

*Reading the Book of Revelation as a Story:  
A Literary analysis of the Apocalypse of John*

By

Shane J. Wood

*©Shanejwood.com 2008  
[Copyright Pending]*



*Table of Contents*

Introduction: The Importance of Literary Analysis in Biblical Studies ..... 1

Chapter 1: The Author of Revelation as Narrator ..... 3

    Who is the Narrator of Revelation? – The Narrator and Characterization..... 3

    Where is the Narrator? – The Narrator and the Story..... 4

    What are the Narrator’s Limitations?

        The Narrator and Time..... 5

        The Narrator and Space ..... 6

    How Does the Narrator Narrate?

        The Narrator and Interpretative Keys..... 7

        The Narrator and Privileged Information..... 9

        The Narrator and Recapitulation ..... 10

        The Narrator and Old Testament Allusions..... 11

        The Narrator and Numerology..... 13

        The Narrator and Foreshadowing ..... 15

        The Narrator and Dialogue..... 16

        The Narrator and Parody ..... 17

        The Narrator and Parabolic Nature..... 17

    Summary ..... 18

Chapter 2: The Setting of the Book of Revelation ..... 20

    The Socio-Political Setting – Caught in Between Worlds..... 20

    The Narrative Setting – Interplay Between the Cosmic and the Mundane..... 23

Chapter 3: The Plot of the Book of Revelation ..... 26

    Plot: Plotting the Conflict..... 26

        Conflict with Supernatural ..... 26

        Conflict with Nature ..... 26

        Conflict with Society..... 27

        Conflict with Individuals..... 27

        Conflict with One’s Self ..... 28

Chapter 4: The Characters of the Book of Revelation ..... 29

    Difficulties in Characterization..... 29

    The Two Sets of Trinities: Simplifying Character Issues..... 30

    Expanding the Issue: Characters in Revelation..... 33

Chapter 5: The Readers/Hearers of the Book of Revelation ..... 41

    The Role of the Readers..... 41

    Tactics of Interaction with the Ideal Reader..... 41

Conclusion..... 44

Bibliography ..... 45

*Introduction*  
*The Importance of Literary Analysis in Biblical Studies*

In our necessary reverence for the Holy Scriptures and meticulous study of God’s word, the fact that is too often ignored is that the Bible is an incredible contribution to the corpus of literature. Each book of the Bible offers a unique addition to the tapestry of literature woven together into the artistic masterpiece labeled the Old and New Testaments. With multiple genres,<sup>1</sup> a multitude of characters, the ebb and flow of plot and setting, combined with the narrative selections by the author, the Bible has one book that would fall, virtually, under every category found in *Barnes and Noble* – with a few other categories created. As a result, it would behoove serious biblical students to analyze biblical works as pieces of literature, along with the other perspectives of hermeneutical analysis, to see if further enlightenment can come to their interpretations using the various investigative methods prominent in the world of literary study.<sup>2</sup>

In essence, studying a book of the Bible as literature is the art and science of examining the various elements present in a story that compose an effective piece of literature. This includes the analysis of: **the narrator** – his tactics, identity, abilities, etc.; **the setting** – of both the piece of literature and the time in which it was written; **the plot** – the storyline of the piece of literature; **the characters** –

---

<sup>1</sup> Genre is a French word that means “kind” or “type”. The general definition of “genre” is the type or style of writing for a particular piece of literature. While this may sound esoteric, genre is something that everyone interacts with and deciphers on a daily basis. For example, a person will not read the headline “Tigers Slay Indians” the same way in the international section of the newspaper as they would in the sports section or the community section. The international section would lead the reader to interpret the title to indicate an unfortunate occurrence in a continent across the world [India]. The sports section would lead the reader to interpret the title as a major defeat by the Detroit baseball team when they played against the team from Cleveland. The community section would cause the reader to possibly go into frenzy of concern about whether or not the feline perpetrators are still at large – especially if the reader lives close to the reservation. The different reactions by the reader is their subconscious interpretation of the genre, or “section of the newspaper”, in which the headline appears.

<sup>2</sup> The primary advocate for this type of study is Leland Ryken. His works include: *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985); *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993); and *The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* – with Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993). There are other works like this [i.e., David M. Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald M. Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Augsberg Fortress Publishing, 1999)], but Ryken is the most influential at this point in the development of this type of biblical study.

the antagonist and protagonist's actions and identities; and **the reader** – how the author intends the audience to interact with the text through the use of various methodologies. While this type of analysis would not be fruitful for some books of the Bible,<sup>3</sup> for other books, this commitment to reading the Bible as literature can open up avenues of interpretation simply overlooked. For the book of Revelation, this type of study bears great fruit.

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, this type of study would not be as fruitful for most of the book of Proverbs (although there *are* sections where literary analysis is pertinent to the understanding of the text – cf. Prov. 7).

*Chapter 1:*  
*The Author of Revelation as Narrator*

One of the key decisions all great literary authors must establish is not only who their narrator will be but also how their narrator will function. Is the narrator omniscient about all events – even the internal inquiries of the characters? Is the narrator bound by space and/or time? Is the narrator a character of the story or a detached, objective guide throughout the story? Each of these decisions helps to mold the shape of the story being communicated. Consequently, the biblical literature must start with the inquiry of the narrator.

**Who is the Narrator of Revelation? – The Narrator and Characterization**

The narrator of Revelation, referred to as John,<sup>4</sup> is not omniscient in his knowledge of the story like narrators in other stories (i.e., Matthew, Mark, etc.). Instead, John is a key character in the narrative itself.<sup>5</sup> This results in the narrative being told from the first person perspective throughout the revelation because the narrator is experiencing all of the happenings in the narrative as they occur. He is seeing, hearing, and encountering all of the visions and revelations that he is delivering through his writings. For this reason the reader encounters many descriptions about what the narrator (who is the author) “sees”<sup>6</sup> and “hears”<sup>7</sup> in the first person singular<sup>8</sup>. John is experiencing (or has experienced) all of

---

<sup>4</sup> While I do affirm the traditional stance of the church that the identity of the author of Revelation is the apostle John also known as one of the sons of Zebedee, it is not the purpose of the literary critic to question the identity of the author or narrator – for the identity of the narrator is whoever the author makes him to be and the identity of the author is the concern more of historians (although some impact will be felt in the analysis of the setting and/or time period of the writing without a clear identity of the author—see pp. 20-25 below).

<sup>5</sup> It is important to remember that simply because John is referred to as a key character in the book of Revelation does not mean that he is fictitious. The apostle John was a real man living in the first century A.D. who was a follower of Jesus, and for this belief, he has been banished by the emperor Domitian to the island of Patmos (a real island off the coast of Asia Minor).

<sup>6</sup> Rev. 1:2, 11, 12 (2x), 17, 20; 4:1; 5:1, 2, 5, 6, 11; 6:2, 5, 8, 9; 7:1, 2, 9; 8:2, 13; 9:1, 7, 17 (2x); 10:1, 5; 13:1, 2, 11; 14:1, 6, 14; 15:1, 2 (2x), 5; 16:13 (2x); 17:3, 6, 8, 12, 15, 16, 18; 18:1; 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4 (2x), 11, 12; 21:1, 2, 22; 22:8.

<sup>7</sup> Rev. 1:10; 4:1; 5:11, 13; 6:1, 3, 5, 6, 7; 7:4; 8:13; 9:13, 16; 10:4, 8; 12:10; 14:2, 13; 16:1, 5, 7; 18:4; 19:1, 6; 21:3; 22:8.

these visions that are recorded with his own senses. Indeed, Revelation 22:8a makes this point clear, “I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things.”<sup>9</sup>

In a sense, then, the author is limited in his perspective. He is only able to tell the audience the message that is being revealed to him through his senses and commands as he is writing the narrative.<sup>10</sup> In this respect, God is the omniscient narrator (revelator) of John’s visions. This is evident in Revelation 10:3b-4, “When [the mighty angel] shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down.’” God has the ultimate authority of how this narrative will progress – even in its written form.

### **Where is the Narrator? – The Narrator and the Story**

As a result, John is communicating the visions he has received from the omniscient revelator [God] through his description of what he “saw” and “heard.” In essence, John as the narrator is speaking from inside of the story itself. This leads the author to show his connection with the story through his communication of various emotions he experiences as a part of the unfolding story. For example, after describing the magnificent appearance of the glorified Christ in Revelation 1:10-16, John communicates his emotional reaction in Revelation 1:17 when he writes, “When I saw him, I fell at his

---

<sup>8</sup> Rev. 1:10, 12 (3x), 1:17; 4:1; 5:1, 2, 6, 11, 13; 6:1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12; 7:1, 2, 4, 9; 8:2, 13 (2x); 9:1, 13, 16, 17; 10:1, 4, 5, 8; 12:10; 13:1, 2, 11; 14:1, 2, 6, 13, 14; 15:1, 2, 5; 16:1, 5, 7, 13; 17:3, 6 (2x); 18:1, 4; 19:1, 6, 11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4 (2x), 11, 12; 21:1, 2, 3; 21:22; 22:8 (2x).

<sup>9</sup> All biblical quotations will be taken from *The New International Version*, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that John did not have the option or ability to edit, revise, or even expound on notes (both mental and physical) that he may have compiled throughout his visionary experiences at a later time. In the narrative itself, however, John presents the material as if he is experiencing the narrative at the exact moment the reader is experiencing it (or at least at the moment of writing it).

feet as though dead.” John communicates the state of ecstasy that the appearance of Christ caused.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, John communicates the heart wrenching emotion of hopelessness and despair when he realizes that no one was worthy of opening the scroll held in the right hand of God on the throne. John writes in Revelation 5:4, “I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.”<sup>12</sup> From inside the story, the narrator reveals his interaction with the visions recorded.

