

# The Apocalypse of JOHN

A COMMENTARY



Francis J. Moloney, SDB

Foreword by Eugenio Corsini

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# One

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## Introduction

Introductory decisions about the book of the Apocalypse inevitably affect an eventual interpretation of the text itself. Detailed investigations into the identification of a possible author; the unity of the text as we have it; the date of its composition; the author's use of Jewish, classical, and other early Christian traditions; the social setting of its reception; its genre, literary structure, and rhetorical features; and the reliability of the textual tradition have been examined in detail by recent commentators.<sup>1</sup> These important questions will only be touched on in this chapter. Given the abundance of excellent treatments, there is no need to rehearse them again. Mainstream critical opinion is well established. However, some interpretive possibilities other than that lying behind the following interpretation of the Apocalypse call for closer focus. This introduction will offer a discussion of these and then propose a detailed literary structure of the document. It suggests that the argument of the Apocalypse does not close with a consoling message of God's definitive eschatological triumph over the wicked, but confidently proclaims the perennial saving effects of Jesus' death and resurrection.

### Introductory Questions

Most contemporary commentators regard the text as a unified literary whole, whatever its prehistory may have been, and interpret the text without recourse

1. Anyone in search of a fair and broadly based presentation of all these details (and more) will find them in Aune, *Revelation*, 1:xlvii–ccxi; Beale, *Revelation*, 3–177; and C. Koester, *Revelation*, 29–150.

to possible earlier and later editions.<sup>2</sup> Others, puzzled by apparent literary non sequiturs, and especially by different strata within the book that appear to reflect earlier (60s CE) and later (90–110 CE) periods, identify a number of editions. Some have suggested that the earliest strata may come from the pre-Christian reflections of an eventual Christian convert from Judaism.<sup>3</sup>

Decisions scholars make about the period of life in the early church reflected in the book and its numerous visions, exhortations, blessings, and condemnations influence the sources they propose for the text. It appears to hint at the first documented persecution of Christians by the emperor Nero (64 CE), who ruled from 54 to 68 CE,<sup>4</sup> and allude to the sentiment, widespread in the late first century, that Nero was not dead but would return from the East (Parthia) to overthrow the current Roman authority. This so-called *Nero redivivus* expectation is generally associated with such passages as the description of the beast rising out of the earth in 13:12 (“It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed”)<sup>5</sup> and the interpretation of the number 666 as “Nero Caesar.”<sup>6</sup> Since late in the second Christian

2. For a sustained defense of the unity (which he calls “wholeness”) of the Apocalypse, see Thompson, *Book of Revelation*, 37–52. See also, e.g., Boxall, *Revelation*, 15–16; C. Koester, *Revelation*, 69–71; Corsini, *Apocalisse*, 43–46. Corsini optimistically claims that the literary unity of the text is nowadays affirmed almost universally. For a vigorous rejection of composition theories and a defense of the literary unity of the Apocalypse, see Boring, *Revelation*, vii; Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, x (“a crass failure to appreciate the specific literary integrity of the work as it stands”); and Vanni, *L’Apocalisse*, 17–29.

3. This is the view of, among others, Aune, *Revelation*, 1:cxviii–cxxxiv. For a helpful survey of other modern scholars who have proposed source-critical theories, see pp. cx–cxvii. For a detailed critique of Aune’s source-critical theory, see Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 84–92. Prigent suggests that the work is undoubtedly formed from preexistent material, but that “the present text of Revelation is that which the author intended it to be, even if in composing it he did not write every passage from scratch” (92).

4. Contemporary scholarship is even raising doubts about the reliability of Tacitus’s claim that Nero blamed and persecuted Christians for the burning of Rome in 64 CE. For the debate, see Shaw, “Myth of the Neronian Persecution”; Jones, “Historicity of the Neronian Persecution”; Shaw, “Response to Christopher Jones.”

