



*New Testament Theology*

# The Joy of Hearing

*A Theology of the Book of Revelation*

**THOMAS R. SCHREINER**

Series edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

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Edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

*The Mission of the Triune God: A Theology of Acts*, Patrick Schreiner

*The Joy of Hearing: A Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Thomas R. Schreiner

# The Joy of Hearing

*A Theology of the Book of Revelation*

Thomas R. Schreiner

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
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## Series Preface

THERE ARE REMARKABLY FEW treatments of the big ideas of single books of the New Testament. Readers can find brief coverage in Bible dictionaries, in some commentaries, and in New Testament theologies, but such books are filled with other information and are not devoted to unpacking the theology of each New Testament book in its own right. Technical works concentrating on various themes of New Testament theology often have a narrow focus, treating some aspect of the teaching of, say, Matthew or Hebrews in isolation from the rest of the book's theology.

The New Testament Theology series seeks to fill this gap by providing students of Scripture with readable book-length treatments of the distinctive teaching of each New Testament book or collection of books. The volumes approach the text from the perspective of biblical theology. They pay due attention to the historical and literary dimensions of the text, but their main focus is on presenting the teaching of particular New Testament books about God and his relations to the world on their own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus. Such biblical theology is of fundamental importance to biblical and expository preaching and informs exegesis, systematic theology, and Christian ethics.

The twenty volumes in the series supply comprehensive, scholarly, and accessible treatments of theological themes from an evangelical perspective. We envision them being of value to students, preachers, and interested laypeople. When preparing an expository sermon

series, for example, pastors can find a healthy supply of informative commentaries, but there are few options for coming to terms with the overall teaching of each book of the New Testament. As well as being useful in sermon and Bible study preparation, the volumes will also be of value as textbooks in college and seminary exegesis classes. Our prayer is that they contribute to a deeper understanding of and commitment to the kingdom and glory of God in Christ.

Tom Schreiner's Revelation volume, *The Joy of Hearing*, takes on the urgent task of explaining the teaching of the most puzzling book in the New Testament. The book of Revelation throws up formidable interpretive challenges, not least in terms of determining its historical setting and understanding its apocalyptic imagery. Schreiner's work aims to enable readers to experience the climax of biblical prophecy in all its fullness. In our day of relentless outrage and bitter conflict, Revelation offers a powerful message of comfort, encouragement, and hope. It discloses our world's true state of affairs and offers a glimpse of transcendent reality. According to Schreiner, the joy of hearing Revelation consists of heeding the call of Jesus, listening to the words of the Spirit, and remaining confident that God rules on his throne.

Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

## Preface

I DECIDED TO WRITE THIS short book on the theology of the book of Revelation when I was invited to give the Moore College Lectures in August 2020. I am currently writing the Baker Exegetical Commentary on Revelation, and I have also written a shorter commentary on the book in the ESV Expository Commentary published by Crossway (2018). I tried out some of the material for this book at the Northeast Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society held at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in 2019, and I am grateful for the feedback I received there and for the wonderful generosity of Eckhard and Barbara Schnabel, who hosted me in their home during those days. I also gave these lectures at Gateway Seminary in Ontario, California, in August 2019, and I learned much from the interaction and responses of those present on that occasion as well. I particularly enjoyed spending time with and getting to know John Taylor, who invited me to Gateway.

In the providence of God, I didn't give the lectures at Moore College after all. COVID-19 intervened, and thus my trip was canceled. I was at Moore College on an earlier occasion, and I was disappointed that I could not be present with them again. Still, the book of Revelation reminds us that we live in a sinful world and that God rules over all that happens. When we think of the devastating effects of the coronavirus worldwide, the disappointment of not giving the lectures at Moore College is a minor annoyance. In any case, what a joy it has been to reflect on the theology of the book of Revelation with its stunning vision

of God's majesty and glory, the beautiful portrait of Jesus as the Lion and the Lamb, and the assurance that comes from knowing that the Spirit utters the word of God. Our opponents are implacable and full of hate, but our God is greater still. We are called to endurance and must refuse compromise, for God will judge those who give themselves to evil, and he promises to reward those who continue to trust him with the greatest joy of all: we shall see his face (Rev. 22:4).

I am grateful to one of my doctoral students, Coye Still IV, who checked references for me and sent me articles I requested. He saved me much time by carrying out such tasks! Also, I am so thankful to Justin Taylor and Dane Ortlund at Crossway. I had no idea what they would think of the book, but they were eager to publish it, which was very encouraging. They then suggested a series of similar books on every book of the New Testament, and Brian Rosner and I are honored to serve as editors of this series. Finally, I am grateful to David Barshinger for his fine editing and helpful suggestions, which made the book better than it would otherwise have been.

Thomas R. Schreiner

April 1, 2020

# Abbreviations

|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| AB          | Anchor Bible   |
| ACT         | Ancient Christian Texts                                      |
| <i>BBR</i>  | <i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>                        |
| BECNT       | Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament             |
| <i>EvQ</i>  | <i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>                                 |
| HNTC        | Harper's New Testament Commentaries                          |
| HSM         | Harvard Semitic Monographs                                   |
| <i>JBL</i>  | <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>                        |
| <i>JETS</i> | <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>        |
| JSNTSup     | Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series |
| LCL         | Loeb Classical Library                                       |
| NCB         | New Century Bible  |
| NICNT       | New International Commentary on the New Testament            |
| NICOT       | New International Commentary on the Old Testament            |
| NIGTC       | New International Greek Testament Commentary                 |
| <i>NovT</i> | <i>Novum Testamentum</i>                                     |
| NSBT        | New Studies in Biblical Theology                             |
| OTL         | Old Testament Library  |
| PCNT        | Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament                    |
| PTMS        | Princeton Theological Monograph Series                       |
| SBLDS       | Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series           |
| SBT         | Studies in Biblical Theology                                 |



|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Sib. Or.   | Sibylline Oracles                                       |
| SOTBT      | Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology              |
| VCSup      | Supplements to <i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>              |
| WBC        | Word Biblical Commentary                                |
| <i>WTJ</i> | <i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>                  |
| WUNT       | Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen<br>Testament |