The key point in this tactic of narrative writing is to draw upon the emotions experienced by the author in order to stir similar emotions in the reader. As John experiences the revelatory visions in his writings, so also the reader experiences the visions as well. This is a powerful narrating tactic that, in essence, guides the reader’s emotions toward the author’s intended end.

### **What are the Narrator’s Limitations? – The Narrator and Time**

Revelation is ironic in its relationship with time. While the previous analysis has shown that the narrator is communicating what he has experienced, the moment in which John experiences the vision cannot always be identified on a timeline. Even though it may be a present moment for John, it may not be a present moment for history, but rather, it may be a moment in the past, present or future history that John is experiencing via “being in the Spirit.”<sup>13</sup> For example, in John’s present moment, he experienced the vision in Revelation 12. This vision is widely accepted to be communicating the Christ-event<sup>14</sup> with the proverbial “veil” pulled back for the audience to see what was going on behind the

---

<sup>11</sup> It is intriguing to parallel the experience that John had on the Mount of Transfiguration with this experience in Revelation 1:9ff. The language in Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8, and Luke 9:28-36 have striking parallels to this experience in Revelation 1.

<sup>12</sup> See also John’s emotions of confusion and awe when he records his two “lapses” described with his attempts to worship the revelatory angels in Revelation 19:9-10 and 22:8-9.

<sup>13</sup> Rev. 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10.

<sup>14</sup> The “Christ-event” is defined as the totality of the ministry of Jesus on earth. In other words, it is a brief way to refer to Jesus’ birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

scenes.<sup>15</sup> While this is a present moment for John, it is an event that occurred in the past that he is experiencing anew – John, the narrator, is not bound by time in the narrative.

Another example of this present moment experience of visions from a different point on the timeline is the multiple times in which the narrator describes his present experience of the end of the world.<sup>16</sup> In each of these visions, John is seeing the end of the world, which is clearly in the future, as a present experience. While each of the recorded events is done with a different intent and purpose depending on the angle, each of the recapitulations<sup>17</sup> is a clear indicator that the author is not bound by time. Instead, his present visions are giving a commentary on all moments of time, past, present and future.

### **What are the Narrator’s Limitations? – The Narrator and Space**

A key characteristic of John’s revelation is the continuous progression from various locales and realms. This does not mean that the author is omnipresent in the narrative; instead, it points to the fact that all space has the possibility of being visited at a moment’s notice without any “real-time” travel. In Revelation 4:1-2, John is transported from the island of Patmos into the throne room of God in heaven in the blink of an eye. From this heavenly perspective, the narrator is able to describe the events in heaven referring to the throne room of God, the revelation of the Lamb, and the judgments implemented by the scrolls – in heaven, John is not limited by space. Similarly, Revelation 10-11:14 shows that John is not limited by space on earth. Revelation 10 seems to occur from the island of Patmos in an ethereal encounter with a magnificent angel, but Revelation 11 appears to be taking place,

---

<sup>15</sup> See R. Lowery, “Christmas on Patmos,” *The Christian Standard* (19 December 2004): 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> Rev. 6:12-17; 11:15-19; 16:17-21; 19:11-21; 20:7-10, 11-15.

<sup>17</sup> Recapitulation is defined as the repetition of the same event from a different perspective with a different purpose often times involving intensification. The colloquial term for “recapitulation” is the abbreviated “recap” that is often times associated with a news or sportscast in which the anchor retells the stories already told with a different perspective (brevity vs. detailed) with a different purpose (explanation vs. reminder). See pp. 10-11 below for more discussion on “recapitulation.”

at least at points, in the city of Jerusalem<sup>18</sup> with the narrator mystically in the midst of the two witnesses. This does not prevent, however, the narrator from immediately being taken to heaven to communicate another vision in Revelation 11:15-19. Space does not bind the narrator in the story.

Furthermore, it is important to note that this blurring of “space” boundaries is not confined to a particular realm (heaven or earth). As seen in the examples above, John also experiences translation from heaven to earth throughout the narrative. In the sequence of visions in chapters 15-18, Revelation 15 and 16 are visions that seem to have the author located in the heavenly realm observing the angels pouring out their bowls in judgment on the earth.<sup>19</sup> Revelation 17, however, immediately translates John to the earth in order to see and have interpreted the vision of the whore riding on the beast and sitting on the seven hills followed by the lamentations of the funeral dirge for Babylon by the orphaned merchants upon its destruction. The point in all of this analysis is to show that the author is not bound by the normal constraints of space – on earth, in heaven, or anywhere in between. John is able to transfer from location to location and realm to realm with relatively no difficulty. Therefore, the narrator is not bound by space in his communication of the narrative. His limitations as a human are superseded by the necessities of the narrative to communicate its meaning.

### **How Does the Narrator Narrate? – The Narrator and Interpretative Keys**

Understanding that John’s apocalypse is heavily laden with symbolic language,<sup>20</sup> it is important to note that the narrator will occasionally break out of the narrative in a moment of symbol

---

<sup>18</sup> See Rev. 11:8 for a veiled reference, albeit negative, to the city of Jerusalem.

<sup>19</sup> This is probably to emphasize the judgment on the corruption of the human system of commerce, sexual indulgences, etc.

<sup>20</sup> While this is debated by some theologians, a literary critic has no problem admitting John’s use of symbols in his revelation. The genre of apocalyptic literature, a common genre of literature in the first two centuries B.C. and A.D., has as one of its primary components the use of symbolism to communicate messages that exceed the ability of human language. In fact, Revelation 1:1 (*contra* the NIV) states, “and [God] sent and signified [the Revelation of Jesus Christ] by his angel unto his servant John.” (KJV) The word “signified” is a good translation of the Greek word (ἐσήμανεν) meaning “to make known through symbols.” For a thorough discussion of this issue

interpretation to the audience of the story. For example, after the description of the destruction of Babylon in Revelation 18, John begins Revelation 19 with heavenly psalms praising God for his judgment. The praise is building because this judgment has commenced the wedding feast of the Lamb. The seer writes in Revelation 19:6-8:

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like peals of thunder, shouting: ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.’

At the very end of this hymn, John provides an aside to his audience to interpret the key symbol in the end of the psalm that may not have been clear. He writes, “Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.” This functions as a clear interpretation of the symbol communicated so that the audience will not miss the function of the language used.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, John uses an interpretative aside in the narrative to define the identity of the dragon in Revelation 12. The passage starts off with the description of another “sign”<sup>22</sup> in heaven, which this time appears to be a majestic woman clothed in the sun who is about to give birth to the Christ child.<sup>23</sup> Immediately after her introduction, John describes the appearance of a grotesque red dragon who is bent on devouring the child at birth. Instead, God delivers the child and the woman to places of protection, which prompts the dragon to wage war in heaven. During this battle with the dragon, Michael, and their angels, the narrator reports, “The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient

---

see Robert Lowery, *Revelation’s Rhapsody: Listening to the Lyrics of the Lamb – How to Read the Book of Revelation* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2006): 67-81.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Rev. 1:20 where a variation of this “aside” technique is used by Jesus. Here Jesus interprets the symbols of the stars and the lampstands for John’s audience like John interprets symbols elsewhere.

<sup>22</sup> Same word used in Revelation 1:1 for “signified.”

<sup>23</sup> The identity of the child becomes apparent in verse 5 when John describes the child as one “who will rule the nations with an iron scepter.” This reference is an allusion to the Old Testament passage in Psalm 2:9. This psalm has been considered by both Jewish and Christian scholars alike to be referring to the Messiah’s exaltation to power. As a result, the “ruler with the iron scepter” is identified as the Messiah – whom the Christians identify as Jesus.

serpent called the devil, or Satan..." (v. 9). This short *aside* makes clear to John's audience the message being communicated in the text by specifically identifying the key character symbolized by the dragon – Satan. This use of interpretative explanations allows the author through the narrator to insure that his audience understands the message being communicated in the narrative. While it does, at times, break the flow of the literature, the importance of the clear communication between the author and reader (via the narrator) is of paramount importance.<sup>24</sup>

### **How Does the Narrator Narrate? – The Narrator and Privileged Information**

One author writes, "The divulging and withholding of knowledge enable[s] the...narrator to guide what the readers know and when they learn it. By so doing, the narrator shapes the readers' readiness to embrace this story."<sup>25</sup> John utilizes this tactic throughout the entire narrative. Revelation 10, with the seven thunders, has already been mentioned regarding the obvious concealing of information by the narrator, but a more subtle form of this divulgence of information comes in chapters 12-20. In chapter 12, John introduces the key antagonist in the story, Satan. While this character has already been alluded to in the opening chapters (Rev. 2:9, 13, 24; 3:9), this key adversary is not formally introduced to the audience until the twelfth chapter, where he appears as a dragon trying to destroy the workings of God throughout history. This leads to the appearance of the two beasts of Revelation 13 and Babylon itself in Revelation 14:8. This progression of revelation is the narrator's way of divulging the intended information to the audience in a manner that prepares the audience for a climactic moment of interaction between the key antagonists and the key protagonists.

---

<sup>24</sup> In fact, the Gospel of John utilizes this specific narrative tactic to explain certain elements to the reader that may not be known due to cultural differences or lack of information. In the Gospel of John, however, the narrator is not a character in the story (although he is seen as the "beloved disciple"), but instead he is the omniscient narrating force that describes all events pertinent to the story (even the thoughts of some) – often times utilizing the interpretative aside. See John 1:38, 41, 42; 3:24; 4:8, 9, 25, 44; 6:1, 71; 11:16; 14:22; 18:10; 19:13, 17; 20:9, 16, 24; 21:2, 20.

<sup>25</sup> David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999): 43.

As a result, we see in a chiastic structure<sup>26</sup> these key antagonists (Satan, Beasts, Babylon) destroyed by the key protagonists (the Trinity) beginning with Babylon in chapter 18. Following this, the two beasts are destroyed at the end of chapter 19 by the rider on the white horse, Christ. Finally, the climactic moment of the destruction of Satan occurs in Revelation 20:7-10 by God.<sup>27</sup> This introduction and destruction of the key antagonists is a subtle way for the narrator to reveal the enemies of God (which would be the enemies of the audience as well) and then dramatically show how God will eliminate each of them in his own time. This strategy of revealing privileged information creates a deep relationship of trust between the audience and the narrator.

