to me that John draws on astronomical and arithmetical traditions. Even if John wasn’t a Sabbatarian, which leads A. Collins to doubt that he draws on sabbatical OT traditions, it doesn’t follow that the author ignores the OT pattern of sevens since John reappropriates and reapplies the OT to his situation, and it is evident that the OT is a significant source for the Apocalypse.

The symbolism of Revelation is indisputable (see Spatafora 2008: 11–36), and we don’t need to weary ourselves with listing all the examples (cf. Barr 1984; Boring 1989: 51–59). Paul (2001) reminds us that symbolism and metaphor are at the heart of interpreting and understanding the book. The colorful and sometimes shocking symbolism stands out in the narrative. Vern Poythress (1993) says that in interpreting Revelation we need to take into account four levels: (1) the *linguistic level*, consisting of the words John wrote; (2) the *visionary level*, meaning the visions John received, whether of beasts, dragons, lambs, and so on; (3) the *referential level*, where the historical referent of the vision is unpacked so that the first beast may refer to Rome or the Lamb to Christ; and (4) the *symbolical level*, where the meaning of the referent is conveyed. For our purposes we can collapse the categories into two: the visions recorded and

68. Exactly the same words from E. Sanders are used here but with lowercased letters.

69. See particularly here the work of A. Collins (1996: 55–138) and the helpful short note from Boxall (2006: 90–92).

the referent/meaning of the visions. John sees Jesus as the Son of Man, with a two-edged sword in his mouth (1:13, 16), and the sword stands for the power and efficacy of his word. Nor are the enemies of the people of God literally beasts (chap. 13); the beasts represent the devastation and tyranny imposed by Rome and the imperial priesthood. Nor is Satan a literal dragon with seven heads and ten horns (12:3), but mythological language about dragons communicates that the devil is terrifyingly powerful. Along the same lines, there are seven spirits of God, which almost certainly refers to the Holy Spirit, and the number seven symbolizes the perfection and fullness of the Spirit (1:4). So too, the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel figuratively identifies the people of God since we have $12 \times 12 \times 1,000$. The wall of the coming Jerusalem is 144 cubits, which is again 12×12 , symbolizing the safety and security of the people of God (21:17). So too, the city as 12,000 stadia (ca. 1,400 miles) square is obviously figurative since that city is larger than the entire country of Israel (21:16).

Angels also play a prominent role in Revelation. We have already seen that an angel conveyed God's message to John (1:1; 22:8, 9). The seven angels are addressed in the letters (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; cf. 1:20). Angels (cf. 3:5; 12:7; 14:10; 21:12) worship the Lord (5:11; 7:11), declare God's word and commands (5:2; 7:2; 10:1, 5, 8, 9, 10; 14:6, 8, 9, 15; 16:5; 17:7; 19:17; 22:6, 8, 16), and convey the judgments coming to the earth (7:1, 2; 8:2, 5–8, 10, 12, 13; 9:1, 14; 10:7; 11:15; 14:17, 18, 19; 18:1, 21; 15:1, 6, 7, 8; 16:1; 17:1; 20:1; 21:9). At the same time, the devil and demons often crop up in the book as well (2:9, 10, 13, 24; 3:9; 9:20; 12:3, 4, 7, 9, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17; 13:2, 4; 18:2; 20:2, 7, 10). Finally, seals (6:1–17; 8:1–5), trumpets (8:6–9:21; 11:15–19), and bowls predict woes and judgments (16:1–21). Yet the judgments that will be unleashed on the earth aren't restricted to these passages.

Since Revelation is identified as a prophecy but is also apocalyptic, many scholars (Ladd 1957; Schüssler Fiorenza 1980; 1985: 138–40, 168–69; Beale 1999: 37–43; Bauckham 1993b: 5–6; Aune 1997: lxxv; Haraguchi 2005: 273; Rainbow 2008: 7–8) have rightly suggested that we don't need to decide between prophetic and apocalyptic. Indeed, it is increasingly recognized today that the lines between apocalyptic and prophecy are fuzzy (e.g., Fletcher 2017: 182–213). For instance, no ancient work characterizes itself as apocalyptic, but designating a work as a prophecy was common (see Linton 2006: 26–27).⁷⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza (1985: 133–56) emphasizes the prophetic nature of Revelation, confirming the insight that the book is both apocalyptic and prophetic. She sees the prophetic dimension of the Apocalypse since believers faced social injustice and were exploited and dehumanized by Rome. Mazzaferri (1989: 262–63, 275–76) goes even further and claims that Revelation is not apocalyptic at all but should be designated as a prophecy. Yet Mazzaferri defines apocalypse too narrowly (cf. Morton 2014: 21; Mathews 2013: 26–27), and even

70. Even though the first word of Revelation is "apocalypse," this should not be interpreted as if John were identifying the genre of the book.

though no one in the ancient world identified books as apocalyptic in genre, it seems clear that some books generally fit such a category.⁷¹ We have already noted that the book of Revelation defies any simplistic genre designation (cf. Mathewson 1992). Smalley (2005: 8) says we see “apocalyptic deepened by prophetic insight, and also as prophecy intensified by apocalyptic vision.” We have a mixture of genres in Revelation so that the book is epistolary, prophetic, and apocalyptic.⁷² Smalley (2005: 7) rightly observes that restricting the book to apocalyptic is too limiting since it lacks some features of apocalyptic and because the book is designated as a prophecy. Still, we should not collapse prophecy and apocalyptic together as if there is no distinction, as Grabbe (2003b) tends to do, although he (2003b: 117) rightly sees many common elements between the two.⁷³ Grabbe (2003a: 26; 2003b: 129) sees apocalyptic as a subset of prophecy, but J. Collins (2003: 50) rightly wonders how it is helpful to make apocalyptic a subdivision of prophecy, for Grabbe, in making this distinction, recognizes that apocalyptic “must be in some way distinct from other prophetic writings, and the question of its distinctiveness remains.” J. Collins (2015: 57) also puts it well in saying that apocalyptic and prophecy are “distinct though related phenomena.” He notes (2015: 58) that “direct inspired speech” is relatively rare in apocalypses in contrast to prophetic books and that heavenly visions are more common.⁷⁴ A revelation is usually mediated in apocalyptic literature (so also Rowland 2011: 167), and this is evident in the Apocalypse as an angelic interpreter plays a mediating role (1:1; see Reddish 2020: 31). Thus there are still solid grounds for seeing apocalyptic as distinctive, though we must avoid segregating it too sharply from prophecy and recognize that we have a mixed genre here.

Robert Thomas (1992: 23–29) says the book designates itself as prophecy and should not be described as apocalyptic, and thus he rules out apocalyptic altogether. He rightly reminds us that the book is a prophecy and self-identifiably so. The label “apocalyptic” represents the judgment of scholars today, and perhaps we are too quick to categorize a work as a specific genre. The genres we detect and perceive overlap so that hard-and-fast distinctions may prove to be distorting. On the other hand, the book of Revelation as a prophecy, most would agree, differs from typical prophetic books in the OT.

71. See the discussion above with the definition of the apocalyptic genre and some common characteristics.

72. Blevins (1980 and 1984) identifies the genre as Greek tragic drama, but such a description hasn’t convinced most scholars. Even Blevins’s own student (Reddish 2014: 10) voices doubts about the proposal. Ureña (2019: 24–25) lists several features that distinguish Revelation from a drama: (1) it has the presence of a narrator; (2) the seven churches are the recipients of the book; (3) the book doesn’t advance only through dialogue, and other elements of drama are missing; and (4) a drama is to be performed instead of being read.

73. Grabbe (2003b: 112–14) rightly dismisses the notion that we can distinguish prophecy from apocalyptic by saying that the latter is mythical and the former historical. He correctly points out that ancient Israelites would have thought the so-called mythical texts to be historical.

74. J. Collins’s (2015: 54–69) entire essay is helpful, showing that various attempts to unduly minimize the differences between prophecy and apocalypse are not successful.