## Introduction

# The Truth Apocalyptically Revealed

THE BOOK OF REVELATION both attracts and repels readers. It attracts readers because it introduces a strange new world, an apocalyptic vision that captures our imagination. We all sense that some dimensions of life are beyond us, that there are mysteries surpassing our comprehension, and Revelation introduces us to this world, inviting us to hear what God says to us. We wonder, what will happen in the future, and how will the world come to an end? Revelation reveals to us where the world is going, and it tells us what we should do to be part of the new world that is coming. At the same time, Revelation can repel us because we wonder what it all means and perhaps because we despair of making any sense of it at all. Martin Luther felt this way when he complained that Christ is not clearly taught or revealed in the book!<sup>1</sup> Our inability to grasp the book is illustrated by this humorous comment by G. K. Chesterton: “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.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps we have been put off from the book when we have encountered speculative and strange readings of it, some of which offer an amazingly detailed map of what will supposedly happen in the future.

- 1 Cited in Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, trans. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 26.
- 2 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1909), 29.

My contention is that we desperately need the message of Revelation for today's world. There is a great conflict between good and evil in our world, and the Christian faith is under attack, as it was in the first century. John reminds us in this book that God rules, even in an evil day; that God has not forsaken his people; and that goodness will finally triumph and prevail. In the midst of evil, in a world in which the Christian faith is under attack, we need hope and assurance that evil will not have the last word, and Revelation teaches us that a new world is coming, that a new creation is coming, and that all will be well. God is just and holy and righteous, and those who turn against God and his Christ will suffer judgment. At the same time, we see in the book that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the center of history, or the fulcrum of history. Evil has been defeated because of what Christ has accomplished. The triumph over wickedness was realized not by an act of judgment but through the suffering of the Lion of the tribe of Judah, through the Lamb who was slain. What do believers do as they live in Babylon, as they live in a world in which the governments of the world are like ravenous beasts tearing apart the church? John tells us that we are to stay close to Christ, that we must not compromise with evil, that we must endure to the end, and that we must look to the final reward. The book of Revelation is not a prophecy chart about the future but a call to be a disciple of Jesus. John tells us to be faithful and fruitful, and we should not give in to despair, for in the end, all will be well.

Before we dive into the theology of Revelation, a brief word needs to be said about the historical context of Revelation and about the kind of literature we find in the book. When we read an ancient book (and modern books too!), it helps to know the circumstances that accompanied the book's writing so that we can place it in its historical context. In the same way, we are also assisted when we grasp the genre of a writing. Is Revelation narrative, poetry, an epistle, or something else? If we read a poem or proverb as if it is an epistle, we are bound to misinterpret it. We need to set the scene, then, before we consider the message of the book, and the theology will then be explained in the subsequent chapters.

## Historical Setting

When we read the book of Revelation, we are struck by the vagueness of its historical setting. Despite the various claims of scholars, nothing in the book itself indisputably points to life under a particular emperor, whether we think of Nero (r. AD 54–68), Domitian (r. AD 81–96), Trajan (r. AD 98–117), or some other emperor. Such a state of affairs suggests that we should not rigidly tie our interpretation of the letter to any particular period or to the actions of a specific emperor. Obviously, the book was written at a particular time and addressed to churches in Asia Minor, but we lack definitive evidence for positing a specific date. I am not rejecting the attempt to posit a particular date. I will argue, in fact, for a late date shortly and will happily appeal to such to confirm interpretations offered here and there. The point being made is that no interpretation should be accepted that *demand*s a particular date—an important hermeneutical conclusion that we can draw from the imprecision of the historical situation. Any interpretation that *requires* a particular historical setting imposes constraints in reading the book that can't be verified. In other words, we must avoid the rabbit hole of binding our view of Revelation to a particular historical reconstruction.

Still, if any date is chosen, it most likely falls in the reign of Domitian (AD 81–96). Irenaeus wrote about this matter 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 toward the end of the reign of Domitian.<sup>3</sup>

Irenaeus's meaning is contested, and his words don't indubitably point to the time of Domitian, but the most natural reading suggests

3 Cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, LCL 153, 265 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992–1994), 5.8.6; see also 3.18.3.

that John penned Revelation while Domitian was the emperor.<sup>4</sup> The subject of the verb “was seen” if the book is claimed to be written before AD 70 could be “him” (i.e., John). If that is the case, Irenaeus does not specify when Revelation was written but records when John himself was last seen. Such a reading is possible, but seeing John as the subject of the verb is quite awkward, and the syntax reads more naturally if the subject is the revelation that John saw on Patmos. 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.

The remaining evidence we have from early tradition seems to support a later date, although in some instances the tradition itself lacks clarity. Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD 155–215) remarks that John returned from the isle of Patmos “after the tyrant was dead.”<sup>5</sup> The tyrant could possibly be Nero, and thus it is possible that Clement 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,<sup>6</sup> concurring with the most natural reading of Irenaeus. Victorinus 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,

4 G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 19–20. Against Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1998).

5 Clement of Alexandria, *The Rich Man’s Salvation*, 42, in *The Exhortation to the Greeks: The Rich Man’s Salvation; and To the Newly Baptized*, trans. G. W. Butterworth, LCL 92 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919).