### **How Does the Narrator Narrate? – The Narrator and Recapitulation**

The key structural tactic used by the author to communicate his message through the narrator is recapitulation. This is the art of repetition that focuses on retelling the same event from a different perspective with a different purpose often times involving intensification. The most blatant example of this tactic in the book of Revelation is found in the seals, trumpets, and bowls. While it is true that each of the seven acts of judgment takes the reader to the end of the world (cf. Rev. 6:12-17; 11:15-19; 16:17-21), there is a different perspective and purpose communicated in each revolution—as well as intensification in the destruction implemented.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> A “chiastic structure” is a literary device, commonly found in Jewish literature, where a complex parallelism is constructed to emphasize the central point – like the tip of an arrow. A typical chiastic structure can be diagrammed as follows: A – B – C – C` – B` – A`. In this diagram, the first point or phrase (symbolized by A) parallels the last point or phrase (symbolized by A`), the second point or phrase (symbolized by B) parallels the second to last point or phrase (symbolized by B`)—and so on. The central point or phrase is the key emphasis intended by this “chiastic structure”. In the above example, there is emphasis being put on the destruction of Babylon, which would have been the more visible threat to the Christians in first century Asia Minor.

<sup>27</sup> Ironically, a battle is anticipated by the reader between the key antagonists and the key protagonists, but such a battle never occurs (cf. Rev. 16:16ff.; 19:19-21; 20:7-10). The purpose of this progression is to create dramatic tension and engage the audience on a deeper level than mere communication of a particular truth. Instead, the author allows the audience to experience the demise of the antagonists that have wreaked havoc on God’s plan throughout the last half of the book, only to realize that they were fulfilling God’s plan the whole time. See pp. 41-43 below for more information.

<sup>28</sup> Seals destroy 1/4, the trumpets destroy 1/3, and the bowls destroy 100%.

Another example of recapitulation in the book of Revelation is found in *the* battle at the end of time described in chapters 16, 19, and 20.<sup>29</sup> All three of these descriptions come in the context of the final judgment, but the judgment itself is focused on three different key elements. While chapter 16 focuses on the judgment of corrupt humanity and chapter 19 focuses on the destruction of the two beasts, chapter 20 describes the judgment of Satan. A few reasons for seeing these battles as recapitulated will help clarify this connection. As already mentioned, all three events are in the context of the final judgment of the world. Furthermore, in all three chapters, an evil army is gathered in order to make war against God. Likewise, in all three chapters, the evil army never touches the army of God because God destroys all of them before a battle even commences. As a result, in all three chapters, *the* battle turns into an execution.

Understanding that repetition is the master teacher, the author through the narrator, recapitulates certain events from different perspectives with intensification in order to establish the key element of his revelation: God's sovereignty throughout the events of history—past, present and future. This literary style of recapitulation would allow the audiences hearing this message read aloud (Rev. 1:3; 22:18) to engage in the vivid pictures that John reveals, and to embrace repeatedly the truths that he is communicating to them.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> The emphasis on the definite article in *the* battle is due to the fact that Rev. 16:14; 19:19; and 20:8, this battle is referred to as τὸν πόλεμον, or "THE battle."

<sup>30</sup> Many will object to recapitulation in the book of Revelation, but a commonly overlooked fact is that recapitulation is used repeatedly throughout the Scriptures. Genesis 2 is a recapitulation of the creation account in Genesis 1. In Genesis 41, Pharaoh's second dream is a recapitulation of the first dream (esp. vs. 26). Daniel 2 records Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the four kingdoms in the giant statue of metal, which is recapitulated in a dream to Daniel in his dream of four kingdoms in the form of four beasts. The four gospels themselves are examples of recapitulation of the life of Jesus from four different perspectives (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) with four different purposes (Matthew = to show Jesus as king; Mark = to show Jesus as slave; Luke = to show Jesus as man; John = to show Jesus as God).

## How Does the Narrator Narrate? – The Narrator and Old Testament Allusions

In the 404 verses of the book of Revelation, it has been estimated that the author uses over 500 allusions to the Old Testament.<sup>31</sup> While the author never formulaically introduces an Old Testament quotation (i.e., “As it is written...”), John clearly refers to the Old Testament consistently throughout the apocalypse. Using these allusions, John communicates deeper realities that are present throughout salvation history that God has revealed to his people. For example, in Revelation 1, John sees a vision of the glorified Christ on the island of Patmos. In the narrator’s description of this event, he describes seeing Jesus as “someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes like blazing fire.”<sup>32</sup> While there are several possible allusions to the Old Testament in these two verses, a clear allusion is to the vision seen by the prophet Daniel in Daniel 7.

In Daniel 7:9 and 13, the prophet describes his heavenly vision when he writes, “As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair on his head was white like wool...and there before me was one like a son of man.” Immediately, one is able to see the linguistic parallels between the passage in Revelation 1 and Daniel 7. Specifically, the distinction of “one like the son of man” is found in both passages, which is not a very common phrase throughout antiquity. Furthermore, the description of someone with white clothes and hair as white as wool is found in both passages, thereby strengthening the connection. Nevertheless, there is at least one key difference between the passages. In Daniel 7, the one with hair white like wool is the “Ancient of Days” who is sitting on the throne. The “Ancient of Days” is merely a circumlocution, or roundabout reference, for “God” or “Yahweh.” In Revelation 1, however, Jesus is the one who has hair

---

<sup>31</sup> See Lowery, *Revelation’s*, pp. 175-197 for a verse-by-verse parallel between Revelation and numerous Old Testament passages.

<sup>32</sup> Revelation 1:13-14.

white like wool. John is saying that Jesus is, in fact, God, which is nothing short of blasphemous if it is not true.

Old Testament allusions are constantly scattered throughout the text and function to elicit powerful images of God's activity throughout history and, most recently, through Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup> Understanding the Old Testament passages behind the revelation will prove to be the key to understanding the meaning and purpose for many of John's symbols and messages in the apocalypse.

### **How Does the Narrator Narrate? – The Narrator and Numerology**

A pervasive literary device used by the narrator is known as numerology. Numerology is the practice of using numbers as symbols instead of mere units of measurement. With a plethora of numbers appearing throughout Revelation,<sup>34</sup> John's genre (loaded with symbolic language) cautions the reader to weigh the numbers instead of measuring them.

What does this mean? When we come across numbers in our western, post-Enlightenment world, we immediately measure the numbers. For example, 9/11 are numbers that are used to identify a specific month and day for a given year. These numbers, however, have transformed in America to something that goes beyond measurement and into the realm of "weighing" the numbers due to the events at the World Trade Center in 2001. Now to suggest that 9/11 merely measures a date and does not give a weight to sociological events as a symbol of suffering is to denigrate the meaning of the numbers altogether. Likewise, the audience of Revelation, due to the genre and the common practice of numerology, would first weigh the numbers before ever thinking of measuring them. Even with the most popular numbers quoted from the book of Revelation (7, 144,000, 666, 1,000, etc.), there is not a

---

<sup>33</sup> See Hebrews 1:1ff.

<sup>34</sup> Revelation has the most occurrences in the Bible of the use of numbers outside of the book of Numbers.

single number in the book of Revelation that does not take on a symbolic meaning on some level of communication.<sup>35</sup>

A good example of the mistake in taking the numbers used in Revelation literally is found in the interpretation of Revelation 7 by the Jehovah's Witnesses. From this text, the Jehovah's Witnesses claim that the Bible teaches that there will only be 144,000 people allowed in the realm of heaven with God.<sup>36</sup> An interpretative faux pas occurs when this number is measured instead of weighed. When the Old Testament background is allowed to interpret the text, the number 12 is seen to symbolize completeness.<sup>37</sup> When 12 (completeness) is multiplied by 12 (completeness), we receive 144, which in numerology would symbolize "complete completeness". In order to get 144,000, John multiplies the complete completeness by 1,000, which is symbolized of a vast number of completeness and is commonly associated with God's vast sovereignty.<sup>38</sup> From this perspective then, the number 144,000 symbolizes the complete completeness of God's people under the direction and sovereignty of God in history that will ultimately enjoy God in the consummation of history but also already enjoys God's reign on earth presently.

Numbers, then, are used by the author to communicate realities and truths on an emotional and symbolic level, which allows his message to transcend our language. Furthermore, this adds to the

---

<sup>35</sup> Often times people will object to this assertion by saying that the seven churches in Revelation are only a literal number of churches that the letter was written too (cf. Dispensationalists who take these seven churches as seven dispensations in the church). However, from the messages communicated and the usage of the number 7 throughout the Old Testament, Jewish literature, and the apocalypse itself, it would be safe to conclude that a symbolic message is present in this literal number 7 of the seven churches as well. It can be said that the number 7 for the churches points to the fact that the messages, warnings, and imperatives are for the 7 individual churches as well as to the universal church as a whole.

<sup>36</sup> See Tower Watch Ministries, "The Jehovah's Witness Version of the 144,000," *The 144,000* (September 28, 2008) <http://www.towerwatch.com/Witnesses/statistics/partakers.htm>. In addition to ignoring the numerology of the passage, the Jehovah's Witnesses also make the mistake of asserting that the 144,000 people are in heaven, while the text clearly portrays them as being on earth.