The symbolism of the book stands out and is distinct. Calling it apocalyptic (and prophetic) isn't distorting when we recognize how predominant the symbols and images are in the book. Robert Thomas (1992: 29–39) emphasizes prophecy in defending a literal interpretation of the Apocalypse, arguing that such an approach can guard one from arbitrary readings. But in reading his commentary, one sees that he often resorts to symbolic readings as well, which is inevitable for all readers in Revelation. Nor is it defensible to say that the book must be read as literally as possible (against Robert Thomas 1992: 36), because such a rule preempts the interpretive task. The interpreter can't decide in advance to read a text as literally as possible. Instead, we must seek to discern the intention of the author. We all recognize that the enterprise is complicated and sometimes confusing and uncertain; in some texts “we see through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV). Still, we can't find refuge in preformatted rules. Instead, we must join the fray as we try to discover what John means. The symbolic and visionary character of the Apocalypse, among other things, demonstrates that the book is also apocalyptic.

Why did John use this genre? It has often been pointed out that apocalyptic appeals to the imagination with its symbolic pictures and sometimes lurid images.⁷⁵ The arresting images and depictions capture the minds and hearts of readers, as they confront the world with new lenses. As deSilva (2009: 96) says, John provides “a symbolic religious communication that engages directly in the construction and maintenance of one worldview over against competing worldviews.” John introduces the readers to another dimension, an aspect of reality that is not accessible to those in the space-time universe. Schüssler Fiorenza (1991: 26) compares it to science-fiction writing that uses contemporary language to envision a future world. She (1991: 31) also rightly says that the book “elicits emotions, feelings, and convictions that cannot, and should not, be fully conceptualized.” At the same time, deSilva (2009: 102–3) rightly says that Revelation doesn't only grant a vision of an alternative world but also casts light on the world as it is, disclosing the true nature of the world in which we live. Thus readers see the Roman Empire for what it truly is (a beast), and they also see Rome for what it truly is (a whore). John uncovers a mystery for his readers: behind the empire is Satan himself (deSilva 2009: 104). A message and content are surely communicated in Revelation, but the message transcends propositional thought while certainly including the latter. The evocative power of the symbols has an impact on us that can't be expressed in words. Those who see the book as the word of God receive Revelation as a word that speaks to our minds and our feelings, our thoughts and our emotions. Barr (2006a) adds an important dimension in saying that the experience of reading Revelation was meant to be transformative. The book doesn't just capture our hearts but also is intended to transform our lives.

75. On the symbolism of apocalyptic, see de Villiers 1988. Among other things, de Villiers shows that early scholars often denigrated Revelation for its symbolism, as if the use of symbols were evidence of an inferior form of communication. Some fell into the error of thinking that writing propositionally is the preferred mode of communication.

Schüssler Fiorenza (1991: 32) captures well the aural experience of the book. “One has to approach the book in the same manner in which one would approach a work of art. If one seeks to appreciate a symphony, for example, one must listen to the whole work in order to grasp the full impact of its total composition—its tonal colors, musical forms, motifs, and relationships. Only after one has listened to the work as a whole can one go on and analyze the elements and details of its composition and study the techniques employed by its composer.”

We could say that Revelation is John’s apocalyptic metanarrative: he declares to the addressees what is truly happening in heaven and on earth. As Bauckham (1993b: 7) says, John seeks to “expand his readers’ world, both spatially (into heaven) and temporally (into the eschatological future), or, to put it another way, to open their world to divine transcendence.” John is revealing the true nature of things. To the human eye, Rome with its empire is a superpower, and John doesn’t dispute the harsh reality of life on earth, but he also reveals the overarching reality. We aren’t confined to what is empirically obvious about Rome and its rule over the world. John unveils a divine perspective, thus telling us that, from God’s vantage point, the empire is a ravaging and idolatrous animal, and its power comes from Satan (Rev. 12–13). So too, the city of Rome is rich, dazzling, and exciting, but when we see reality from the standpoint of heaven, when we see the apocalyptic reality, it is evident that Rome is actually a whore, and all who get into bed with her are destined for judgment. The apocalyptic genre, then, opens readers’ minds to the true reality of what is going on, to a heavenly and transcendent perspective.

I have suggested that Revelation was written near the end of the first century, when Domitian was in power (AD 81–96) and the churches in the province of Asia were facing persecution from the Roman Empire and the society in which they lived. The book is a combination of genres: it has epistolary features but is also prophetic-apocalyptic. The apocalyptic genre is especially important in interpreting the book because we must see the symbolism shaping the work. Otherwise we are apt to misread what the author teaches us. The apocalyptic nature of the book teaches us that what is happening in history is awesomely important, that a cosmic conflict between God and Satan is underway. Believers must side with God and refrain from throwing their lot in with evil and compromising with it (A. Collins 1984a: 73–76; C. Koester 2014: 107), for a reward that exceeds our wildest dreams awaits those who are faithful. John encourages those who are fearful to persevere and endure, promising them final triumph and vindication.

The Use of the Old Testament in Revelation

Historical scholarship emphasizes that Revelation should be interpreted in its historical context. The importance of the OT for interpreting the book has long been recognized, but its significance has been unpacked by a number of scholars. Recent research was kicked off by Beale (1984) and Moyise

(1995).⁷⁶ Beale argues that the book of Daniel, and particularly Dan. 2, played the formative role in the composition of Revelation. Moyise (1995: 59–63; cf. Bøe 2001: 9, 259) rightly disputes this claim, for Beale overemphasizes the role of Daniel as the vital source for the interpretation in the book (cf. Ruiz 1989: 119–22; A. Collins 2017: 18). Daniel was certainly an important source for John, and thus Beale’s work is of immense value. But other books of the OT also played a significant role, and it is difficult to assign Daniel a primary role.⁷⁷ Fekkes (1994: 102–3) rightly observes,

We may rightly question, therefore, those theories of composition which suggest that John’s visions were inspired by reading specific books or passages of the OT. . . . This view does not account for the fact that often within a single visionary unit John brings together elements from a variety of books or isolated texts within a single OT book. Special books do not appear to play as important a role as special themes. Thus it misses the point to ask whether the book of Daniel, Ezekiel, or Isaiah is more important to John. For it is not the book or author which dictates his choice of passages, but the topic.

This observation also fits with John’s tendency to merge several OT texts into a particular text, suggesting again that topics rather than any specific book or author are fundamental.

Other scholars continued the work inaugurated by Beale and Moyise.⁷⁸ Paulien (1988: 100–118, 165–94; cf. Paulien 2001) sought to establish criteria for allusions, while Ruiz (1989) studied John’s use of Ezekiel in Rev. 16:17–19:10.⁷⁹ Jauhainen (2005b: 21–24) rightly remarks that Paulien’s criteria for allusions aren’t as clear as he alleges. Fekkes (1994) investigates the use of Isaiah in Revelation, while Jack (1999) proposes a postmodern approach. Mathewson (2003b) examines the use of the OT in Rev. 21:1–22:5. He sees “continuity” and “discontinuity” with the OT as John “adapts” OT “traditions for a new situation” (Mathewson 2003b: 223). Kowalski (2004) examines the use of Ezekiel in Revelation, while Jauhainen (2005b) concentrates on the use of Zechariah. More recently, Fletcher (2017) understands Revelation as pastiche, as using the OT in a multilevel way.

It is not my purpose to engage in detail the debate about Revelation’s use of the OT in this commentary since the subject is complex, deserving its own

76. For a recent survey, see A. Collins 2017; Moyise 2020 (cf. also A. Robinson 2019: 9–14). Ruiz (1989) surveys and appraises scholarship on the use of the OT in Revelation up to the writing of his dissertation. Moyise (2012) surveys three different approaches to intertextuality, focusing on (1) John’s meaning as he deploys OT texts, (2) the meaning of the OT texts themselves, or (3) the meaning the reader assigns to the intertexts.

77. Fekkes (1994: 74) rightly says that John’s “use of the OT may sometimes be determined less by special books than by particular themes or traditions in which he has an interest.”