6 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.23.1.

and afterward he disseminated the revelation that he had received from the Lord.<sup>7</sup>

Jerome (AD 340–420) advocates the same background: “In the fourteenth year then after Nero Domitian having raised a second persecution he was banished to the island of Patmos, and wrote the Apocalypse.”<sup>8</sup> 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 and did not have firsthand knowledge about when Revelation was written.<sup>9</sup> After all, the early writers in history are not entirely reliable and are clearly guilty of mistakes in some instances. We face again the problem that we can’t specify a particular date for the writing of Revelation. 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. Still, we have to admit that certainty eludes us. To sum up, the internal evidence doesn’t clearly point to a specific date, and the external evidence, if we assume it is reliable, points to a date when Domitian was the emperor.

## Genre

Scholars have often discussed the genre of Revelation, with the apocalyptic genre taking pride of place. At the same time, they have also noted the seven letters in chapters 2–3 and the prophetic character

7 Victorinus of Petovium, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 10.3, in *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, ed. and trans. William C. Weinrich, ACT (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 13–14.

8 Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men*, 9, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd ser., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 3:364.

9 Cf. Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 38A (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 66–67.

of the book. Revelation, in other words, contains a mixture of genres: epistolary, prophetic, and apocalyptic. 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, but he has transmuted them through what must have been a lengthy process of reflection and writing into a thoroughly literary creation which is designed not to reproduce the experience so much as to communicate the meaning of the revelation that had been given to him.<sup>10</sup>

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. Since we have letters, seven of them, we are reminded that the book wasn't written as a general tract about the end of history but was intended for the churches in Asia Minor in the first century. 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 practice newspaper eschatology and read the book in terms of current events. Actually, all who pay attention to such things realize that such a hermeneutical approach is arbitrary since the interpretations change as events transpire. The interpretation of the book, even if one adopted the approach of interpreting 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

10 Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3–4.

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.<sup>11</sup> 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” (Rev. 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 the readers that the prophetic character of the book is key in understanding the Apocalypse. As a prophecy, the book should be read aloud and heard by the churches when gathered (1:3). The oral recitation of Revelation is a constitutive element of the church’s worship, indicating that the words of the prophecy were considered authoritative. 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 and that 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 here echoes Moses when he impresses on his hearers that they must not add to or subtract from the commands given from Mount Sinai (Deut. 4:2), and the echo indicates that John believed his words were as authoritative as the words of Torah.

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” (Rev. 22:6, my trans.). And 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

<sup>11</sup> So Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 16.



in due course. Since we have a divine disclosure of what must occur soon, what is prophesied must be not sealed up but announced to the churches (22:10). The prophecy, however, isn't written merely to convey information; the purpose is ethical formation and transformation, since genuine hearing leads to obedience, to keeping the words of the prophecy (1:3; 22:7). 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 by wisdom I mean that it is intended to shape the character of the readers.<sup>12</sup>

Nowhere does John say that he is writing a book in the apocalyptic genre, though the first word of the book is *apokalypsis* (Gk. "revelation"), which is probably intended to tell us something about the nature of the book. In any case, there is virtually universal agreement about the apocalyptic character of Revelation. Adela Yarbro Collins has consulted and included the work of John Collins, David Hellholm, and David Aune in proposing the following definition:

*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 transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another supernatural world. Apocalypse was 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.<sup>13</sup>

12 Supporting such a general conception of wisdom is Jeffrey de Waal Dryden, *A Hermeneutic of Wisdom: Recovering the Formative Agency of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

13 Adela Yarbro Collins, "Introduction," *Semeia* 36 (1986): 7. See the earlier definition proposed by John J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9. Apocalypse, he says, is "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."

Certain characteristics are typical in apocalypses, but the pragmatic, practical element should be especially stressed here.<sup>14</sup> David Aune describes the apocalyptic worldview to be “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 fallen cosmic order and by restoring or recreating the cosmos to its original pristine perfection.”<sup>15</sup> Bauckham remarks that Revelation differs from other apocalypses in that the amount of visual imagery exceeds what we see in other apocalypses, and we don’t have the longer conversations between the mediator of revelation and the one who receives it, which is quite common in other apocalypses.<sup>16</sup> As readers, we might wish for such conversations, for they would presumably solve some of the interpretive puzzles that bedevil us.

We should note, by the way, that apocalyptic isn’t restricted to the book of Revelation. We see apocalyptic sections in parts of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah in the Old Testament. John is also informed by Jesus’s eschatological discourse in Matthew 24–25 (cf. Mark 13; Luke 21) as well. We also have apocalyptic writings in Second Temple Jewish literature (e.g., 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch), and so readers of Revelation would, assuming they were familiar with some of these other writings, not find Revelation to be completely foreign or a radically new way of writing.

The book contains a revelation communicated in a narrative that rehearses the Lord’s triumph over the forces of evil, as we are informed

14 Christopher Rowland says about apocalyptic, “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.” *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 14.

15 David E. Aune, “Apocalypticism,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 25.

16 Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 9–10.

about the end of history and the coming new heavens and new earth. To use Yarbrow Collins's terms, an "otherworldly being"—that is, an angel—communicated 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. John clearly interprets in his visions the events occurring on earth, 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. Brian Tabb 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.<sup>17</sup> I would add that in Revelation the readers are exhorted to remain faithful to God and Christ, to endure until the final day by not capitulating to the pressures imposed on them from the world.

Apocalyptic typically has certain characteristics, and a helpful resource in this regard is Leon Morris's book *Apocalyptic*.<sup>18</sup> The list below captures some of the characteristics:

- historical dualism
- visions
- pseudonymity (Revelation excepted)
- symbolism
- numerology
- angelology
- demonology
- predicted woes

If we consider how the book of Revelation relates to this list, we see that it fits quite nicely. We don't have ontological dualism, in which God and Satan are equally powerful, but we do have historical dualism, in which

<sup>17</sup> Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone*, NSBT 48 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972).

there is a cosmic conflict between God and Satan. We also recognize that much of the book stems from visions John received, which are then communicated to his readers. Many apocalypses, such as 1 Enoch or 4 Ezra, are obviously pseudonymous, but Revelation stands out as an exception, as virtually all scholars agree, in identifying John as the author. Scholars aren't agreed about the identity of John, but they do agree that the book stands out as an exception to other apocalypses in not being pseudonymous.