<sup>37</sup> Especially in regards to God's people (cf. the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 disciples, etc.).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Psalm 90:4 and 2 Pet. 3:8.

poetic manner in which he is delivering his message. Instead of the sterile assurances of God found in many other writings, the author taps into the audience's emotional frame of reference to communicate a reality beyond words.<sup>39</sup>

### **How Does the Narrator Narrate? – The Narrator and Foreshadowing**

The author also utilizes the element of foreshadowing in his literary composition through the narrator. This element creates a strong awareness of anticipation and dramatic tension that help progress the story towards its climax. In some sense, foreshadowing can create a longing in the reader for the tension to be alleviated that was created by the “potentiality” of the foreshadow. An electrically charged foreshadow is found in Revelation 12:10ff. As already mentioned, in this chapter the key antagonist of the story, Satan, is introduced.<sup>40</sup> In the same chapter, Satan's demise is celebrated in verses 10ff. He is seen as being defeated and overcome by the blood of the Lamb. This reminder clues the reader into the reality that Satan is a proverbial “dead man walking.” That while he is currently active, albeit in a restrained manner (i.e., Rev. 20:1-3), ultimately he has already lost the battle. This foreshadowing in Revelation 12 meets its culmination in Revelation 20:7-10 when Satan is destroyed at the consummation.<sup>41</sup>

While there are numerous other examples of foreshadowing in the apocalypse, the primary point to retain is the power in the message of John using literary techniques to build dramatic tension

---

<sup>39</sup> This is similar to the way in which we attempt to communicate our emotions to each other in everyday language. When we are frustrated with someone, we may say, “I have told you a thousand times to leave me alone!” Was the person told, literally, a thousand times to “leave me alone”? No! The number 1,000 is not meant to be measured...but weighed. Or biblically speaking, when Peter asks Jesus in Matthew 18:20-21, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus replies, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (lit. “seventy times seven”). So if a person sins against you the seventy-eighth time (or four hundred and ninety first), you do not have to forgive them? No! The number is not meant to be measured...but weighed.

<sup>40</sup> Again, while this figure had been foreshadowed in the opening chapters of Revelation, chapter 12 introduces him blatantly in the narrative (Rev. 2:9, 13, 24; 3:9).

<sup>41</sup> See G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999): 991-995 for intriguing parallels and connections between Revelation 12 and 20.

and anticipation. This can be focused on a negative anticipation (destruction of evil) or a positive anticipation (deliverance from evil).<sup>42</sup>

### **How Does the Narrator Narrate? – The Narrator and Dialogue**

Often times, interjections can be passed over as merely a distraction or a lapse in the author's writing, but in Revelation, the interjections often function as interpretative guides to the passages in their respective contexts. A good example of this use of dialogue to help progress and interpret the narrative is found in Revelation 6:15-17. This passage concludes the vision of the seven seals that poured out judgment on the earth. The seer sees the conclusion to this vision as follows:

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

Amidst the description, the text contains an interjection from some of the characters in the story. In this interjection, a key question is posed, "Who can stand?" When the wrath of God is poured out on the unrighteous, who can stand? When justice has come to retrieve its wages, which of the sinful can stand? When the holy God enters into the realm of humanity, who can stand? This interjection poses a key question for all humanity. The answer comes in chapter 7 with the author saying, "The people of God, the followers of the Lamb—the Christians, will be able to stand." This interjection, therefore, functions as more than fluff or a momentary lapse of the author. It functions as a tool for prompting and revealing the ultimate point of this narrative section.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Cf. the connection between all of the promises in Revelation 2 and 3 and the parallels with the elements of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and 22.

<sup>43</sup> See also Revelation 16:15 and 21:3-4. Some have suggested that the apparent interludes throughout the text (Revelation 7; 10-11; 16:15) can be used to interpret the sections for which they are interludes.

Dialogue, then, serves a much greater purpose than merely recording the communicative interaction like a stenographer. Rather, dialogue is used by the narrator to prompt, progress and interpret key messages throughout the story.

### **How Does the Narrator Narrate? – The Narrator and Parody**

Throughout the narrative, the author uses a sophisticated form of irony commonly referred to as parody. A parody is a feeble imitation of something or someone that communicates a message about either the one who is initiating the parody or the one whom the parody is about. In addition to the subtle parodies of the Roman Empire in the text,<sup>44</sup> some of the parodies that can be found in Revelation include the woman in Revelation 17 (the whore) and the woman in Revelation 21 (the bride), the resurrection of Christ pictured in Revelation 11<sup>45</sup> and the resurrection of the beast wounded in the head in Revelation 13, and the city of Babylon in Revelation 17 and 18 and the city of God, the New Jerusalem, in Revelation 21 and 22.

The purpose of these parodies is to show how the evil representations of the various godly realities pale in comparison. In the book of Revelation, parody is typically used to emphasize the futility of the attempts of evil to be and function in the same manner as the godly realities. In addition, it is also used to warn the readers of the potential for evil entities to look a lot like the godly realities. While they may look and act like God, they fail miserably to deliver the true good only found in God.

### **How Does the Narrator Narrate? – The Narrator and Parabolic Nature**

While the study on this particular element of the apocalypse has not been given much attention from the scholarly community, the narrator utilizes the element of parable to both reveal and conceal

---

<sup>44</sup> Revelation 4 and 5 as parody of Imperial Cult, cf. David Aune, "The Apocalypse of John and Graeco-Roman Revelatory Magic," (*New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 481-501.

<sup>45</sup> This is not to say that Revelation 11's primary intent is not to use Christ's activity on earth as a symbol for the church, but rather, it is merely to say that Christ seems to be a part of the historical referent for this symbol.

his message throughout the revelation. John first indicates that this will be a recurring tactic throughout his literary composition in Revelation 2-3 when he repeats the phrase, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”<sup>46</sup> This type of language is used in connection with parables frequently throughout the gospel records of Jesus’ parabolic teaching.<sup>47</sup> The intent of such parables is to allow those that are able and willing to hear the message of God to be challenged or encouraged by the words, while those that do not want or are not able to hear the message of God to be confused or repelled by the words. In other words, the parables and Revelation are pushing the hearer further toward their committed allegiances: be it God or Satan.

John continues this parabolic nature through the use of riddles. In Revelation 13:9-10 John writes, “He who has an ear, let him hear. If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed.” Or in Revelation 22:11, “Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy.” This type of language is used throughout the revelation as a means to reveal and conceal.<sup>48</sup>

## **Summary**

The narrator in the book of Revelation is John, both the author and prime character in the narrative. John tells the narrative from within the story by communicating what he is able to “see,” “hear,” and “touch.” Through his abilities to pass effortlessly across time, space and between realms, John narrates the revelation using multiple literary devices to progress the story without losing the reader in the visions. By tapping into familiar literary techniques and cultural practices, John is able to

---

<sup>46</sup> Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Matt. 11:15; 13:9, 15-16, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; 8:18; Luke 8:8; 14:35.

<sup>48</sup> It could be argued that the book of Revelation is a whole book of parables in that it utilizes narrative in the same manner that parables are used in the gospels.

challenge his audience to a deeper commitment—be it toward evil or good. Revelation, as a story, is meant to be polarizing.

## Chapter 2: The Setting of the Book of Revelation

### The Socio-Political Setting – Caught in Between Worlds

Throughout the revelation, one becomes distinctly aware of the socio-political climate as being one of tension and conflict<sup>49</sup>. There are at least 95 different passages that describe or refer to conflicts and/or oppositions.<sup>50</sup> The overwhelming evidence points to a situation of turmoil. While it would be inaccurate to claim that there was a systematic persecution or imperial decree that specifically demanded the eradication of Christians, it would be equally inaccurate to assume that the situation in the Roman world was not tense for Christians. There were at least three agencies of opposition for Christians to deal with in the Roman world that would have contributed to the intensity of the situation.

First, the Christians were blatantly experiencing persecution from the Jews throughout the Roman Empire. This should come as no surprise because the Jews have been the primary antagonists throughout the whole Christian story. The Jews were a key driving force, utilizing Roman legalities, in the crucifixion of Jesus.<sup>51</sup> The Jews were a key driving force in the persecution of the Christians that led to the Diaspora, for this *was* the mission of Saul.<sup>52</sup> The Jews were a key driving force in the persecution of Paul and his companions.<sup>53</sup> It should be no surprise, then, to find the Jews as a key driving force of

---

<sup>49</sup> Conflict is defined as: two people (or kingdoms) trying to occupy the same space at the same time.

<sup>50</sup> This list records opposition in a more generic instance, in that even God's judgment on the earth is considered opposition: Rev. 1:9; 2:2, 3, 4, 5b, 6, 7b, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17b, 19b, 20-23, 26; 3:3, 9, 12, 16; 5:6, 9, 12; 6:2, 4, 6, 8b, 9, 11, 12-17; 7:2b, 14b; 8:5, 7, 8-9, 10-11, 12; 9:3-11, 15-19; 11:2b, 5, 7, 10b, 13, 18; 12:4, 7, 8-9, 12b, 13, 15-16, 17; 13:6, 7, 10b, 15, 16-17; 14:8, 9b-11, 12, 13a, 19-20; 16:1, 2, 3, 4, 5b, 6a, 6b, 8-9, 10-11, 14b, 19b; 17:6, 14, 16; 18:8b, 20b, 21, 24; 19:2, 15, 17b-18, 19, 20b-21; 20:2-3, 4a, 7-8, 9b, 10, 15; 22:18, 22.19.

<sup>51</sup> Matt. 12:14; 21:33-46; 26:4; Mark 11:18; 12:1-12; 14:1; Luke 19:47; 20:9-19; John 5:18; 7:19, 25; 8:37, 40. While it would be unfair for the Jews to take all of the blame for the crucifixion of Christ in that the Romans were involved and the Scriptures point out that the sins of all people were responsible for his death, it would be irresponsible to eradicate any responsibility from the Jews in light of the overwhelming amount of biblical texts that state otherwise.

<sup>52</sup> Acts 7:54-60; 8:1-3; 9:1-6.