78. See the survey in Fletcher (2017: 7–28) and the older survey and commentary in Beale (1998: 13–59).

79. A. Collins (2017: 19) rightly critiques Ruiz for saying that “the liturgy was the setting for the reading and interpreting of Revelation.” She suggests that “the gathered community . . . provides the occasion and setting for the interpretation of Revelation, rather than a ‘liturgy.’”

monograph.⁸⁰ The goal will be more modest: to note and comment on the use of the OT in relevant verses. The text or texts from which John pulls his allusions are difficult to identify since the textual history of the Greek OT and the Hebrew text is complicated. The source texts on which John depends and the text form he uses are extremely complicated issues. It is possible that, in some instances, John relied on his memory.⁸¹ For instance, G. Allen (2017a: 101) remarks that John could have appropriated Zechariah through actual manuscripts, his memory, hearing the text read, and other exegetical traditions. Jauhainen (2005b: 9–10) suggests the following sources: the Hebrew text (MT); an alternative Hebrew text; the LXX as reflected in Rahlfs or the Göttingen LXX; another Greek text; paraphrases of the OT in Aramaic; Christian collections or translations of the OT; and citations of the OT from memory.⁸² G. Allen (2017a: 28–30) argues that Jauhainen’s list is flawed since he gives the impression that the texts John cited actually existed, but they are in fact scholarly reconstructions. Furthermore, the last three items in Jauhainen’s list aren’t even texts, and thus he confuses matters. G. Allen (2017a: 93) points to twelve possible text forms:

1. A translation of proto-MT; 2. a translation of the *Vorlage* of OG/LXX; 3. a translation of another Hebrew text; 4. Old Greek; 5. the *καίτε* [*kaige*] recension (8HevXIIgr); 6. a (proto-) Hexaplaric recension; 7. a translation of a Hebrew text (options 1–3) with adaptations; 8. an adaptation of a Greek version (options 4–6); 9. a free paraphrase of a Hebrew text; 10. a free paraphrase of OG/LXX; 11. a Greek text influenced by memory of a Hebrew text;⁸³ 12. a quotation from memory.

From this list we see how complicated and difficult the matter is (cf. Moyise 2020: 86). The issue becomes even more complicated in Revelation since John doesn’t formally quote the OT but alludes to it. Thus, as noted above, he could have appropriated the text by memory, from a Greek OT, or from a Hebrew

80. Beale and McDonough (2007: 1082) report that the number of OT references is disputed since “different criteria” are “employed to determine the validity of an OT reference”; scholars have seen as few as 226 and as many as 1,000.

81. For an introduction to the issues, see Labahn 2012.

82. Swete (1922: cl–clvi) argues that John drew from the LXX, while R. Charles (1920a: lxvi–lxxxvi) sees the primary source as the Hebrew Text. Moyise (1993) points out that the matter is remarkably difficult, with evidence for use of both Greek and Hebrew sources. John’s allusive use of the OT makes it difficult to establish specific sources from which he drew his material. G. Allen (2017a: 25–27) argues that we can’t simply say that John draws from the LXX or the MT since the textual tradition is so complicated. I am more sanguine than G. Allen (2015b) appears to be about our ability to determine the particular source or sources from which John drew, though we must often admit uncertainty about exact sources. I refer to the LXX and to the MT in this commentary, and I think it is reasonable to refer to these sources since there is stability in the tradition between the Old Greek (the original LXX), the extant LXX, the proto-MT, and the extant MT. Still, G. Allen rightly reminds us of the diversity in textual sources and cautions us against overconfidence.

83. In a fascinating discussion, G. Allen (2017a: 106–11) also interacts with Michael Labahn’s particular conception of how John appropriated the OT.

version.⁸⁴ He may have used more than one text form even in citing a particular book. It is evident that certainty about the textual forms John drew on is remarkably complex, though all agree that he mined the OT deeply. In some instances, we can discern with more clarity whether John drew from the LXX or Hebrew text tradition (Moyise 2020: 86–87).

In Revelation, we don't have any OT text with an introductory formula, and thus we are left with allusions and echoes. G. Allen (2017a) offers brief definitions of crucial terms: (1) a quotation is present with "explicit reuse of identifiable antecedent" material (2017a: 8); (2) allusions are "less direct than quotation[s]" but "must retain a high level of linguistic correspondence to an identifiable source" (2017a: 10); (3) an implicit allusion has a "minimal level of linguistic correspondence to its source," but there needs to be some connection to the source text (2017a: 10). I think it is fitting to say that implicit allusions are echoes. It isn't the purpose here to try to establish airtight definitions of these terms. Scholars offer different definitions; discussion over exact definitions can become unending. The purpose in offering such definitions is to give a general perspective on the use of the OT in Revelation, which should suffice for this commentary. Hays says that echoes are "subtler," and allusions more obvious, and proposes seven tests for finding echoes (Hays 1989: 29–32), but he admits that distinguishing between echoes and allusions is often difficult. Porter (2019: 20–21) proposes the following categories: formulaic quotations, direct quotations, paraphrases, allusions, and echoes. Yet sharp distinctions between echoes and allusions point to more certainty than is warranted; as Hays (2016: 10) explains, categories are blurred. Jauhiainen (2005b: 33) says "the quest for objective, scientific criteria for determining OT allusions in Revelation is at least partially misguided and should be laid to rest." But he declares that he isn't advocating irresponsible readings, and he agrees with Hays that finally, as readers, we decide if a particular reading is "satisfying."

Jauhiainen (2005b: 21) points out that Beale interprets Revelation's use of the OT persuasively and well, even though Beale's criteria for determining what is an allusion are in Jauhiainen's eyes deficient. In his commentary, Beale (1999) explains how OT texts cited in Revelation accord with the OT context, and he defends this further in explaining how texts in the OT were used in the book of Daniel (1998: 60–128). The matter of whether Revelation interprets the OT in accord with its historical context is debated vigorously, but virtually all scholars recognize that the use of the OT in Revelation is multivalent and that different OT sources are merged and recontextualized by John. In any case, the use of the OT "lend[s] authority to" the "visions" (deSilva 2009: 148). "John gives the texts new shape, referents and direction" (deSilva 2009: 149). For John to identify the OT source would detract from the impact of the vision, as if readers had to pause to look at footnotes, and John's purpose is to immerse those hearing in his "narrative world" (deSilva

84. G. Allen (2017a: 98) says that when John remembers OT texts, it is "the memory of a particular textual form."

2009: 149). Still, John's use of the OT doesn't distort or do violence to OT contexts but applies and appropriates them in a new context, to the fulfillment of God's promises in Christ (cf. Beale and McDonough 2007: 1084–85). Royalty (2004), coming with a different perspective, argues that John, in a power move, wants to *replace* the OT with his own book and to exclude the OT from consideration. This claim is unconvincing; deSilva (2009: 153–55; cf. also Mathews 2013: 8–9) shows that John emphasizes the *fulfillment* (10:7), not the abrogation, of the OT. John's constant appeal to and conversation with the OT isn't negating it but is richly appropriating it. DeSilva (2009: 155–58) also counters Royalty's complaint that the many allusions and echoes leave readers in a trackless forest. DeSilva counters that there is no need to identify all the allusions to grasp John's message, that different readers would respond at various levels, and that the impact of the book comes from the impression it stamps on those who hear and read it. Revelation doesn't displace the OT but recontextualizes and applies and appropriates the last days, which have arrived in Christ Jesus.

As noted above, the use of terms such as “allusion” and “echo” in this commentary isn't technical, and the diversity of terminology recognizes that the categories are blurred and on a spectrum. An allusion or an echo calls to mind another text, and I am suggesting that John as the author of the text of Revelation (and we discern intentions by reading his text, not by trying to read his mind) either had such texts in mind or that they at least were part of his mental furniture from his knowledge of the OT. I recognize that even this definition is subjective; yet there isn't space here to adjudicate all the issues satisfactorily. There is no method for detecting allusions that is free from subjectivity since reading literature isn't like working in the hard sciences (see esp. Jauhiainen 2005b: 32–35).

Challenges Today

Some contemporary readers question the value of the book of Revelation, primarily because they think it promotes a negative view of women or advocates violence. It is not my purpose to delve into these matters deeply since they are matters of appropriation more than explanation.⁸⁵ Further, the issues are complex and deserve a much longer treatment than is possible here. My brief comments will at least orient readers to my perspective on these important questions; in the commentary some of these issues will be addressed

85. For an interesting book that, from a number of angles, considers the reception history of the book of Revelation, see Lyons and Øklund 2009, including the use of and interaction with Revelation in the work of Robert Louis Stevenson, Johnny Cash, Umberto Eco, and the Branch Davidians and the use of the book in contemporary films. See also the collection of essays edited by Rhoads (2005), which includes a variety of perspectives on the book: African American, Cuban American, Central American, Brazilian, and Chinese, along with a First World reading, a Womanist reading, and a feminist reading. Hongisto (2010) reads the text in terms of the experience of the readers, but this commentary seeks to discover the meaning of the text intended by the author, which I think is still possible (see Vanhoozer 1998).

occasionally as well. The questions raised are significant because if the criticisms of Revelation raised by some are legitimate, the message of the book should not be received and obeyed as a divine revelation but denounced and rejected as unjust. In particular, issues about empire, violence, and the stance toward women have been raised, and postcolonial interpretation has played an important role in interpreting the book (cf. Maier 2020).