The symbolism of Revelation is indisputable, and we don't have to weary ourselves with listing all the examples. Vern Poythress says that in interpreting Revelation, we need to take into account four levels: (1) the *linguistic level*, which consists of the words John wrote; (2) the *visionary level*, which includes the visions John received, whether of beasts, dragons, lambs, or other elements; (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.<sup>19</sup> For our purposes we can collapse the categories into two: the visions recorded and the referent/meaning of the visions. For example, John sees Jesus as the Son of Man with a two-edged sword in his mouth (Rev. 1:16), and the sword stands for the power and efficacy of his word. Similarly, the enemies of the people of God are not literally beasts (Rev. 13); rather, the reference to beasts represents the devastation and tyranny imposed by Rome and the imperial priesthood. Again, Satan is no 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" (3:1), a phrase that almost certainly refers to the Holy Spirit, the number seven symbolizing the perfection and fullness of the Spirit (1:4). So too the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel figuratively describes the people of God since we have 12 x 12 x 1,000. The wall of the coming

19 Vern S. Poythress, "Genre and Hermeneutics in Revelation 20:1-6," *JETS* 36, no. 1 (1993): 41-54.

Jerusalem is 144 cubits, which is again 12 x 12, symbolizing the safety and security of the people of God (21:17). So too the city being 12,000 stadia is obviously figurative since the 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). At the same time, the devil and demons often crop up in the book as well. Finally, predicted woes are found in the seal (6:1–17; 8:1–5), trumpet (8:6–9:21; 11:15–19), and bowl judgments (16:1–21). And 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, George Ladd rightly suggested some time ago that we don't need to decide between prophetic and apocalyptic, though the focus in his article was not on the book of Revelation.<sup>20</sup> We have a mixture of genres in Revelation; the book is epistolary, prophetic, and apocalyptic. But here I will make a comment about the apocalyptic character of the book. Why did John use this genre? It has often been pointed out that apocalyptic appeals to the imagination with its symbolic pictures and lurid images. The arresting images and depictions capture the minds and hearts of readers, as they confront the world with new lenses. John introduces the readers to a new dimension, a dimension of reality that is inaccessible to those in the space-time universe. We could say that Revelation is John's apocalyptic metanarrative in which he declares to the addressees what is truly happening in heaven and on earth. As Bauckham says, John "expand[s] 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."<sup>21</sup>

Said differently, 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 over-

20 George Eldon Ladd, "Why Not Prophetic-Apocalyptic?," *JBL* 76, no. 3 (1957): 192–200; see also Beale, *Revelation*, 37–43; Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 5–6.

21 Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 7.

arching reality. We aren't confined to what is empirically obvious about Rome and its rule over the world. John unveils a divine perspective, and thus he tells us that the empire is from God's vantage point a ravaging and idolatrous animal and that its power comes from Satan (Rev. 13:1–18). 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 that all who get in bed with her are destined for judgment. The apocalyptic genre, then, opens readers up to the true reality of what is going on, to a heavenly and transcendent perspective.

### **Conclusion**

I have suggested that Revelation is written near the end of the first century when Domitian was in power, and the churches in Asia Minor were facing persecution from the Roman Empire and the society in which they lived. The book is a combination of genres so that 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 informing 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 in their lot with evil, for a reward that exceeds their wildest dreams awaits those who are faithful.



## The Deafness of Those Living on Earth

IN THIS CHAPTER WE CONSIDER those in Revelation who refuse to hear the truth, those who close their ears to the message about Jesus Christ. John tells us about the earth dwellers, the beast, the false prophet, and Babylon. Readers need to know the truth about what is happening in the world, which means that they need to be aware of what they are up against. The true nature of the opposition must be disclosed to them.

An apocalyptic revelation discloses the true state of affairs, giving us a window into the transcendent reality that is hidden from us. John received via an angel a vision of reality that represents God's perspective on life, and in that sense we have a metanarrative—a heavenly disclosure about life on earth. We see in the book a great battle, a cosmic conflict between heaven and earth, between God and Satan, between believers and the beast, between believers and earth dwellers, and between the bride of the Lamb and the whore of Babylon. Life on earth may look ordinary, but for those who have eyes to see, for those who *hear* the revelation communicated to John, they see and hear about truth from another dimension, which represents the truth about life, death, evil, and goodness. When John talks about hearing, he is not the first to do so. We see the same theme in the Gospels. As G. K. Beale says,

John's repeated use of the hearing formula is thus not novel but in line with the prior prophetic pattern. John's use of the phrase "the



one having ears, let him hear” is linked to Isaiah 6:9–10, as well as to Ezekiel 3:27 (*cf.* Ezek. 12:2), and is a development of the Gospels’ use of the phrase (*e.g.* Matt. 13:9–17, 43), which itself builds on Isaiah 6:9–10. As also in the case of the Old Testament prophets and Jesus, the expression about hearing indicates that parabolic communication has the dual purpose of opening the eyes of the true remnant but blinding counterfeit members of the covenant community.<sup>1</sup>