<sup>53</sup> Acts 17:5-9, 13-15; 18:6; 21:27-36; 23:1-11, 12-22.

persecution in the book of Revelation.<sup>54</sup> The motivation behind this persecution from the Jews is more evident when one realizes the honor/shame sociological system in place. Namely, the expansion of the Christians was shaming to the Jews who perceived the Christians as a blasphemous offshoot of Judaism. In addition, the Christians would commonly go into the synagogues and preach the message of Jesus Christ,<sup>55</sup> which was a shaming act to the Jews as well. As a result, the only way to gain back their honor was to persecute, kill, and eradicate all Christians, but there was a problem. The Jews did not have the authority to kill. Only the Romans had that “privilege”, which functions as a precursor to the second group the Christians were in conflict with: the Imperial Cult.

The Imperial Cult was the practice of worshipping the emperor of Rome as a god. Often times, the Imperial Cult would be instituted for an emperor only after he had died. The Senate would gather and establish whether or not the deceased emperor was to be worshipped as a god or not. This practice was altered for the first time under the reign of Caligula (AD 41-54), where he *demanded* to be worshipped as a god while he was still living. A few of the emperors that followed Caligula continued this practice, namely Nero (AD 54-68) and Domitian (AD 81-96).

Accepting the traditional date of the book of Revelation as A.D. 95-96, the Christians at the time of the apocalypse were under the reign of Domitian.<sup>56</sup> Suetonius (A.D. 69-112) records the fact that Domitian demanded godly accolades from his subjects when he writes in *Domitian XIII*, “With no less arrogance he began as follows in issuing a circular letter in the name of his procurators, ‘Our Master and our God bids that this be done.’<sup>57</sup> In addition to sacrifices offered to the emperors as gods, festivals

---

<sup>54</sup> Rev. 2:9, 14, 20-24; 3:9.

<sup>55</sup> Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14, 42; 14:1; 17:1-2, 10, 17; 18:4, 19, 26; 19:8. [Note the definition of conflict from footnote 49].

<sup>56</sup> An Imperial Cult temple dedicated to Domitian was erected in the city of Ephesus, which is the first city of the seven cities addressed in the book of Revelation. (See Revelation 2)

<sup>57</sup> *Suetonius*, vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library, ed. By T.E. Page, et al. and trans. by J.C. Rolfe.

celebrating the emperor as a god were commonly held in cities, and all citizens were expected to participate.<sup>58</sup>

This put the Christians in an incredibly difficult situation. A key tenet to being a Christian was to worship Jesus as the only Lord and Savior, while Rome demanded the same allegiance. At this point, the Christians were faced with six options of response: Quit (curse Jesus and bow before Rome); Lie (worship the emperor in action but not with the heart); Fight (overthrow the oppression); Change the 'law'; Adjust (try to incorporate the Emperor worship with the Christian Theology); or be faithful until Death. It is in this volatile position that Christians in Asia Minor found themselves at the time of the composition of the book of Revelation by John.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to the Jewish and the Imperial Cult opposition, Christians were in direct conflict with Roman society.<sup>60</sup> Ethically, the Christians and the Romans were worlds apart. In a society that celebrated sexual pleasures of all kinds (married/unmarried, homosexual/heterosexual, etc.), Christians stood against the grain by practicing monogamy and faithfulness. In a society that celebrated and thrived off of war and bloodshed, the Christians stood against the grain by practicing pacifism. In a society that worshipped wealth and power, Christians were dedicated to using their wealth to help the lesser brother and practicing being a servant. In a society that embraced numerous gods exalting only the emperor as the chief god, the Christians practiced monotheism and worshipped only the Trinity as a god, shunning all other allegiances.

---

<sup>58</sup> The purpose for universal participation in a city was commonly tied to political reasons. Oftentimes, the Imperial Cult was most powerful and pervasive in cities that were further away from Rome, like those in Asia Minor. The reason for this illustrious worship in these cities was to insure their allegiance with the Roman emperor even if they lived on the fringes of Rome. These cities were granted various rights as "free city-states" by the Roman government in exchange for their undying allegiance. The Imperial Cult became a key way in showing their allegiance to Rome.

<sup>59</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997): 325.

<sup>60</sup> See the occurrences of Paul in Philippi (Acts 16) and Ephesus (Acts 19:23ff.) for key examples of Christian conflict with society.

This final point is the primary point of contention with the Christians and the rest of society. While all of the other differences made the Roman society suspicious of the peculiar Christian actions,<sup>61</sup> the final element of shunning all of the other gods, even the emperor, was considered treasonous. In a society that links the success of war and empire with the worship of the various gods, the Christians were seen as a movement that was sabotaging the *Pax Romana* by instigating the gods to anger. Their lack of participation in the Imperial Cult and other temple worship activities was not merely an act of seclusion; it was an act of subversion.

While the first explicitly systematic, empire-wide persecution of the Christians in edict form did not occur until the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century under Decius,<sup>62</sup> it is clear that from the time of Jesus the Christians were under extreme pressure and opposition from the Jews, the Imperial Cult, and the Roman society as a whole. This would account for the overwhelming amount of persecution language in the book of Revelation and the focus on reinstating a resilience and hope that would naturally be waning under such opposition.

### **The Narrative Setting – Interplay Between the Cosmic and the Mundane**

While one could argue that the book of Revelation takes place on the island of Patmos during the reign of Domitian, a quick read through the book will reveal that the island of Patmos is left in the distance as John is taken on this ecstatic journey. Through God's divine revelation, the barriers between heaven and earth seem to merge, which allows for the seer to communicate his message from a variety of settings.

---

<sup>61</sup> Other accusations of Christians in the ancient world included: atheism – because they denied the legitimacy of the pantheon of gods and only worshipped one god that could not be seen by anyone; cannibalism – because they described the practice of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of their leader; incest – because everyone called each other brother or sister.

<sup>62</sup> The persecution of Nero does not fall into this category because it appears that his persecution of Christians was an isolated event in the city of Rome and not the entire empire.

First, it is important to recognize the strong connection between the activities of heaven and the activities of earth. John stresses this connection in the opening chapters of the apocalypse by establishing the connection between the churches on earth with an angel in heaven.<sup>63</sup> Each of the messages to the seven churches of Asia Minor is addressed to the representative angel for that church in the heavenly courts. This sets the tone for the blurring between the boundaries of heaven and earth that John continuously develops throughout the revelation.

A key example of this connection is found in Revelation 16. In this chapter, the final series of 7 judgments is implemented through the angels merely pouring out bowls in heaven, which result in magnificent plagues on earth. The actions in heaven have a clear effect on earth. This motif is a continuation of the first two series of 7 judgments, the seals and the trumpets. Merely breaking a seal on a scroll in heaven by the Lamb caused judgments to reign on the earth in chapter 6, while the sounding of trumpets in heaven in chapters 8 and 9 are the catalysts for judgments on the earth. All throughout the revelation John blurs the distinct settings of heaven and earth into a cosmic carousel that takes the reader up to heaven and down to earth as it recapitulates in an intensifying spiral.

As a result of this blurring, we find John constantly shifting from one realm to another or one location to another. For example, in chapter 4, John is taken up from earth to heaven. Or chapter 17, John is taken to earth from heaven to describe the whore riding the beast; or even John's perspective of heaven merging with earth in Revelation 21. A good example of John's constant shift from one realm to another is found in Revelation 20. At the beginning of the chapter (vv. 1-3), John sees an angel coming down out of heaven to earth to bind Satan and throw him into the Abyss. The following verses (vv. 4-6) reveal the fate of the faithful by John going into the heavenly realms to witness Christ and the faithful ruling.<sup>64</sup> In verses 7-10, the narrator is shifted back to earth to show Satan's release and final

---

<sup>63</sup> Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14.

destruction. This scene ushers in verses 11-15 that show the final judgment, which is presumably in heaven (or perhaps is a mixture of heaven and earth).

The point in describing the close connection between heaven and earth and John's continual shift between the two realms is to suggest that John's setting has to be determined by the context. It is a shifting setting that carries the same themes and functions as a normal setting would allow, but John pushes the limits on a particular setting into a blurred picture of heaven and earth with miniscule separation—a divide by only a thin veil.

---

<sup>64</sup> While a large number of exegetes will argue that this scene is on earth, a simple word study throughout the book of Revelation on "throne" will show that every time the word is used in connection with God and Jesus it is located in heaven and would be associated with "good" (this would be the only exception), but every time it is associated with Satan or his servants, it is located on earth and associated with "evil" (this would be the only exception). It seems logical, then, since the text does not mention earth as its dwelling that we are in heaven with the throne of Christ like all of the other times the word "throne" is used in connection with the persons of the Trinity.

### *Chapter 3: The Plot of the Book of Revelation*

#### **Plot: Plotting the Conflict**

Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie point out that the key to the plot is conflict. Conflict is what both drives the plot and reveals the key message the plot is driving toward and through.<sup>65</sup> The conflict of a plot can be divided up into five categories: conflict with supernatural, conflict with nature, conflict with society, conflict with other individuals, and conflict with one's self.<sup>66</sup> Revelation contains all five of these conflicts that point toward the same theme and message: God is sovereign.

#### **Conflict with Supernatural**

Revelation is full of conflict with the supernatural. The most blatant conflict with the supernatural is in Revelation 12. In this passage, the dragon, or Satan, declares war on God's plan of salvation by making war against the people of God, the Messiah, heaven itself, and the Christians. In the middle of the description of this supernatural conflict, John inserts a hymn that declares God's victory and sovereignty over this supernatural force because of the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 12:11). Furthermore, in all of the attempted conflicts by Satan, God's sovereignty destroys Satan's attempts to ruin God's salvific plan. In the end, God, in his sovereignty, destroys Satan in Revelation 20:7-10.