Some feminists claim that the way women are depicted in the book—as a whore (see Jezebel and Babylon) and a bride—buy into the negative conceptions of women promoted by androcentric society (e.g., Pippin 1992a; 1992b; Selvidge 1992; Keller 1996; Marshall 2001; A. Collins 2009).⁸⁶ Even the woman in the wilderness (Rev. 12) and the bride (19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17), who align themselves with God and the Lamb, are portrayed as passive, fostering negative stereotypes of women. Stenström (2011) says that the author features masculine virtues, and the book's message is that only those who live in a masculine way triumph. S. Smith (2014) reads the text as an African American, and she argues that John doesn't completely escape from the oppressive worldview in which he lived.⁸⁷ Others claim that the author resists imperialism (Schüssler Fiorenza 1991: 12–15; Rossing 1999: 87–90), though Schüssler Fiorenza (2001: 17–19) advocates a critical reading of the book in which the violent and misogynistic elements are recognized and rejected.⁸⁸ L. Huber (2019) sees the negative images of women in the book and its valorizing of masculinity, though she also thinks it subverts the typical understanding of what it means to be a man.

The fundamental flaw with those who think John depicts women in a negative way is their hermeneutic. Schüssler Fiorenza (2006: 256–59; cf. also deSilva 2009: 324–31) also thinks there are negative gender stereotypes but at the same time rightly critiques feminists who condemn John. John's detractors fail to recognize that the language of the book is symbolic. Of course, feminist critics recognize symbolism in Revelation, but they still read the narrative as if it represents or reveals John's conception of women. They see the text as a palimpsest for gender understandings. Such readings steer us in the wrong direction because John wasn't thinking of the symbol (women) but the referent of the symbol (cf. also Humphrey 2003: 93–94). It is a bit like saying that John doesn't like animals and lions, bears and leopards, since he depicts the enemy of God's people as a beast (13:1–2). I suppose those who find fault with John's portrayal of women will not be satisfied since one might say that using bears and lions as bad examples signals a negative view of animals, and the same is true of women. John doesn't identify women as evil; examples of evil include Balaam (2:14), the false apostles (2:2), and the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15). It is also instructive that women are not described merely as harlots and

86. Stenström (2009) says that even though the images used for women are symbolic, they still betray John's standpoint vis-à-vis women, showing his androcentric bias.

87. For a survey of some African American approaches to Revelation, see Slater 2020. See also Blount 2005.

88. For a survey of some feminist approaches to Revelation, see Jack (2001); Carey (2001: 164–70), and especially Hylan (2020).

false teachers. In chapter 12 the woman stands for the people of God, and the bride is described in admiring terms in 19:7; 21:2, 9; and 22:17, representing those who are faithful to the Lord. Such images don't satisfy critics because they think that even the positive images represent an oppressive view. Still, the woman in chapter 12 isn't merely passive but represents endurance and strength while suffering (Boxall 2006: 251). Also, the bride's righteousness is featured (19:8). The goodness of the bride isn't finally autonomous, but at the same time she actually does what is righteous and good and is commended for doing so. Finally, an argument like this can't be resolved, as all of us who have been in such discussions recognize. Still, at the symbolic level the woman in chapter 12 and the bride represent *men* and women. The perspective of the reader plays a role in how the text is read. It would be anachronistic to say that John subscribes to the view of women promoted in Western culture in the last fifty years, but he should not be indicted as a person who dishonors women or who tolerates their abuse. And we still await the verdict of history as to whether the social experiments of the last sixty to seventy years will lead to greater liberation and justice for women. In any case, some feminist readers mistakenly read John's symbols as if they express and reveal a negative view of women.

Scholars have also discussed the book of Revelation in terms of its message of justice and violence.⁸⁹ Some see in the book a message of liberation (Boesak 1987; Howard-Brook and Gwyther 1999; Richard 1995; A. Collins 2009; cf. Battle 2017), in which an evil empire is destroyed and the poor and disenfranchised are emancipated.⁹⁰ Howard-Brook and Gwyther (cf. also Maier 2002) emphasize that the Pax Romana was a false peace imposed by empire, and Christians are to oppose the empire in all of its dimensions with a non-violent witness. S. Moore (2006: 97–121) adopts a postcolonial standpoint in interpreting Revelation, noting how the book is anti-imperial. In the end he finds Revelation to be flawed since, in his judgment, it counters empire with empire. It has become parasitic on the very thing it criticizes and thus doesn't escape from being imperious itself.

The death of the Lamb plays a vital role in nonviolent readings of the Apocalypse. If we focus on the death of the Lamb, it is evident that the Lamb's sacrifice and suffering bring life to the world so that his suffering love triumphs over evil (Barr 2006b; Blount 2009: 1–5; Bauckham 1993a: 238–337; Grimsrud 2022).⁹¹ Boring (1989: 112–19) interprets all the violent texts through the suffering and slaughtering of the Lamb so that violence is hermeneutically excluded. The way to righteousness, the Lamb shows us, is not violence but suffering (cf. P. McDonald 1996). Some scholars (e.g., Bredin 2003; Barr 2006b) have

89. For an early reception history of violent texts in Revelation, see Verheyden, Nicklas, Merkt, and Grundeken 2011. See also the survey of research up to 2007 in Skaggs and Doyle 2007 and the larger work by de Villiers and van Henten (2012).

90. See also Sánchez (2008), who appropriates Rev. 12 from a postcolonial perspective.

91. W. Campbell (2015) surveys those who consider the role of violence in Revelation, positing his own solution by examining the plot of the book as a whole.

said that Revelation actually promotes nonviolent resistance and subversion, and there is truth in this picture since the Lamb suffers instead of inflicting vengeance on his enemies. At the same time, the texts on judgment are too neatly planed away by this approach (see Streett 2012).⁹² T. Martin (2018), reading from a postcolonial perspective,⁹³ argues that a nonviolent reading can be defended by separating God's perspective from the voice of the narrator. Perhaps this approach will seem convincing to some, but it seems like a desperate expedient since it jettisons the message of much of the book and appeals to an outside stance to rescue its message. Darden (2015), adopting a postcolonial perspective as an African American woman, claims that the author of Revelation mimics the very violence he allegedly rejects. In Revelation, in other words, God ends up using the same kind of violence that Rome exercised.

Other scholars find the book of Revelation to be disturbing and troubling in its ethic (see S. Moore 2014). They claim that the book promotes violence (Moyise 2001; Pippin 1992a; 1992b), unrestrained judgment, and misogyny (Royalty 1998: 37, 246). Carey (1999, 2006) says that John falls prey to the same authoritarianism that he condemns in the empire, and thus John turns out to be the mirror image of the beast and the dragon since at the end God destroys his enemies in the lake of fire. Similarly, Moore (2009) complains that the God of Revelation is hypermasculine (cf. Lester 2018: 53), lusting for power and authority just like Roman emperors.⁹⁴

The problem isn't restricted to the portrait of God that emerges. The author himself, some say, is a dictatorial and uncompromising authoritarian. We see this in John's conflict with other Christian groups. John doesn't tolerate or try to understand other believers like Jezebel or the Nicolaitans. Instead, in his conflict with other Christian prophets, he tries to seize power and to exclude them (cf. Royalty 1998: 28; Duff 2001: 49).⁹⁵ Duff (2001: 61) praises Jezebel as one who wished to reform society, in contrast to John, who wants believers to withdraw entirely from the world. Similarly, Royalty (2004: 287) complains that John slanders Jezebel.⁹⁶

I begin with those who think John is authoritarian and denigrates other believers to further his own ends. DeSilva (2009: 67–69, 142–45, 316–18; see also deSilva 2021: 86–87) shows that such claims are tendentious and selective.

92. Hulen (2011) argues that both the violent metaphors and those that bespeak suffering must be integrated in interpreting Revelation, but in her article she doesn't resolve, in any complete way, how the two different kinds of metaphors relate.

93. See also Ruiz's (2003) postcolonial reading of Rev. 13.

94. Low (2014) argues that Moore's reading fails to see the hidden transcripts in Revelation, but Low doesn't account for the theme of judgment in Revelation and has the lamb image swallowing up the lion image. Thus, his criticisms don't truly solve the problem.