### Earth Dwellers

John describes those who are aligned with the beast, those who oppose believers, as “those who dwell on earth” (Rev. 3:10, Gk. *hoi katoikountes epi tēs gēs*). The phrase is a technical term in Revelation for unbelievers, and they are called earth dwellers because they hear and see the message that comes from this world instead of hearing the message that comes from above, the message that comes from heaven. Only those who are earth dwellers will face the judgment that will engulf the entire world according to Revelation 3:10. The promise of preservation for believers doesn’t mean that they will be absent from the earth when the great trial arrives; it means that they won’t face judgment, that they will be spared from God’s wrath, just as Israel was exempted from the plagues that devastated Egypt. Earth dwellers think that they live an ordinary life, buying and selling, marrying and burying. John declares, however, that “with the wine of [the great prostitute’s] sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk” (17:2). The woman with whom they have committed sexual immorality is Babylon, which stands for the city of Rome and the city of man in general.<sup>2</sup> Sexual immorality (Gk. *porneuō*) doesn’t refer to sexual sin but stands for idolatry, for the worship of other gods besides the Lord. Israel in the Old Testament was to be committed to the Lord, as a bride is faithful to her husband. The Old Testament prophets declaim against Israel, lamenting her harlotry

- 1 G. K. Beale, “Revelation (Book),” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 361–62.
- 2 See Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone*, NSBT 48 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 164–58.

and whoredom. So too the fundamental problem with earth dwellers is false worship, the degodding of the one true God.

We see particularly in Revelation 13—the chapter about the two beasts—the true nature of the earth dwellers: “All who dwell on the earth will worship it [the beast], everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain” (13:8). The earth dwellers don’t represent all people on the earth; otherwise, all people without exception would worship the beast, which would mean that there would be no believers whatsoever on earth. Earth dwellers are described as those whose names aren’t in the book of life. By definition they are unbelievers. They have given their allegiance to the beast instead of to the Lamb (see 13:12, 14). They are people of the earth instead of being a heavenly people.

Still, it is not as if earth dwellers fully realize the import of their actions; they are *deceived* in offering their worship to the beast (13:14). John gives us an apocalyptic revelation for those who have ears to hear about the true nature of earth dwellers. Presumably those who lived in the Roman Empire in John’s day and who didn’t believe in the Christ didn’t think they were allied with evil. They were just getting along in the world as it was. Many of them probably thought they were virtuous and on the side of what was true, right, and beautiful. John, however, gives a heavenly and transcendent view of their lives, shining a spotlight on the ultimate commitment in their lives. They are astonished and dazzled by the beast instead of by the true and living God (17:8).

Since earth dwellers have given their worship to the beast and to the harlot, they oppose the proclamation of the gospel (11:10). The declaration of salvation and judgment is repugnant to them. Thus they cast their lot with those who put believers to death (6:10; 11:10). Obviously, many unbelievers, probably most, had no role in the actual death of believers. John, however, provides us with a radical apocalyptic vision of reality. Just as we see in the Gospel of John, so too in Revelation there is no neutral space. One is either light or darkness, in truth or in error, from above or from below (John 3:19–20; 8:23–24), from

heaven or from the earth. Since the earth dwellers have given their lives to the beast and to the harlot, they will face judgment (Rev. 8:13).

### **The Beast**

The terrifying earthly opponent of believers is christened the beast. The beast isn't mentioned until Revelation 11:7, and there we are told that it hails from the abyss, which signals that the beast is associated with the underworld, with death and evil. Indeed, the verse goes on to say that the beast makes war on the saints and puts them to death. We receive a fuller introduction to the beast in Revelation 13, and it is clear that the beast is Satanically inspired (12:17). The beast is compared to a leopard, a bear, and a lion (13:2). We have an obvious allusion to Daniel 7, where in night visions Daniel sees beasts coming up from the sea: the first is like a lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard, and the fourth indescribably horrible (Dan. 7:1–7). The Danielic interpretation clarifies that the four beasts are four kings and four kingdoms (Dan. 7:17, 23), and there is no need here to identify the four kingdoms from Daniel specifically, although all agree that the first is Babylon.

John sees the beast arising from the sea, and the choice of the sea isn't accidental since the sea represents chaos and surging evil (Rev. 13:1). In fact, the sea and the abyss in some instances in the Old Testament may designate the same place (Gen. 1:2; 7:11; 8:2; Deut. 8:7; Job 28:14; 38:16; Pss. 33:7; 42:7; 77:17; 107:26; 135:6), and the beast is said to come from both. Since the beast is described as a lion, a bear, and a leopard, combining together in one animal the first three beasts in Daniel, we have good reasons to think that the beast in Revelation signifies the fulfillment of Daniel's fourth and indescribably terrible beast. And most commentators have agreed that the beast represents the Roman Empire.

What is the significance of John describing the Roman Empire as a beast, drawing on Daniel? We have in both Daniel and Revelation one of the characteristics of apocalyptic, in which true reality is exposed and unveiled. The empire, John tells us, is not humane or conducive to

human flourishing. Instead, it is like a ravenous and ferocious beast that mauls, kills, and destroys human beings. Rome was extremely proud of its rule and government, but to borrow the language from 1 John, the empire was an antichrist (1 John 2:18). Richard Bauckham rightly points out that Rome is criticized not only because of its murder of Christians but because it trampled on the human rights and dignity of human beings in general.<sup>3</sup> As he observes, Revelation 18:24 indicts Babylon for killing not only prophets and saints but also “all who have been slain on earth.” Rome almost certainly conceived of itself as fostering human flourishing, but the truth, John tells us, is that Rome is not only anti-God but antihuman.

Even though Rome deprived people of their rights, liberties, and even their lives, people stood in awe of the empire because of its unrivaled power. We have often seen in history that people support those who have power, even if that power is wielded unrighteously. The temptation to adore and to worship the strong is almost irresistible, and Rome could claim that it was “on the right side of history.” The power of Rome is evident in the wound that the beast suffered (13:3, 12), and yet the wound was healed, suggesting a parody of the resurrection. The beast’s wound and recovery probably signify occasions when it appears as if the empire’s rule and power will come to an end, and yet out of the ashes the empire rises again. Many scholars think that the wound refers to Nero’s death and to the rumors circulating about Nero’s return. In support of such an interpretation, it is common to understand the gematria, the number 666, as a reference to “Nero Caesar.”<sup>4</sup> Still, the solution isn’t obvious since one has to transliterate Nero’s name from Greek into Hebrew to come up with 666, and one wonders if believers

3 Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, *New Testament Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 38–39. So also G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, HNTC (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 223; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 38A (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 711.