#### **Conflict with Nature**

God's sovereignty is also manifested in the conflict with nature. The seals, trumpets and bowls all contain key elements of judgment on creation. In addition, at the end of all the seals, trumpets and bowls, John writes that there came "flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder."<sup>67</sup> On the surface, this literary parallel does not seem to have much significance, but the key to understanding the meaning of this phrase is found in Revelation 4:5, "From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings, and

---

<sup>65</sup> Rhoads, pg. 77ff.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>67</sup> See Revelation 8:5; 11:19; 16:18. While there are some variations on this formula in each of the three passages, these elements are present in all three.

peals of thunder.” In other words, all of the judgments inflicted by the seals, trumpets and bowls were stamped with the approval of God on his throne through the recurring phrase “flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder.” God is exerting his sovereignty over creation, which is in conflict with him—specifically due to the effects of the “fall” in Genesis 3.<sup>68</sup>

### **Conflict with Society**

As noted above, the Christians in the first century were in clear conflict with Roman society, and Revelation 17 and 18 shows that God himself was in conflict with Roman society. The longest description of any of the judgments in Revelation is reserved for the judgment of the Roman society in these two chapters. Not even Satan is allotted as much time as this judgment (cf. Rev. 20:7-10). In these chapters, God powerfully condemns the society’s obsession with perversion and commerce/materialism. God’s zeal against such abominations can be seen in Jesus’ reaction to the church of Laodicea (3:14-22), or even in Revelation 18 with the recurring phrase “In one hour...” (18:10, 17, 19). This phrase emphasizes the magnitude of God’s sovereignty to judge those that oppose him, no matter how great or powerful the opposition may appear. These chapters emphasize God’s sovereignty over Roman society.

### **Conflict with Individuals**

The conflict between God and individuals is displayed in at least two categories: conflict with the individuals of the world and conflict with individual Christians who compromise with the world. Revelation 6:15-17 keenly pictures God’s conflict with individuals of the world, in which the worldly individuals, ironically, reveal God’s sovereignty:

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

---

<sup>68</sup> See Romans 8:19-22 and Revelation 20:11b.

The proclamation by the worldly individuals who have lived their lives in conflict with God is quite telling of how powerful God's sovereignty in this conflict truly is.

In addition, Revelation 2 and 3 make it quite clear that God demands unadulterated allegiance to his kingdom by reprimanding the deviants in the seven churches of Asia Minor and commanding their repentance. The fate of the individual Christians that compromise is made clear in Revelation 14:9b-12:

If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on his forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name. This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.

### **Conflict with One's Self**

The only real conflict with one's self found in the book of Revelation is done by the narrator himself two times, both of which emphasize the same theme: God's sovereignty. In Revelation 19:10 and 22:8-9 John enters into a conflict with himself when he attempts to worship the angel that is revealing the visions to him. Clearly, John is a man that is dedicated to God, but in the moments of revelation, he becomes so overwhelmed that he begins to worship something other than God. The angel correctly rebukes John in both instances and exclaims that he is merely a servant to the sovereign God. The theme once again surfaces of God's sovereignty, but in the final passage (22:8-9) the reaction to this theme is commanded: "Worship God!"

## Chapter 4: The Characters of the Book of Revelation

### Difficulties in Characterization

The characterization in the book of Revelation has proven to be quite difficult to establish for several reasons. First, the sheer volume of the amount of characters can compete with any novel in its propensity.<sup>69</sup> Second, minor characters at the beginning of the book will surface later in the book in a completely different manner for a completely different purpose. For example, angels have a prominent function throughout all phases of the revelation, but their actions differ drastically from vision to vision.<sup>70</sup> In Revelation 16:1-20, seven angels are given bowls to pour out judgment on the corrupt actions of humanity. In Revelation 21:9, however, John writes, “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’” In this scene, while it refers to his previous appearance, the angel has totally changed his purpose from an agent of judgment to an agent of revelation.

Third, the major characters seem to go through various recapitulations each time that they appear. A key example of this difficulty is found in the appearances of Jesus throughout the revelation. In Revelation 1:9-20, Jesus appears as the glorified Christ in all of his heavenly splendor, but in Revelation 5:6ff. Jesus appears as a slain lamb. In Revelation 14:14, Jesus possibly appears as a harvester of the souls of the earth, but in Revelation 19:11ff. Jesus appears as a divine warrior. The complexity, then, of establishing the character’s definition varies throughout the entire book.

---

<sup>69</sup> D.L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1998): 181-183, Appendix.

<sup>70</sup> *Description of Angels in Revelation* – Messenger for the 7 churches (2; 3); Deliverers of the judgments in the 7 trumpets (8-9); Deliverers of the judgments in the 7 bowls (15-16); Representatives before God (1:20; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:7, 14); God’s Restrainers (7:1; 20:1); Residents of Heaven (3:5; 7:11; 14:10; 21:12); God’s Measurer (21:15, 17); Messengers (1:1; 5:2, 11; 7:2; 10:1, 5, 8, 9, 10; 11:15; 14:6, 8, 9, 15; 17:1, 3, 7, 15; 18:1; 19:9, 17; 21:9; 22:1, 6 [2x], 8, 16); God’s Agents/Weapons of War/Judgment (7:2; 8:2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13; 9:1, 11, 13, 14 [2x], 15; 10:7; 12:7; 14:17, 18, 19; 15:1, 6, 7, 8; 16:1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17; 17:1; 18:21; 20:1; 21:9); Satan’s Agents to wage War (12:7, 9); *Actions of the Angels in Revelation* – Worshipping God (7:11; 8:3, 4; 16:5); God’s Agents/Weapons of War/Judgment (7:2; 8:2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13; 9:1, 11, 13, 14 [2x], 15; 10:7; 12:7; 14:17, 18, 19; 15:1, 6, 7, 8; 16:1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17; 17:1; 18:21; 20:1; 21:9); Fights supernatural entities (12; 20); Delivers messages (2; 3; 10; 19; 22); Acts as Tour Guide (17).

Fourth, the prominent characters vary from vision to vision throughout the revelation. Even the more “significant” characters do not seem to hold the stage for extended periods of time. For example, the prominent character in chapter 4 is the one seated on the throne, while in chapter 5 the Lamb starts to take over the lead role, but in chapter 6 it is a vacillating exchange of key characters in regards to the execution of the judgment (i.e., the four different horsemen, the martyrs under the throne, etc.), with the Lamb as the background instigator of each of the judgments. However, in chapter 8, the Lamb falls out of focus, and the visions are driven by characters that in most cases would be perceived as peripheral—specifically, demonic locusts, angels, eagles, and others.

### **The Two Sets of Trinities: Simplifying Character Issues**

As a result, a consolidation of the characters would be helpful in understanding some of the major driving forces, both explicitly and implicitly, throughout the entire narrative. The two main categories can be split into: the Holy Trinity and the Unholy Trinity. The Holy Trinity, obviously, consists of Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit. Jesus shows up as the Glorified Savior in Revelation 1:9-20 and acts as the voice that dictates the messages to the seven churches of Asia Minor in chapters 2-3. After this initial prominence, Jesus disappears from the scene to be replaced by the appearance of God, or the one sitting on the throne, in Revelation 4. God is prominent throughout the scene until the middle of chapter 5, where the Lamb takes back over the primary focus of the narrative (5:6). At the opening of chapter 6, the Lamb falls back into the backdrop and is only mentioned in cursory statements about breaking the seals. In chapter 7, both God and Jesus are in the backdrop of the narrative at best, as the followers of God take center stage, only to end right back in the throne room of God at the beginning of chapter 8. Immediately after this opening scene, God and Jesus are right back in the backdrop of the scenes until the end of chapter 11 where God becomes the clear focus and central character of the section (11:15ff.), albeit in an indirect manner.

In Revelation 12, the actions of God and Christ are both clearly seen, but do not play as prominent of a role in the narrative as the dragon. Both of the characters fall into the distant background until the opening of chapter 14, where the Lamb takes front and center while God is merely mentioned. At the end of 14, Christ possibly appears as the harvester of souls, while God is merely in the background.<sup>71</sup> Chapter 15, however, opens with God taking a more prominent role throughout this chapter, and Christ shifting into the background. Both God and Christ seem to take a cursory position throughout chapters 16, 17, and 18. In chapter 19, the narrative opens with hymns to both God and the Lamb, which is followed by Christ taking the stage, front and center, as the divine warrior in 19:11ff. Chapter 20 offers a mixture of Christ and God in the narrative's immediate background until verses 11-15, where it seems that God takes the center stage in the judgment scene. The scene decisively shifts in chapters 21 and 22, where both God and Christ dominate the scenes, God with more prominence at the beginning and Christ with more prominence at the end.

The Holy Spirit is consistently in the background of the entire revelation. While the third part of the Trinity is mentioned explicitly in 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 4:5; 5:6; 14:13; 19:10; 22:6, 17, he is never seen as the central figure in any given scene. This does not mean that the Spirit is insignificant throughout Revelation, but rather, it simply indicates that he is functioning in the background to progress the narrative.

The Unholy Trinity, conversely, appears in a much more sporadic fashion. While Satan is referred to in Revelation 2:9, 13, 24 and 3:9, he does not appear as a key character until chapter 12. In this chapter, Satan is the key figure in the scene and portrayed as a red dragon. Entering into chapter 13, Satan becomes a powerful character in the background only. He is the one that empowers the other two elements of the Unholy Trinity to fulfill their mission, but after chapter 12, Satan does not appear as

---

<sup>71</sup> The argument against this being a picture of Jesus is in the fact that the "one like the son of man" is commanded by an angel, which can be a bit awkward for Christ to be commanded by an angel. Nevertheless, "one like the son of man" is exclusively used for the Messiah throughout the Bible (note: Ezekiel is called "son of man", but not "one like a son of man")—See Daniel 7:13 and Revelation 1:13.

the primary character in a vision until chapter 20. This chapter displays the ultimate fate of Satan from the lens of the interadvent age, in which Satan is bound. Ultimately, Satan finds an eternal place of residence in the lake of fire (20:10).