95. In my judgment Mathews (2013: 150) misconceives the situation in seeing the internal conflict with Jezebel, Balaam, and the Nicolaitans as the primary problem in the churches. Certainly, compromise was one of the concerns, but conflict with a hostile world was also a concern.

96. Carter (2009) says we can't privilege the perspective of Jezebel or John, and we recognize that the issues are probably more complicated than either side acknowledged.

Those who stress the internal conflict in the churches, where John allegedly maximizes his authority, minimize what John says about the empire; the battle with the empire isn't internal but *external*. Nor is it correct to say that John is sectarian and excludes all others from Christian circles. He identifies other believers as prophets (cf. 10:7; 11:10, 18; 16:6; 18:20, 24; 22:6, 9), showing that he does not claim to be the only one who speaks with truth and authority. Furthermore, there is no evidence, contrary to Duff, that Jezebel, over against John, wanted to reform society (rightly, deSilva 2009: 77–78). John wants the churches to be lampstands, witnessing to society with love and truth. DeSilva (2009: 319–23) remarks that John should not be straitjacketed as if he is tyrannical and imperious and domineering. A. Stewart (2013: 556) says, “John seems more concerned with the spiritual faithfulness and health of the congregations in line with the expectations of discipleship drawn from his early Jewish-Christian world view than with gaining and maintaining personal authority. This fits the data—authority in the Apocalypse centers on God and Christ, and only derivatively in John as a human messenger.” At the same time, John is intolerant of an oppressive empire that hurts and harms human beings. One's view of tolerance and truth plays into how one receives John's words.⁹⁷ It should also be said that the modern view of tolerance (which is actually not completely tolerant) bumps up against the OT tradition that summons human beings to exclusive loyalty to Yahweh (deSilva 2009: 322).

The notion that Revelation justifies violence depends again on one's perspective. The truth that the Lamb suffers for his enemies and offers life to all stands as a central theme of the book. The Lamb didn't come to inflict violence on others but to suffer and die to bring salvation to all who would take the water of life freely (22:17). Still, the suffering of the Lamb, against some interpreters, doesn't rule out the many texts that also speak of final judgment. The lion is a lamb, but the lion isn't transmuted into a lamb; he is both a lion and a lamb (against Barr 1997: 361; rightly, Bay 2015). He will judge the world as a lion (19:11–21), and he conquers as a lion and a lamb. As Augustine (Weinrich 2005: 73) remarks, “Who is this, both lamb and lion? Gentle and strong, lovable and terrifying, innocent and mighty, silent when he was being judged, roaring when he comes to judge.” John sees the judgment inflicted on the enemies as just and right (16:5–7), not as the evil machinations of a cosmic torturer. The voice of the martyrs cries out for justice and recompense (6:9–11), and the Lamb and God ultimately judge and destroy their enemies (6:17; 19:11–21; cf. Middleton 2018, esp. pp. 132–87). Their opponents who refuse to repent (9:20–21; 16:9, 11) end up in the lake of fire (19:20). John's perspective, a vantage point shared by the OT, is that God has the right to judge and punish the guilty. “John sees violence as perfectly legitimate as long as it is initiated by the appropriate authority, namely God” (Streett 2012: 3). Boesak (1987: 38) remarks, “Those who do not know this suffering through oppression, who do not struggle together with God's people for the sake of

97. On tolerance and intolerance, see Carson 2012.

the gospel, and who do not feel in their own bodies the meaning of oppression and the freedom and joy of fighting against it shall have grave difficulty understanding this letter from Patmos.”

For some interpreters such a final judgment, even if symbolic, can never be justified. They believe that final judgment makes God into something like Satan. I would say in reply that their reading sees final and eternal judgment as unjust, but most Christian readers throughout history, whether Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant, believe that the final judgment doesn't contradict God's justice but expresses it. Such questions indicate that no reader occupies a neutral Archimedean or Greenwich-time standpoint. For Christians in the broad orthodox tradition, what C. S. Lewis called “mere Christianity,” there are grounds for defending a canonical lens in reading the book of Revelation. If Revelation is truly a revelation, if it represents God's metanarrative on reality, then it judges all other perspectives and viewpoints. Those who reject such a perspective come to the text with their own preconceptions and worldview. According to John, the punishments inflicted in the book represent God's judgment on evil, and the joy the saints feel in judgment is like the celebration felt when the Nazis fell or when a serial killer and rapist is caught and brought to justice. No position can finally be proven, but it is possible that those who charge John with promoting injustice are actually, even if inadvertently, promoting what is unjust. When all the facts are known, their toleration of what John identifies as evil could be seen as sentimentality. We think of how Winston Churchill saw the nature of Nazi Germany and its horrors clearly, while Neville Chamberlain didn't truly grasp the nature of the German ruler.

The Text of Revelation

The number of textual witnesses for Revelation is much less than for other books in the NT.⁹⁸ G. Allen (2020) considers paratextual features of manuscripts and reflects on the significance of such for understanding the Apocalypse. The book was contested by some, and perhaps the difficulty of interpreting the Apocalypse led to it being used less in church contexts, and this seems to be confirmed since we don't find it in ancient lectionaries.⁹⁹ The distrust of Revelation in some circles is attested by the Greek Orthodox tradition, which didn't include the book in its canon for much of its history (see below). Aune (1997: cxxxvi) lists five main types of evidence used for the text of Revelation as (1) papyri—now seven; (2) uncials—now twelve; (3) minuscules—currently 291 (Hernández 2020: 343); (4) patristic quotations; and (5) translations. Recent research has identified 310 Greek manuscripts containing Revelation (Hernández 2020: 343; G. Allen 2020: 12). Gallagher and Meade (2017: 51)

98. For helpful surveys on the text in the book of Revelation, see Parker (2008: 227–45), Nicklas (2012b), Karrer (2017: 71–81), and especially the work of Hernández (2020).

99. For a fascinating discussion of paratextual features in Revelation, see G. Allen (2017a; 2020). Allen's concern about the reception history of Revelation is well placed, but it doesn't follow that the desire to discover the original text is misplaced, as he alleges (G. Allen 2020: 35–38).

and also J. Elliott (2015: 576) counted 307.¹⁰⁰ The oldest papyrus fragment of Revelation is \mathfrak{P}^{98} , which can be dated to the second century (J. Elliott 2015: 581), though it has also been assigned to the third century (Malik 2016: 205). The oldest complete text of Revelation is in Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century; J. Elliott 2015: 581). One fascinating anecdote from textual history pertains to Erasmus's Greek text produced in 1516. Erasmus didn't have access to 22:16–21 since he had only one Greek manuscript, and thus he supplied the Greek via a translation of the Latin Vulgate; in doing so, he introduced readings that aren't in any other manuscripts. Furthermore, the text he had (2814) was mixed with a commentary, and thus Erasmus introduced other variant readings as well (Parker 2008: 228).

The majority of witnesses to the text of Revelation are the 291 minuscules, most of which are accompanied by a commentary (cf. J. Elliott 2015: 581; Gallagher and Meade 2017: 129–30).¹⁰¹ Parker (2008: 233–34) notes that half the manuscripts for the book were copied between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries—no accident since it was a time of Ottoman rule, which “was a traumatic period for the Greek world.” Scholars often remark on how difficult it is to establish the text in Revelation given the state of the textual evidence. Still, J. Schmid (2018: 263), recognizing the many variations and the difficulty of resolving the original text in a few places, says, “On the whole, it is correct to say that by using the textual tradition fully we have greater certainty, even in those places where agreement already existed about the text's reconstruction, and the initially quoted judgment that the Apocalypse's text was ‘extremely uncertain’ or ‘very poorly transmitted’ can no longer be justified.” Hernández (2015b: 28) says that “little remains to be done” regarding the “basic text” of Revelation, though Karrer (2009) calls for a revision of critical editions. The forty instances where Aune departs from NA²⁷ are merely “touch-ups,” according to Hernández (2015b: 28).