4 See, e.g., Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 37; Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (London: T&T Clark, 1993), 384–452; Koester, *Revelation*, 538–40, 597–99.

in Asia Minor would have detected such a recondite solution. Even if the referent is Nero, the point remains largely the same. The empire that seemed to be collapsing rises again.

The incredibly difficult words in Revelation 17 also support the notion that a godlike authority and power was attributed to Rome. We read that the beast “was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction” (17:8). John goes on to say about kings, “Five . . . have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction” (17:10–11). On the one hand, John says the beast “is not” (17:8), but on the other hand, he says that one king “is” in 17:10. Trying to put together these two claims is one of the great puzzles in the book—perhaps one of the most difficult in the Scriptures. Interpreters have tried to work out what John is saying by producing a list of emperors that match the eight kings or alternatively by constructing a list of eight empires. Without going into details, it is scarcely clear that any list of emperors or empires really fits, and the solutions seem forced and artificial. Thus, it is better to read the text more generally and symbolically. Grant Osborne is correct in seeing a reference to emperors, but at the same time, he understands the number seven symbolically, where the number seven signifies that the “the world kingdoms are complete.”<sup>5</sup> Craig Koester says that “seven is a round number representing the beast’s power as a whole.”<sup>6</sup> The text is obscure since there is a sense in which the empire exists and a sense in which it does not. Osborne thinks a new king will arise who is not from the seven but will function like the former emperors.<sup>7</sup> Koester says, “The tyranny that has reared its head in the past might not be widely visible at present, but it is not gone; the beast’s character has not changed.”<sup>8</sup> The seven kings “represent the completeness of the beast’s

5 Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 620.

6 Koester, *Revelation*, 691.

7 Osborne, *Revelation*, 620.

8 Koester, *Revelation*, 692.

power, rather than a precise list of first century sovereigns.”<sup>9</sup> However we parse out the details, the resurrection of the beast<sup>10</sup> or its coming<sup>11</sup> leads people to worship, for the beast, in the estimation of the people, is incomparable, just as God is incomparable, and thus they exclaim, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” (13:4). People put their trust in the beast and praise it as a divine figure. The beast casts a spell over people, deceiving them because it speaks with a godlike authority (13:15).

The beast is radically narcissistic and self-obsessed, boasting of its exploits and reviling the one true god (13:5; cf. Dan. 7:8, 11, 20). The totalitarian impulses of the beast translate into rage against the one and only true God and his people (Rev. 13:6). Like all megalomaniacs, it doesn’t merely elicit worship but demands and enforces homage (13:12). Earth dwellers are deceived and grant obeisance to the beast (13:14), whereas political, economic, and bureaucratic pressure is put on believers to give adulation to the beast (13:16–17). When they refuse to capitulate, they face economic discrimination and are put to death (11:7). The beast claims greatness, but John has a piece of numerological apocalyptic wisdom to convey about the empire. The beast’s number “is the number of a man, and his number is 666” (13:18). The meaning of this verse, of course, has been debated intensely throughout history, and it would be presumptuous to claim certainty about its interpretation. I am convinced by the reading that doesn’t lock onto a particular individual. It is common, as was noted previously, to identify the number with Nero, but this requires constructing numerology from Hebrew, which seems too clever and obscure for most recipients of the letter. What John tells us is more significant and striking. The empire that claims to be divine is merely human; the number 666 falls short of the perfect number 777. In other words, the beast is human, not divine, and thus John tells us that all its pretensions to glory are laughable. The

9 Tabb, *All Things New*, 126.

10 So G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 875–76.

11 Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 407.

beast rules in totalitarian fashion, oppressing those who resist it. Pitirim Sorokin (1889–1968), a Russian-American sociologist, describes well the society that develops under totalitarian rule:

Inalienable rights will be alienated; Declarations of Rights either abolished or used only as beautiful screens for an unadulterated coercion.

Governments will become more and more hoary, fraudulent, and tyrannical, giving bombs instead of bread; death instead of freedom; violence instead of law. . . .

Security of life and possessions will fade. With these, peace of mind and happiness. Suicide, mental disease, and crime will grow.<sup>12</sup>

John teaches that the rule of the beast continues to manifest itself in human history. The beast that seemed to be dethroned marches on, and people prostrate themselves before the one who seems all-powerful.

### The Second Beast

The second beast is the sidekick of the first (Rev. 13:11–18), and since it is also called a beast, it has the same destructive and ravaging character. We receive further illumination when the beast is described as “the false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). The second beast, then, has a religious and prophetic dimension, showing that political power is intertwined with religious devotion so that there is no separation of church and state. The historical reference likely represents “the priesthood of the imperial cult.”<sup>13</sup> The second beast parodies Christ since it has two horns like a lamb (13:11). As the false prophet, the second beast

12 Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics: A Study of Change in Major Systems of Art, Truth, Ethics, Law and Social Relationships* (1937; repr., Abingdon, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2017), chap. 40, Google Books.

13 S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 197. Cf. Caird, *Revelation*, 17; Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 38; Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 446; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 259. Beale suggests the priesthood of the imperial cult or political authorities who enforced emperor worship. *Revelation*, 717. Osborne doesn't limit the reference to the imperial cult. *Revelation*, 510.