The second two parts of the Unholy Trinity are introduced in chapter 13: the beast from the land and the beast from the sea. These two parts of the trinity function as Satan's primary agents to carry out his will on earth, similarly to the purposes of Jesus and the Spirit as agents of God to carry out his will on earth. These two beasts are only perceived as puppets in chapter 13, and then they fall out of view until chapter 19, where they are destroyed by the Divine Warrior.<sup>72</sup> Like Satan, the two beasts are thrown into the Lake of Fire for eternal torment (19:20).<sup>73</sup>

The purpose of focusing on these two groups as the key characters of the narrative is for a couple of reasons. First, all of the other characters that appear in this revelation either flow from, are in submission to, or are controlled by one of the two trinities presented. Second, the Unholy Trinity is consistently presented as a parody of the Trinity throughout the revelation. For example, the beast of the earth is described as receiving a fatal wound to his head that is miraculously healed. This reference is a parody from the Unholy Trinity of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Unholy Trinity, and by extension its followers, are perceived as being a cheap imitation of the true Trinity and, by extension, its followers. Third, the key application questions that are being asked by John's audience would be in direct connection to one of these two trinities: Who is really sovereign in light of the suffering we experience? Where is God? Why is Satan so powerful? Why are we being oppressed if we are truly the children of God?

---

<sup>72</sup> Revelation 17 does present the audience with the picture of another beast, which probably carries the same symbolic connotations, ridden by the doomed prostitute, but it is not one of the two beasts from Revelation 13. John describes this beast as being red or scarlet in vs. 3. This addition to the narrative is intentionally indicating to the reader that this is not the same beasts previously seen, of which neither were described with the color red. Otherwise, this detail is completely inconsequential to the narrative—a superfluous detail at best.

<sup>73</sup> It is important to note that one of the beasts has been changed in its reference to him here in Rev. 19 as the false prophet.

## Expanding the Issue: Characters in Revelation

While this simplified focus of the two trinities helps in our overall analysis, here is also a list of the functioning characters throughout Revelation:

- *John*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Persecuted (1:9)
    - On Patmos (1:9)
    - Servant of God (1:1)
    - Witness to Jesus Christ (1:9)
    - Witness to the visions (22:8)
  - *Actions*
    - Prays (1:10)
    - Receives visions (1:10ff.)
  
- *Jesus*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Glorified Savior (1:11ff.)
    - Slain Lamb (5)
    - Triumphant Lamb (14)
    - Harvester of Souls (14:14-20)
    - One like a son of man (14:14)
    - The Child (12)
    - Divine Warrior (19)
    - Coming King (22:7ff.)
    - Ruler in Heaven (20:4-6)
  - *Actions*
    - Comes in judgment (6; 12; 14; 19; 22)
    - Came in salvation (5; 7; 12; 14; 21; 22)
    - Demands repentance (2; 3; 22)
    - Revelator of Message (1; 2; 3; 22)
    - Rules in Heaven (20:4-6)
  
- *God*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Creator (4)
    - Eternal (5)
    - Eternal Light (22:5)
    - Sovereign Ruler (4; 5; 6; 8-9; 12; 14; 15-16; 17; 18; 19; 20; 21-22)
    - Judge (20)
    - Protector (7; 12)
  - *Actions*
    - Institutor of judgment (6; 8-9; 15-16; 20)
    - Makes all things new (21-22)
    - Judges the dead (20:11-15)

- *Angels*
  - *Description*
    - Messengers for the 7 churches (2; 3)
    - Deliverers of the judgments in the 7 trumpets (8-9)
    - Deliverers of the judgments in the 7 bowls (15-16)
    - Representatives before God (1:20; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:7, 14)
    - God's Restrainers (7:1; 20:1)
    - Residents of Heaven (3:5; 7:11; 14:10; 21:12)
    - God's Measurer (21:15, 17)
    - Messengers (1:1; 5:2, 11; 7:2; 10:1, 5, 8, 9, 10; 11:15; 14:6, 8, 9, 15; 17:1, 3, 7, 15; 18:1; 19:9, 17; 21:9; 22:1, 6 [2x], 8, 16)
    - God's Agents/Weapons of War/Judgment (7:2; 8:2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13; 9:1, 11, 13, 14 [2x], 15; 10:7; 12:7; 14:17, 18, 19; 15:1, 6, 7, 8; 16:1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17; 17:1; 18:21; 20:1; 21:9)
    - Satan's Agents to wage War (12:7, 9)
  - *Actions*
    - Worshipping God (7:11; 8:3, 4; 16:5)
    - God's Agents/Weapons of War/Judgment (7:2; 8:2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13; 9:1, 11, 13, 14 [2x], 15; 10:7; 12:7; 14:17, 18, 19; 15:1, 6, 7, 8; 16:1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17; 17:1; 18:21; 20:1; 21:9)
    - Fights supernatural entities (12; 20)
    - Delivers messages (2; 3; 10; 19; 22)
    - Acts as Tour Guide (17)
- *Christians in Ephesus*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Hard workers (2:2)
    - Perseverant (2:2, 3)
    - Discerning (2:2, 6)
    - Forsaken their first love (2:4)
  - *Actions*
    - Endures hardships (2:2, 3)
    - Hates the Nicolaitans (2:6)
- *Nicolaitans*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Hated in Ephesus (2:6)
    - Hated by Christ (2:6)
    - Some follow Nicolaitans in Pergamum (2:15)
  - *Actions*
    - Teach a false doctrine that is intended to lead Christians astray (2:15)
- *Spirit*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Speaks to the churches (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22)
    - Before the throne of God (4:5)
    - Sent out into all of the earth (5:6)
    - Messenger (14:13; 22:17)

- Testimony of Jesus (19:10; 22:6)
- *Christians in Smyrna*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Afflicted (2:9)
    - Impoverished (2:9)
    - Rich Spiritually (2:9)
    - Slandered by the Jews (2:9)
  - *Actions*
    - Slandered by the Jews (2:9)
    - Persecuted by Satan (2:10)
    - Endure hardships (2:9, 10)
- *Jews*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Persecutors of Christians in Smyrna (2:9)
    - Worship in a Synagogue of Satan (2:9; 3:9)
    - Persecute Christians in Philadelphia (3:9)
    - Destined to be in submission to the authority of the Christians (3:9)
  - *Actions*
    - Persecute Christians (2:9; 3:9)
    - Are involved in the act of lying (3:9)
- *Christians in Pergamum*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Remain true to Christ's name (2:13)
    - Resilient in their faith in the face of persecution and even death (2:13)
    - Some hold to the teaching of Balaam (2:14)
    - Some hold to the teaching of Nicolaitans (2:15)
- *Antipas*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Was martyred in Pergamum (2:13)
  - *Actions*
    - Was faithful to his testimony to the point of death (2:13)
- *Christians in Thyatira*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Loving (2:19)
    - Faithful (2:19)
    - Servants (2:19)
    - Perseverant (2:19)
    - Tolerate Jezebel (2:20)
  - *Actions*
    - Some have followed the licentiousness of Jezebel (2:20ff.)
    - Some have rejected her and faced persecution (2:24)

- *Jezebel*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Claims to be a prophetess (2:20)
    - Misleads Christians (2:20)
    - Invites sexual immorality (2:20)
    - Coerces them into eating food sacrificed to idols (2:20)
    - Adulteress (2:22)
    - Destined for destruction (2:22ff.)
  - *Actions*
    - Leads Christians astray in her teaching (2:20)
    - Leads Christians astray with her unrighteousness (2:20, 22)
  
- *Christians in Sardis*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Appear alive, but are dead (3:1)
    - Asleep Spiritually (3:2)
    - Some have not soiled their clothes (3:4)
  - *Actions*
    - Become lackluster in their Christianity (3:1-3)
    - Some have resisted the temptation to become lackluster (3:4)
  
- *Christians in Philadelphia*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Little strength (3:8)
    - Perseverant (3:8)
    - Patient endurers (3:10)
  - *Actions*
    - Resist the temptation to compromise in the face of persecution (3:8, 10)
  
- *Christians in Laodicea*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm (3:15-16)
    - Boast of wealth (3:17)
    - Self-sufficient (3:17)
    - Spiritually naked and distraught (3:17)
    - Spiritually blind (3:18)
  - *Actions*
    - Rely on themselves (3:17)
    - Boast of wealth (3:17)
  
- *24 Elders*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Seated on thrones (4:4; 11:16)
    - Lay down crowns before God (4:10)
    - Worship God through song (4:11; 19:4)
    - Deliverers of messages (5:5; 7:13)
    - Bow down to the Lamb (5:8)
  - *Actions*

- Worship (5:14; 11:16; 19:4)
  - Stand around the throne (5:11, 6; 7:11)
- *Four Living Creatures*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Looked like a lion, ox, man, and an eagle (4:7)
    - Had six wings and eyes all around (4:8)
    - Worship God through song/shouts (4:8; 5:14)
    - Bow down before the Lamb (5:8)
  - *Actions*
    - Worship (4:9; 19:4)
    - Encircle the throne (5:11; 7:11)
    - Instigators of Judgment (6:1, 3, 5, 6, 7; 15:7)
- *Four horseman*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Commanded by one of the four living creatures (6:1, 3, 5, 6, 7)
    - Agents of Destruction (6)
  - *Actions*
    - Destroy the earth, creatures, commerce, etc. (6)
- *Martyrs*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Cry out for justice (6:9-11)
    - Reign with Christ (20:4-6)
  - *Actions*
    - Rulers with Jesus in heaven (20:4-6)
- *People/Rulers of the World*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Kings (6:15)
    - Princes (6:15)
    - Generals (6:15)
    - Merchants (18)
    - Sea Captains (18)
  - *Actions*
    - Cowering in fear over God and the Lamb's wrath (6:15-17)
    - Lamenting over the destruction of Babylon (18)
- *Sealed People of God*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Seen as reigning on earth (7)
    - Seen as reigning in heaven (14; 20)
- *Locusts*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Looked like horses prepared for battle (9:7)