Despite consensus on the basic text of the book, the complexities of the textual tradition, particularly with respect to the Majority Text (U. Schmid 2016: 237–38), increase the difficulty of making decisions on the text.¹⁰² The Majority Text (\mathfrak{M}) in Revelation is typically split into two groups: the Andreas Text¹⁰³ (\mathfrak{M}^A) and the Koine Text (\mathfrak{M}^K ; cf. Sommer 2016: 176; Hernández 2006: 4; G. Allen 2020: 13); whatever one makes of the Western Text or Caesarean Text, they don't play a role in Revelation (cf. Lembke 2016: 202). Parker (2008:

100. Parker (2008: 232) in 2008 lists the number as 306.

101. The groundbreaking 1955 work of J. Schmid has now been translated (J. Schmid 2018), so that this foundational work is now more widely available. G. Allen (2020: 14) thinks “the textual tradition and relationships between witnesses is much more complicated than Josef Schmid, its most prominent and once-infallible textual critic, was able to identify.” G. Allen's own work focuses on the tenth century and onward (2020: 18). For earlier reviews of Schmid's work, see Kilpatrick 1959; Birdsall 1961.

102. Parker (2008: 232) lists all the publications of J. Schmid on the textual criticism of Revelation, showing that the latter's work was Herculean.

103. The reference is to Andrew of Caesarea.

235), following J. Schmid (2018), says designations like Alexandrian and Western must be “abandoned” in Revelation. Thus in the Apocalypse we do not have a division between the Alexandrian Text and Byzantine Text types; as we noted above, the Majority Text itself is divided and complex. Therefore, making textual decisions is not easy, especially for those who are not technical experts in the field.

Hernández (2006: 4) says that textual critics have usually seen four main text types for Revelation (J. Elliott 1997: 120). But recent work calls into question whether such text types really fit the evidence (Hernández 2020: 356–57). In any case, the four text types are typically represented by the following witnesses: (a) A C Oecumenius 2057. 2062. 2344; (b) **ℵ*** Andreas;¹⁰⁴ (c) the Koine; and (d) **℘**⁴⁷ **ℵ**. According to C. Koester (2014: 150), **℘**^{18, 24, 98, and 115} may reflect the same text type as A and C, but Malik (2016), after his transcription of the papyrus and analysis, says that **℘**⁹⁸ doesn’t fit neatly within such categories.

Many scholars claim that A and C represent the best text, and the second-best text is found in **ℵ**, **℘**⁴⁷; in the minuscules 1006, 1611, 1854, 2030, 2050, 2329, 2351, 2377; and in Origen’s text. Nicklas (2012b: 228) remarks that even though **ℵ** and **℘**⁴⁷ “are clearly older than A and C, they show a greater distance from the original text than A C.” Scholars generally agree that Alexandrinus (A) (cf. Hernández 2008: 343) and Codex Ephraemi (C) are superior in quality to Sinaiticus (**ℵ**), which reverses what we typically find in the remainder of the NT, and this was recognized already by Tregelles in 1844 (Parker 2008: 228). Indeed, it is recognized that Sinaiticus is plagued by errors in the Apocalypse, though some of the readings are fascinating (see Hernández 2015a).¹⁰⁵ The text of **ℵ** is marked by mistakes and omissions; it apparently was not copied carefully (see C. Koester 2014: 148). Codex Vaticanus (B), which is so valuable for textual criticism and plays such an important role in the rest of the NT, does not have the book of Revelation. Codex Alexandrinus (A), on the other hand, was the work of one scribe, who carefully copied from his exemplar(s).¹⁰⁶ The Koine text is reflected in Codex 046 and numerous minuscules. It is evident that there isn’t complete consensus on textual issues pertaining to the Apocalypse, and we await clarifying work in the future. Fortunately, many variants don’t change the text’s meaning or are too late to be considered (Hernández 2006: 4), and thus they do not need to be

104. It was accepted in scholarship, on the basis of Josef Schmid’s work, that the Andreas Text Type originated in the fourth century. Hernández (2014) argues, however, that such a conclusion is flawed and that the Andreas Text Type actually belongs to the seventh century. Malik (2015) raises further questions about the Andreas Text, wondering if “Schmid’s notion of the *recensional* nature of the Andreas text may be called into question” (2015: 614). For further observations and arguments on this matter, see G. Allen (2020: 98, 107–10). More diversity seems to be in the textual tradition than Schmid recognized.

105. Hernández (2015a: 108) points out that the text is quite a bit shorter, having “a net loss of 207 words.”

106. Nicklas (2012b: 228) follows most in saying that A is the most important text in the first group but goes on to say that “A must be considered the only representative of this text type.”

adjudicated in this commentary.¹⁰⁷ It is not the purpose of the commentary to sift through the complexities of the textual tradition, especially since the basic text of the book isn't in dispute, despite the difficulty of unraveling the state of the text. Thus I will limit my discussion in the Additional Notes to textual readings that are important for the interpretation of the book or readings that I find interesting.

Canonicity

Even though Revelation is one of the best-attested books in terms of apostolic authorship, its canonical status has been disputed.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, Beckwith (1967: 337) states, “No other writing of the New Testament can claim in comparison with the Apocalypse more abundant and more trustworthy evidence that it was widely known at an early date. It is also shown beyond question to have been recognized from an early time in a part of the Church, and by certain fathers in all parts of the Church, as belonging in the category of authoritative Scriptures.” Kruger (2016: 161–67) notes the early reception of the book by Papias; the early consensus on apostolic authorship by Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Theophilus of Antioch, and in the Muratorian Fragment (though the date is disputed); and the acceptance of the book by nonchiliasts: Hippolytus, Melito of Sardis, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen.

The date of the Muratorian Canon is debated, and the voluminous literature on the matter cannot be adjudicated here. There are good arguments for thinking that the canon was written from Rome in AD 180–200 (see Campenhausen 1972: 244–45), but others assign the date to the fourth century: Sundberg (1973) to early in the fourth century; Hahneman (1992; cf. L. McDonald 2007: 369–78) to later in the fourth century. Still, an earlier date for the Muratorian Fragment is more persuasive (see C. Hill 1995b; 2004: 129–34; Ferguson 1993; Verheyden 2003; Schnabel 2014: 239–53; Gallagher and Meade 2017: 177).

Some in the third century, perhaps Gaius, rejected Revelation as a forgery, claiming that it was penned by Cerinthus, but his questions stemmed from concerns about chiliasm. Dionysius of Alexandria reported on Gaius's view, but Dionysius himself didn't reject Revelation. He received the book but argued that it wasn't written by the apostle John (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.25.4–5). The reputed Alogoi also rejected Revelation, but they also rejected John's Gospel. Kruger (2016: 167–71) remarks that the rejection of the book by some was partially due to a reaction to Montanism and also centered on doubts about who wrote it.¹⁰⁹

107. For recent research on scribal habits, see Hernández 2006. G. Allen (2020: 21–22) notes the variation in the textual tradition, but in most cases such variations don't materially affect the meaning of the text.

108. For further discussion, see the helpful essay by Kruger (2016).

109. Nicklas (2020) thinks the doubts about canonicity were deeper and more profound than the position argued here. Certainly there continued to be doubts about the authority and canonicity of the book, but Nicklas gives too much credence to 5 Ezra (= 2 Esd. 1–2) and the Alogoi in his own understanding of the early reception of the book.

Despite questions and debate about the book's authority, the church in the West accepted the book as Scripture by the fourth century. The situation in the Eastern church, as we shall see, was different. In the West (see Kruger 2016: 300), the canonical status of Revelation was repeatedly acknowledged: at the Synod of Hippo (393) and the Council of Carthage (397) and by Athanasius (367), Philastrius of Brescia (d. 385), Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403; *Pan.* 51.3.1–3; 76.22.5), Rufinus (d. 410), and Jerome (ca. 414).¹¹⁰ Mommsen discovered a book titled *Liber generationis* that should probably be dated about 365, and Revelation is listed as canonical (Gallagher and Meade 2017: 188–92). Gallagher and Meade (2017: 183–88) provide some more detail, showing that a Latin document inserted into the sixth-century Codex Claromontanus (with Paul's Epistles and Hebrews in Greek) likely reflects a fourth-century canon in Greek and accepts Revelation as canonical, though the list also includes some books later judged to be noncanonical. Gallagher and Meade (2017: 222–24) also provide more detail about the Synod of Hippo in North Africa in 393, where the Apocalypse was affirmed as canonical. A summary (Breviarium Hipponense) of the council was "accepted" at the Council of Carthage in 397 and "reaffirmed" by another Council of Carthage in 419.