“deceives” those who worship the beast and receive its image (19:20) by performing spectacular signs that dazzle observers (13:13–15; 19:20). We are reminded of Deuteronomy 13:1–3:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, “Let us go after other gods,” which you have not known, “and let us serve them,” you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

We see again the role of apocalyptic revelation. The “evidence” seems to attest the validity of the message proclaimed by the false prophet, but evidence must always be interpreted within the matrix of divine revelation, particularly in light of the truth that one must worship only the one true God. We also noticed previously the totalitarian and coercive nature of the power exercised by the two beasts (Rev. 13:16–17). We do not find a “live and let live” world; instead, the second beast discriminates against those who don’t prostrate themselves before the beast. Political tyranny, economic discrimination, and religious persecution mark the rule of the two beasts.

### **Babylon the Harlot**

The jealous competitor of the bride of the Lamb is Babylon. Obviously, the moniker Babylon is symbolic, for virtually no commentator thinks that John refers to Babylon literally. The name stirs up the memory of Old Testament antecedents, among whom Babylon is the great enemy of the people of God. John tips the readers off regarding the identity of Babylon in informing us that the woman sits on “seven mountains” (Rev. 17:9), and “the woman you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth” (17:18). Such information clarifies that the city is Rome, the capital city of the empire. As Osborne notes, the reference to Rome rules out a preterist view, at least a preterist view



centered on Jerusalem, for the city is clearly not Jerusalem, and Rome wasn't destroyed until around four hundred years later.<sup>14</sup> The woman works hand in glove with the beast. Indeed, the beast supports and promotes her welfare in that she sits on the beast (17:3).

To the human eye, Rome was prosperous, rich, entrancing, exciting, and beautiful—"arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls" (17:4)—a city pulsating with business and commerce, with entrepreneurs hawking their wares. Still, the city, like the beast, is a mystery (17:7), and John unveils for readers the true nature of the city. The city bustles with business and promises prosperity, but in reality the woman is a wicked prostitute (17:1, 4, 5, 15, 16; 19:2). Bauckham says about Babylon,

At first glance, she might seem to be the goddess Roma, in all her glory, a stunning personification of the civilization of Rome, as she was worshiped in many a temple in the cities of Asia. But as John sees her, she is a Roman prostitute, a seductive whore and a scheming witch, and her wealth and splendor represent the profits of her disreputable trade.<sup>15</sup>

Babylon is the engine of economic oppression,<sup>16</sup> and both the kings of the earth and the earth dwellers have gotten into bed with her, engaging in sexual immorality (17:2; 18:3). We need to enter John's symbolic world to grasp what he is saying, for he enters the world of the Old Testament, where Israel's attachment to other gods is depicted as harlotry (cf. Jer. 3:1–3; Ezek. 16; 23; Hos. 2:5; 4:10–12, 18; 5:3–4; 6:10; 9:1).<sup>17</sup> Paul says that true worship consists of glorifying God and giving him thanks (Rom. 1:21). Babylon glorifies itself and lives for its own comfort (Rev. 18:7). Furthermore, she thinks she is unassailable in her

<sup>14</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 628.

<sup>15</sup> Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 17–18.

<sup>16</sup> See Mounce, *Revelation*, 251; Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 35–36; Beale, *Revelation*, 684–85.

<sup>17</sup> See Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *God's Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery*, NBSB 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

rule, convinced that grief and sorrow will never be her portion since she is a queen (18:7). Doubtless, sexual sin is included in Babylon's sins, but the focus is on idolatry, the worship of other gods. Babylon is "the mother of prostitutes" (17:5), which probably means that other cities in the world imitate and follow the example of Babylon in their harlotry.

The woman Babylon may look stunning and beautiful, but she is actually demonic and unclean (18:2). The idolatry of Babylon is accompanied by—or perhaps better, expressed by—her material prosperity. Babylon was a shopper's paradise, where goods from the farthest reaches of the world were available (18:12–13, 16–17). The city was filled with astonishingly gifted musicians, skilled craftsmen of every trade, the best and tastiest food, and technological wizardry (18:22–23). But at the same time, its prosperity was gained unjustly, even enslaving other human beings to support her lavish lifestyle. Note how Revelation 18:13 concludes its list of Babylon's fine goods with slavery: ". . . cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, *human souls*." Babylon's oppression doesn't end there but climaxes in the spilling of the blood of the saints (17:6; 18:24; 19:2). John describes the martyrdom of the saints in a dramatic way, depicting Babylon as a disgusting drunk who has imbibed the blood of the saints (17:6). We note again the apocalyptic perspective because in reality only some and not all believers were put to death in Rome. Still, John unveils the true nature of the city, its inner desires and motivations, which of course manifest themselves in actions. Thus, the harlot is pictured as dead drunk, holding a golden cup, the blood of the saints dripping down her lips.

### **The Dragon**

Unsuspecting readers might be surprised to learn that the most common word for the devil in Revelation is the word "dragon," which occurs thirteen times, whereas the word "Satan" is found eight times, "devil" five times, and "serpent" four times. A dragon in the ancient world wasn't a creature who breathed fire and had wings and claws. The

appellation “dragon” fits with the apocalyptic character of the book, for the enemy of the people of God is described in mythological terms as a monster who exercises a preternatural power over human beings. The symbol of the dragon or serpent was a common cultural convention. The Old Testament background includes references to Leviathan, Rahab, and Tannin (Job 3:8; 9:13; 26:12; 41:1; Isa. 27:1; 51:9; Pss. 74:14; 89:10; 104:26). John pulls back the curtain on reality and informs readers about a cosmic conflict, a heavenly war being waged on the saints from a source that isn’t observable to human beings. The dragon takes center stage in Revelation 12–13, where the battle between the dragon and the people of God is featured.