- Wore something like crowns of gold (9:7)
    - Had faces like humans (9:7)
    - Had hair like women's hair (9:8)
    - Had teeth like lions (9:8)
    - Had breastplates like iron (9:9)
    - Had tails like scorpions (9:10)
  - *Actions*
    - Tormented people for five months (9:10)
    - Were released from the abyss to make war (9:11)
- *Abaddon*
  - *Descriptions*
    - King over the locusts (9:11)
    - King of the Abyss (9:11)
    - His name means destroyer (9:11)
    - Is an angel (9:11)
  - *Actions*
    - Rules the locusts (9:11)
    - Rules the Abyss (9:11)
- *2 Witnesses*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Have power to destroy enemies with fire from their mouths (11:5)
    - Have power to shut up the sky from rain (11:6)
    - Prophets (11:6)
    - Have power to turn water into blood (11:6)
    - Have power to strike the earth with every kind of evil plague (11:6)
    - Killed by the beast (11:7)
    - Bodies lie in the street for 3 and ½ days (11:8)
    - Raised from the dead (11:11)
    - Ascended to heaven (11:12)
  - *Actions*
    - Tormented the earth with prophecy (11:10)
- *Woman descending from Heaven*
  - *Descriptions*
    - Clothed with the sun (12:1)
    - Moon under her feet (12:1)
    - Crown of 12 stars on her head (12:1)
    - Pregnant and about to give birth (12:2)
    - She gives birth to the Messiah (12:5)
    - She flees to the desert (12:6)
    - Given wings of a great eagle to flee the dragon (12:14)
    - Saved by the earth from the dragon's attempts at destruction (12:15-16)
  - *Actions*
    - Gives birth (12:5)
    - Flees to the desert (12:6, 15-16)

- *Satan*
  - *Descriptions*
    - The Dragon (12:9; 20:2)
    - The Ancient Serpent (12:9; 20:2)
    - The Devil (12:9; 20:2)
    - Cast down to earth (12)
    - Bound by an angel (20:1-3)
    - Cast into the Abyss (20:1-3)
    - Released to deceive the nations (20:7-10)
    - Cast into Hell (20:10)
  - *Actions*
    - Leads the world astray (12:10)
    - Makes war against God's plan of salvation (12)
    - Makes war against God's people (12; 13)
    - Empowers the beasts (13)
    - Makes war against God (20:7-10)
  
- *Beast of the Sea*
  - *Descriptions*
    - 10 horns and seven heads (13:1)
    - 10 crowns on his horns (13:1)
    - A blasphemous name on each head (13:1)
    - Resembled a leopard (13:2)
    - Feet like a bear (13:2)
    - Mouth like a lion (13:2)
    - Received the power, throne, and authority from the dragon (13:2)
    - Seemingly fatal wound is healed (13:3)
    - Worshipped by the people (13:4, 8)
    - Given power to make war and conquer the saints (13:7)
  - *Actions*
    - Uttered proud words and blasphemies (13:5, 6)
  
- *Beast of the Land/False Prophet*
  - *Descriptions*
    - 2 horns like a lamb (13:11)
    - Spoke like a dragon (13:11)
    - Had all of the authority of the beast from the sea (13:12)
    - Destroyed by the Divine Warrior and thrown into hell (19:21; 20:10)
  - *Actions*
    - Made the earth worship the beast of the sea (13:12)
    - Performed miraculous signs (13:13, 15)
    - Deceived the inhabitants of the earth (13:14)
    - Forced worship of an image in honor of the beast of the sea (13:14)
    - Forced the reception of a mark (13:16, 17, 18)
    - Controlled commerce (13:16-17)
  
- *The Prostitute*
  - *Descriptions*

- Sits on many waters (17:1)
- Sitting on a scarlet beast (17:3)
- Dressed in purple and scarlet and glittering with gold and precious stones and pearls (17:4)
- Held a golden cup filled with atrocities (17:4)
- Was labeled on her forehead with: MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH (17:5)
- Drunk on the blood of the saints (17:6)
- She sits on seven hills (17:9)
- Destroyed by the beast (17:15ff.)
- *Actions*
  - Committed adultery with kings of the earth (17:2)
  - Intoxicated inhabitants of the earth (17:2)

### The Role of the Readers

In understanding the role of the reader in the revelation, it is important to keep in mind the historical context of the readers. These were people that were being oppressed and seduced by their society. They were reeling for hope and a means to survive as a Christian, both literally and figuratively. As a result, John's ideal reader<sup>74</sup> experiences the story first hand, which is intended to produce the narrator's desired result: resilient faithfulness.

### Tactics of Interaction with the Ideal Reader

The ideal reader is intended to experience the story first hand through a number of literary techniques. One such technique is dramatic tension. John develops dramatic tension frequently throughout the apocalypse as a means to draw the ideal reader closer to the story. He does this through shattering expectations with delays,<sup>75</sup> through building climactic tension through an increase in intensity,<sup>76</sup> and even bringing the story to the point of intersection with the ideal reader's life.<sup>77</sup>

A good example of increasing the dramatic tension to pull the ideal reader closer to the story, if not into the story, is found in Revelation 20. This section starts out with a triumphant reality that the ideal reader has clearly experienced, namely the binding of Satan achieved through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Satan's influence has been diminished, not into paralysis, but rather into obscurity. There

---

<sup>74</sup> Terminology borrowed from Rhoads, 138, "The ideal reader is the mirror image of the narrator. The ideal reader is the reader that the author creates (has in mind to shape) in the course of telling the story—an imaginary reader with all the ideal responses *implied by* the narrative itself."

<sup>75</sup> For example, between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> element of each of the 3 series of 7 judgments (seals, trumpets, and bowls), John adds an interlude which creates dramatic tension (i.e., Rev. 7:1-17; 10:1-11:14; 16:15).

<sup>76</sup> This is clearly seen in the recapitulation structure of the apocalypse and the increase from 1/4 to 1/3 to 100% destruction in the seals, trumpets, and bowls respectively (i.e., Rev. 6:8; 8:8ff.; 16:3-4, 8, 20).

<sup>77</sup> This occurs most clearly in Revelation 12 where the dragon progressively comes closer to the ideal reader in his rage, and then finally turns fully toward the ideal reader to persecute them. This is also done subtly in allusions to rituals and practices that were occurring in their respective regions (cf. Rev. 4 and 5 as a parody of Imperial Cult ritual; Rev. 19 as a Roman triumphal entry; etc.)

is a startling line, however, in verse 3 which says, “After that, he must be set free for a short time.” Immediately this would alarm the ideal reader with questions like, “Why?” or “What will he do if he is released?” John immediately launches into a description of the security of the Christians who have died, or who will die before the Second Coming, seen in their reign with Christ in heaven in verses 4-6. This “interlude” would alleviate some of the dramatic tension for the ideal reader because they are able to see their fate if they are persistent in resisting the devil’s tactics.

The dramatic tension, however, is reignited in verses 7-10 with an intensity that exceeds that felt in the earlier verses. Verse 7 indicates that Satan is released. The following verses show him gathering all of the nations for war, and then the reader realizes the target of Satan’s aggression: God’s people. The siege begins when the enemies encircle the people of God. At this moment the tension has built to a breaking point: “What is he going to do?”; “Why would God allow this?”; “Didn’t the resurrection conquer this foe?”; “Where is the justice?”; “What will we do?”; “Can we even come close to a victory against a foe of this magnitude?” As all of these emotions and questions are flooding the mind and heart of the ideal reader, something unexpected happens; fire comes down from heaven and devours the enemy. The dramatic tension gives way to elated jubilation, for God is sovereign.

Through tactics such as dramatic tension, John allows the ideal reader to even experience the consequences of their potential choices through the story. They are able to experience on some level God’s judgment and fury on those that choose to be rebellious,<sup>78</sup> and at the same time, they are able to experience God’s salvation and desire for those that choose to be obedient to the calling.<sup>79</sup> This allows the ideal reader to clearly establish their desire when they are able to perceive and encounter the sovereign God through John’s story.

---

<sup>78</sup> See Rev. 6; 8-9; 14:14ff.; 15-16; 20:11-15.

<sup>79</sup> See Rev. 7; 14; 20:4-6; 21; 22.

These tactics create in the ideal reader hope and resilience to stand firm for Christ even to the point of death. This experience creates community with both the Trinity and with each other (Rev. 21-22). This community is what unites and ties together Christians from the centuries past that have died being faithful to Christ, Christians of the present struggling to be faithful to Christ, and the Christians of the future that will long to follow in the footsteps of the cloud of witnesses before them. John's ideal reader, then, is: Christians that will respond to the visions by being resilient in their faith in the face of persecution and social seduction, no matter what the cost because their God is sovereign and has conquered the forces of evil yesterday, today, and forever.

### *Conclusion*

Reading Revelation as literature enhances our understanding of John's literary masterpiece that concludes our Scriptures. With the functionality of the author, the setting of the recipients and the narrative, the development of the storyline through conflict, the identification of the key characters in the drama, and even the role of the reader encountering the text, the exegete is able to peel back the veil of the science of exegesis, which is a vital stage of interpretation, and engage with the art of hermeneutics. Appreciating the masterpiece presented, the parallels and progression of the narrative are clearly traced to reveal the paths in the ocean of words that guide the audience to the author's desired location, namely – a faith rooted in the sovereignty of God that is able to face death knowing that victory is just beyond the veil.

### *Bibliography*

Aune, David E. "The Apocalypse of John and Graeco-Roman Revelatory Magic." *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 481-501.

Barr, D.L. *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation*. Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1998.

Beale, G.K. *The Book of Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Lowery, Robert. *Revelation's Rhapsody: Listening to the Lyrics of the Lamb – How to Read the Book of Revelation*. Joplin, MO: College Press, 2006.

Rhoads, David, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie. *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.