Eusebius (d. 339) divided books into three categories: (1) books accepted as canonical, (2) books disputed but received by the majority, and (3) spurious books (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25.2–4). He seems uncertain about Revelation, saying that it should be included among the recognized (ὁμολογουμένα, *homologoumena*) books if it should appear (φανείη, *phaneîē*) fitting. He acknowledges, however, that some reject Revelation and put it in the category of books that are not genuine (νόθοις, *nothois*). Eusebius's hesitancy can probably be ascribed to his worry about chiliastic views; Metzger (1987: 204–5) rightly notes that Eusebius's discussion is confused and confusing.

Revelation wasn't received in the same way in the Eastern churches as it was in the West, but in the second and third centuries the book was accepted in both the East and West (Metzger 1987: 209–10; Kruger 2016: 172; Gallagher and Meade 2017: 114–17). The canonical list of Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 350) excludes Revelation (Metzger 1987: 209–10; Kruger 2016: 172; Gallagher and Meade 2017: 114–17). Apparently he thought Revelation should be avoided since, he said, the books not listed shouldn't be read. The Synod of Laodicea (AD 342–81, so Gallagher and Meade 2017: 129) omits the book of Revelation from its list of canonical books. Gregory of Nazianzus (d. ca. 390) is often understood to exclude the book since he doesn't list Revelation specifically. On the other hand, in referencing the Gospel of John he mentions the one who entered heaven, which is a clear allusion to Revelation; thus he may have thought it was canonical. It is difficult to come to a firm conclusion regarding his view of the book's canonicity (see Gallagher and Meade 2017: 142–46; Thielman 1998: 157), though

110. Jerome (*Epist.* 129.3) says that in contrast to the Eastern church, leaders of the Western church accept both Hebrews and Revelation. In doing so they follow "not at all the present usage, but the authority of the ancient writers, who for the most part make use of citations from both . . . as canonical church texts." Citation taken from Gallagher and Meade (2017: 215).

Thielman (1998: 156) points out that Gregory may have, in his comment about John entering heaven, implied the inclusion of the Apocalypse after the Gospels in his canonical list. Amphilochius of Iconium (ca. 394) seems to extend his hand toward those who doubt the authenticity of the book, though he includes it in his canon list; thus the evidence is unclear (Gallagher and Meade 2017: 154). Dionysius (ca. 500) in Rome and John Scholasticus (ca. 550) in Antioch depended on the compilations at the Synod of Laodicea (4th cent.) and did not include Revelation as canonical (Gallagher and Meade 2017: 130–31). The list makes clear that Revelation wasn't to be used for worship or instruction (see Gallagher and Meade 2017: 132). The Apostolic Canons, composed in Syria between 375 and 380, excluded Revelation, though the Apocalypse was included in the Ethiopic tradition (Gallagher and Meade 2017: 135–41). Similarly, John Chrysostom (d. 407) may have had doubts about the book since he never quotes from the Apocalypse (Metzger 1987: 214–15). The Greek Orthodox Church didn't include Revelation in its lectionaries, and a Syrian manuscript from Saint Catherine's Monastery (at Mount Sinai) dated to the fourth century doesn't include Revelation (Gallagher and Meade 2017: 237–38, 242–43). The Syriac Peshitta, a translation produced in the fifth century, didn't include Revelation either (Metzger 1987: 219). Even today the Syrian Orthodox churches don't acknowledge the Apocalypse. Still, some (see Kruger 2016: 172) from the East recognized that Revelation was canonical: Athanasius (in his *Festal Letter* for Easter of 367), Epiphanius (ca. 375), Basil the Great (d. 379), and Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 381) all accepted the book. Interestingly, the Greek Orthodox Church does not use Revelation in its liturgy and did not accept the book as canonical until the seventeenth century (Gallagher and Meade 2017: 49–50). Both Jerome and Augustine accepted Revelation as canonical (Metzger 1987: 236–37), as noted previously, and their opinions influenced subsequent generations.

Erasmus (d. 1536) didn't doubt the canonicity of Revelation, but he was skeptical of apostolic authorship (Metzger 1987: 240–41). Martin Luther's 1522 initial perspective on Revelation is famous and quite negative: "I miss more than one thing in this book, and it makes me consider it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic" (LW 35:398). He doubted its canonicity since he could not "detect that the Holy Spirit produced it" and he believed that "Christ is neither taught nor known in it" (LW 35:399). By 1528, however, he had a change of heart about Revelation—apparently because it supported his view that the papacy was the antichrist. Zwingli rejected Revelation because he thought it supported the invocation of angels (Metzger 1987: 273); Karlstadt (d. 1541) didn't think it should be accepted as canonical (Metzger 1987: 241–42). Calvin didn't denigrate Revelation, but he didn't write a commentary on it either. Oecolampadius (d. 1531) accepted Revelation but didn't accord it the same status as he did most of the rest of the NT (Metzger 1987: 244). Still, Protestants included the book in their canonical lists in the French (1559), Belgic (1561), and Westminster (1647) Confessions; orthodox Protestants and Roman Catholics (as at the Council of Trent) embrace the Apocalypse as part of the canon.

Structure

Many different structures and outlines have been suggested for Revelation, and it would be wearisome to reproduce different outlines here. Whitaker (2015: 26) rightly says, “Revelation is a book that continues to defy simple generic definition or structural analysis.” A. Collins (1976: 8) asserts, “There are almost as many outlines of the book as there are interpreters.”¹¹¹ I am not claiming to offer the definitive outline or structure here; after such intense study by so many scholars for such a prolonged period, it is doubtful that any particular outline could claim to be definitive. Instead, I hope that the outline suggested below will prove helpful in explaining the message of the book. Those who read Revelation rhetorically don’t all come to the same judgment as to the type of rhetoric present in the book.¹¹² Witherington (2003: 15–17) sees it as forensic, Royalty (1998: 125–49) as epideictic, Kirby (1988) as deliberative; and deSilva (2009: 78–91) opts for a combination of deliberative and epideictic. Whitaker says that the book is characterized by ekphrasis, “a vivid description that leads the subject before the hearer’s eyes” (2015: 5).¹¹³ Barnhill (2017: 237–38) says that “overall” the book is deliberative. It seems doubtful that Revelation fits with the rhetorical schemas found in Greek rhetoric; yet in terms of the content of the book, we can understand why it is seen as epideictic and deliberative.

Caird (1966: 106) eloquently captures the nature of Revelation: “John is like an expert guide in an art gallery, lecturing to students about a vast mural. First he makes them stand back to absorb a general impression, then he takes them close to study the details. . . . The unnumbered visions are his close-ups, his studies of detail. They are not meant to be a comprehensive view and therefore do not constitute a seven.” I am less convinced by Caird’s claim that John’s Christian contribution comes through more clearly in the unnumbered visions in the book. Still, he (1966: 106) catches the nature of the work in saying, “The unity of John’s book, then, is neither chronological nor arithmetical, but artistic, like that of a musical theme with variations, each variation adding something new to the significance of the composition. This is the only view that does adequate justice to the double fact that each new series of visions both recapitulates and develops the themes already stated in what has gone before.” Schüssler Fiorenza (1991: 34) compares Revelation to a “conical spiral” in its “forward movement.” She says (1991: 36) the “narrative could be likened to that of a dramatic motion picture whose individual scenes portray the same persons or action each time from a different angle or perspective, while simultaneously adding some new insight into the whole.” The unity of the book supports the notion that we don’t have sources stitched

111. For discussions of the structure that are particularly helpful, see A. Collins 1976: 1–13; Schüssler Fiorenza 1985: 159–80; Aune 1997: xci–xcix; Bandy 2009; Wendland 2014; Kuykendall 2017.

112. For an excellent survey, see deSilva 2020.

113. Ryan (2012: 124–26; cf. also A. Stewart 2017b) says the educated reader would see 9:7–9 and 17:3–6 as ekphrasis; Barnhill (2017) focuses on ekphrasis in 1:12–18 and 19:11–16.

together. Instead, the book evinces a careful structuring and a unity, as we shall see shortly. An instance of this appears in the epilogue's repristination (22:6–21) of many of the themes found in the introduction (1:1–8).