The term “Satan,” which means “adversary,” designates Satan’s influence on others. Twice, the Jews are identified as “a synagogue of Satan” (2:9; 3:9), which means that the Jewish synagogues in Smyrna and Philadelphia have turned against Christians, probably by reporting them to imperial authorities. In *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12.1–13.2, which is dated sometime in the mid-second century, Jews reported Polycarp to Roman imperial authorities, saying that he was not willing to offer sacrifice or worship the emperor. Presumably the Jews wanted to distinguish themselves from Christians, arguing that the latter were not a legal sect, thereby exposing believers to discrimination, harassment, and persecution. Similarly, Pergamum is characterized as a place “where Satan’s throne is,” that is, “where Satan dwells” (Rev. 2:13). Most scholars agree that we have a reference here to the imperial cult, which demanded that Christians worship the emperor.<sup>18</sup> Those in Thyatira under “Jezebel’s” influence (2:20) know “what some call the deep things of Satan” (2:24), which includes permission to engage in sexual sin and eat food sacrificed to idols (2:20). What is interesting is that references to Satan especially cluster in the letter to the churches and center on his attempt to subvert the faith of God’s people either

18 Cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, 141; David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC 52A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 183–84. On emperor worship in Revelation, see Beale, *Revelation*, 5–12; Osborne, *Revelation*, 6–7. Koester thinks the reference is more general. *Revelation*, 286–87.

through persecution or by drawing believers into compromise. We also see two instances of the term “Satan” in chapter 20 (20:2, 7; cf. 12:9), where we are reminded that he is the adversary of the people of God.

The term “devil” is found five times (2:10; 12:9, 12; 20:2, 10), and again chapters 12 and 20 are the most prominent. The word “devil” means “slanderer,” and that fits with the claim that he accuses the people of God (12:10). John, in fact, emphasizes his role in deceiving human beings about the truth (12:9; 20:10). The devil is also characterized as full of fury and irrational anger toward God and his people (12:12), and that fury manifests itself especially in persecution, though he uses human agents, such as Roman authorities, to work out his designs. The devil is identified as “the serpent” four times (12:9, 14, 15; 20:2). Again, chapter 12 is the most prominent. Twice he is called “that ancient serpent” (12:9; 20:2), which clearly alludes to Genesis 3, where the serpent tempts and deceives Eve so that she disobeys the Lord.

The dragon’s seven heads and ten horns symbolize authority and strength (Rev. 12:3). The sweeping away of “a third of the stars of heaven” (12:4), if we pay attention to the Danielic background, refers to his persecution of believers, for in Daniel the stars that are cast and trampled on the ground by Antiochus IV Epiphanes aren’t angels but the people of Israel (Dan. 8:10).<sup>19</sup> Thus the account in Revelation 12 does not refer to an original war in heaven in which angels joined the devil in rebelling against God.<sup>20</sup> Just as the dragon persecutes the saints, so too he attempted to slaughter the Son, who was appointed to rule the nations as Messiah and Lord (12:4–5). We will return later to his war with Michael in heaven, in which he is cast out of the heavenly realms (12:7–9).

Since the dragon has been cast out of heaven, he knows his time to wage war is abbreviated, and thus he pursues believers with insane fury (12:12–17). The people of God are portrayed as a woman fleeing to the wilderness for safety, while the serpent pursues and persecutes

<sup>19</sup> So Beale, *Revelation*, 635–36. For doubts about this identification, see Koester, *Revelation*, 545–46.

<sup>20</sup> Against Osborne, *Revelation*, 461.

the people of God, attempting to destroy them with a flood. The referent of the flood is difficult to determine. Perhaps it is false teaching, or more likely it represents everything the dragon does to seduce the church, including false teaching, persecution, and miracles.<sup>21</sup> In any case, the dragon's design hasn't changed since the days of Adam and Eve, as he attempts to sever human beings from God. Revelation 12 ends on an ominous note. The dragon stands on the sand, looking out to the sea, which represents the forces of chaos and evil (12:18). Out of the sea the dragon summons his henchmen, the two beasts who will advance his agenda in the world. The dragon and the two beasts are an unholy trinity, a parody of the true Trinity. The dragon "had given his authority to the beast" (13:4) to advance his agenda, which centers on the dragon's desire to be worshiped and adored (13:4).

### Conclusion

Life on earth may look ordinary and even plebian, but John reminds readers that there is a war on, a cosmic conflict, a great battle between good and evil, between God and Satan. Behind the opposition that comes from the two beasts, Babylon, and the earth dwellers is the great dragon himself, the ancient serpent, the great adversary and accuser and slanderer of God's people. Just as he tempted Eve, so too he is attempting to intimidate and to terrify the saints so that they depart from God. The Roman Empire, the Roman religion, and the great city of Rome are not neutral entities. They have thrown in their lot with the dragon. Thus, what is happening on earth is not trivial or insignificant. Believers must hear the message so that they truly grasp what is going on in the world and so that they persevere until the end and refuse to compromise with Rome. Unbelievers who are on earth, whom John calls the earth dwellers, are an earthly instead of a heavenly people. John in apocalyptic colors draws the line for his readers: one is either on the side of the earth dwellers, the beasts, Babylon, and Satan, or else one belongs to God. There is no neutral

21 Cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, 483.

space; either one hears the message proclaimed by the Lord, or one is deaf to the things of God. John writes so that his readers will hear and see what is at stake, so that they will be wise instead of foolish, devoted to God instead of to the dragon.

The message for us today is that we should not put our trust in political power to bring in the kingdom. This doesn't mean, of course, that Christians should forsake the political sphere, for we are called on to engage the culture and to do good in every sphere. But Revelation warns us about utopian dreams of bringing in the kingdom through political dreams. Indeed, as believers, we must be alert since the rulers of this world incline toward totalitarianism. Government may gobble up human rights in the name of justice, and Christians may find themselves in the situation described by John, in which they face discrimination in employment, are persecuted, or are even put to death. Such economic and political discrimination opens up the temptation to compromise with the world, and John warns believers about this mortal danger, which we will consider in more detail in the next chapter. We must not shut our eyes to the true nature of the battle being waged, nor should we be deceived, as if any political program will instantiate the kingdom of God.