When it comes to structuring the Apocalypse, some have tried to split the book into seven groups of sevens;¹¹⁴ but John doesn't consistently number his visions, and it is contrived to see seven sevens in the book (rightly, Roloff 1993: 15). If John intended to structure the book so neatly, it seems that he would have led the readers along that path since he specifies seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. Many scholars have noted that recapitulation is featured throughout (e.g., Smalley 2005: 7). Surprisingly, Leithart (2018a: 45–50) rejects recapitulation, seeing the book as a unified narrative that is "chronologically progressive." Certainly the book is unified and structured coherently, and we do find progression and even increasing intensity in the judgments. Recognizing such features doesn't deny recapitulation. An advancing narrative and recapitulation aren't necessarily mutually exclusive. Still, in contrast to Leithart, I will argue in the commentary that we don't have a linear ongoing narrative in Revelation. A. Collins (1984b: 74) rightly says that "the visions of chapters 4–22 do not provide a logical, chronological foretelling of future events in a historical sequence. Rather, they express an impressionistic vision, in which the specific details are secondary. What forward movement there is, apart from the basic plot which is repeated, is there to build suspense and for dramatic effect."

Some broad observations can be made about the structure.¹¹⁵ John's being "in the Spirit" introduces key sections in the letter. The first reference occurs in 1:10 and introduces the vision of the Son of Man that shapes the entire book and informs the letters to the seven churches. Second, John is in the Spirit when he is called up to heaven and sees a vision of the divine throne room (4:2), and the throne room discloses to readers a transcendent reality. In the throne room we see where history is truly going and who really rules the world. The third and fourth "in the Spirit" references point to John's vision of Babylon (17:3) and of the holy city (21:10), the bride of the Lamb. The polarity between the two cities, the two women, constitutes the fundamental dividing line in the last part of the book.¹¹⁶

The letters to the seven churches belong together (chaps. 2–3), and chapter 1 belongs with the letters to the churches since it functions as the introduction to chapters 2–3 (J. Thomas and Macchia 2016: 85). Chapters 4 and 5 are a throne-room vision in which God is worshiped as creator and the Lamb as

114. E.g., Hendriksen 1940: 22–30. See the discussion of the structure by A. Collins (1976: 5–55), which is fascinating and instructive, though I don't think it works to identify 17:1–19:10 (against Babylon) and 21:9–22:5 (for the new Jerusalem) as appendices (1976: 19). Farrer (1949: 36–58) posits six sets of sevens.

115. Siew (2005) delineates a chiasmic pattern in 11:1–14:5, but it isn't clear that any chiasmic scheme truly unpacks the larger plot in the book (see deSilva 2008).

116. See also the exploration of this theme in Räßle (2004), who reads the text from the standpoint of metaphor and the imagination.

redeemer. These fundamental truths inform the remainder of the book. The seals, trumpets, and bowls, like the letters to the churches, are marked by the number seven. The seals, trumpets, and bowls are apparently evidence of recapitulation. Bauckham (1993b: 40–41) says that we have a “progressive severity” in these judgments. Interspersed with the seven seals (6:1–17; 8:1) and the seven trumpets (8:2–9:21; 11:15–19) are two interludes: 7:1–17 and 10:1–11:14, respectively. The insertion of these interludes signals a careful structuring; John thus invites readers to discern the significance and meaning of the interludes, which I will consider further as we approach them in the commentary.

Probably chapters 12–15 are the most difficult part of the book to outline.¹¹⁷ No solution is entirely satisfactory or completely convincing. I follow A. Collins (1976: 14) in seeing seven visions from 12:1 to 15:4 (against Bauckham 1993a: 17). It is striking that “and I saw” (καὶ εἶδον, *kai eidon*) is at the beginning of each of these sections (13:1, 11; 14:1, 6, 14; 15:1). On the other hand, we don’t have the expression in 12:1, and the phrase is repeated in 15:2. Still, the outline proposed here seems to capture the cosmic conflict that marks this section.

The last segment of the book divides, as already noted above, at the junction of the two cities, the city of Babylon and the heavenly Jerusalem. Babylon’s judgment is featured in 17:1–19:10; then we see the new Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, in 19:11–22:5. Believers are to leave what Augustine called “the city of man” in order to enjoy “the tree of life” in “the city of God.” The epilogue of the book (22:6–21) repristinates many themes seen in the prologue (1:1–8), tying the text together nicely. My proposed outline is below.

- I. Introduction and seven letters (1:1–3:22)
 - A. Prologue (1:1–8)
 - B. Vision of the Son of Man (1:9–20)
 - C. Letters to the seven churches (2:1–3:22)
 - 1. Ephesus (2:1–7)
 - 2. Smyrna (2:8–11)
 - 3. Pergamum (2:12–17)
 - 4. Thyatira (2:18–29)
 - 5. Sardis (3:1–6)
 - 6. Philadelphia (3:7–13)
 - 7. Laodicea (3:14–22)
- II. Visions in the throne room (4:1–5:14)
 - A. God as the holy creator (4:1–11)
 - B. The Lamb as the slaughtered and risen redeemer (5:1–14)

117. A. Siew (2005) sees a chiasm in 11:1–14:5; space precludes a detailed interaction with his thesis. I would suggest that the linkage is tighter between chapters 10 and 11, thus calling into question Siew’s chiasmic reading.

- III. The seven seals (6:1–8:5)
 - A. The first six seals (6:1–17)
 - B. Interlude (7:1–17)
 - 1. Sealing of the 144,000 (7:1–8)
 - 2. The salvation of an uncountable multitude (7:9–17)
 - C. The seventh seal and the seven trumpets (8:1–5)
- IV. The seven trumpets (8:6–11:19)
 - A. The first four trumpets: Cosmic destruction (8:6–13)
 - B. Fifth trumpet: Demonic locust plague (9:1–12)
 - C. Sixth trumpet: Demonic cavalry (9:13–21)
 - D. Interlude (10:1–11:14)
 - 1. Renewed call to prophesy (10:1–11)
 - 2. Temple and witnesses (11:1–14)
 - a. The temple protected and exposed (11:1–2)
 - b. Two witnesses empowered, killed, and vindicated (11:3–14)
 - E. The seventh trumpet: Kingdom come! (11:15–19)
- V. Signs in heaven and on earth (12:1–15:4)
 - A. The woman and the dragon (12:1–17)
 - 1. Birth and exaltation of the child (12:1–6)
 - 2. War in heaven: The dragon expelled (12:7–12)
 - 3. The woman: Persecuted and protected (12:13–17)
 - B. The beast from the sea (12:18–13:10)
 - C. The beast from the land (13:11–18)
 - D. The 144,000 on Mount Zion (14:1–5)
 - E. Declarations from three angels (14:6–13)
 - F. Two harvests (14:14–20)
 - G. Praise of the conquerors (15:1–4)
- VI. The seven bowls from the sanctuary (15:5–16:21)
 - A. The seven plagues from God’s temple (15:5–8)
 - B. The seven bowls (16:1–21)
- VII. The judgment of Babylon and the wedding of the bride (17:1–19:10)
 - A. The harlot Babylon destroyed (17:1–18)
 - B. The declaration of two angels (18:1–8)
 - C. Lamentation over Babylon’s fall (18:9–19)
 - D. Rejoicing over Babylon’s Fall (18:20–19:5)
 - E. Rejoicing over the marriage of the Lamb (19:6–10)
- VIII. The Triumph of God in Christ (19:11–20:15)
 - A. Defeat of the beast, the false prophet, and their adherents (19:11–21)

- B. Reigning with Jesus a thousand years (20:1–6)
- C. The last battle (20:7–10)
- D. The last judgment (20:11–15)
- IX. The new heavens and new earth (21:1–22:5)
 - A. Making all things new (21:1–8)
 - B. The bride and the holy city (21:9–22:5)
- X. Epilogue (22:6–21)

► I. Introduction and Seven Letters (1:1–3:22)

II. Visions in the Throne Room (4:1–5:14)

III. The Seven Seals (6:1–8:5)

IV. The Seven Trumpets (8:6–11:19)

I. Introduction and Seven Letters (1:1–3:22)

The introduction should be divided into two sections: the prologue in verses 1–8 and John’s commission in verses 9–20, where he receives a vision of the Son of Man. John sets the scene for the entire book by informing the readers why he writes to them. Jesus Christ has revealed to John a message for the seven churches in Asia (1:4). Indeed, the message comes from the Father, the Spirit, and the Son. History is hurtling to a conclusion, and the churches must pay attention to the message of the glorious Son of Man, who rules as priest and king, as the crucified and risen Lord. Chapters 2 and 3 consist of the seven letters to the churches in which Jesus as the Son of Man declares his word to the churches, encouraging them to persevere and warning them of compromise.