5. I will generally use the NRSV, despite my reservations about some decisions made by the editors. There are times when I will adopt my own translation, and this will be indicated by the abbreviation AT. My long familiarity with the RSV, as well as the Greek text, often influences my alternative translations.

6. For a detailed study of the links with *Nero redivivus* and its use in the Apocalypse, see Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 384–452. All the essays collected in Bauckham’s volume argue for the setting of a suffering Christian community within the Roman Empire. See also A. Y. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 90–94, 101. Collins interprets the Apocalypse as a retelling of an ancient combat myth, a struggle for lordship between evil, personified by Rome, and good, personified by Jesus Christ and his followers. See also her *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*. A situation of crisis is denied by Thompson (*Book of Revelation*, 74–91). For

century, especially under of the influence of Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* 5.30.3 (ca. 180 CE), the book of the Apocalypse has been associated with the latter years of the emperor Domitian (reigned 81–96 CE). It is possible, especially if one resorts to a theory of multiple editions, that the Apocalypse reflects traditions that come from across fifty years, from the 60s until the end of the first century CE. Some suggest that they reach into the early second century and the reign of the emperor Trajan (98–117).

Close attention devoted to the study of the Gospels over more than a century has made it clear that NT narratives are the result of a long literary history.<sup>7</sup> This is also the case for the Apocalypse. Some of the material in the final document may have come from the Neronic period (64–68 CE), from the years between Nero and Domitian, and from the latter years of Domitian (91–96 CE). Indeed, it would be incredible if such were not the case. Difficulties arise in any attempt, however detailed and scholarly, to determine, down to the verse, the half-verse, and even the single word, what belonged to various editions, and the process by which they were eventually unified into the Apocalypse, already part of early Christian literature by the time of Justin Martyr (100–165 CE).<sup>8</sup> For theological reasons, and no doubt for pastoral reasons, an author late in the first century gathered prophetic and apocalyptic material and added his own contribution to address a Christian audience. His contribution was the final production of the document as we have it in the Christian Scriptures. Whatever may have been the *Sitze im Leben der Kirche* that produced earlier strata, they have been taken over by the point

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Thompson, behind the “soft boundaries” that appear to alienate the various agents in the narrative is the unifying presence of God, the *pantocrator*. He claims that “at the most fundamental level, the seer envisions reality as a world in process, a flow of becoming, a sequence of transformations that unfolds into various planes, eras, qualities, and objects” (87). Friesen (*Imperial Cults*, 161–65) expands Thompson’s analysis of “soft boundaries,” focusing on John’s denial of the imperial discourse that places Rome at the center. For John, space and time are “organized around the absent throne of God, while the churches wait for an unfulfilled future on a not-yet-created earth” (166). Friesen argues that John has his own myth with roots in Jewish traditions that destabilize the myths sustaining the empire. Howard-Brook and Gwyther (*Unveiling Empire*, 223–35 [and passim]) argue that the Apocalypse challenges the dominant legitimating myths, subverting “the imperial view of reality in favour of the alternative reality of Jesus” (223).

7. On the “narrative” nature of the Apocalypse, see C. Koester, *Revelation*, 115–22.

8. Justin Martyr’s recognition of the apostolic authorship of the Apocalypse (*Dial.* 81.4) makes it unlikely, in my opinion, that it first appeared later in the time of the emperor Trajan (98–117 CE). For such a complex Christian book to receive approbation by the first half of the second Christian century calls for a late first-century appearance as a *terminus ante quem*. Justin advocates a millennial interpretation (*Dial.* 81). He does so, however, after recognizing that “many who belong to the true and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise” (80.2). See below, 22n66.

of view that determines the shape and the message of our Christian book of the Apocalypse.<sup>9</sup>

The question of authorship has also been widely debated. The Apocalypse is regarded as being part of the so-called Johannine literature, a corpus made up of the Gospel of John, 1–3 John, and the Apocalypse. Among these five potentially independent documents, only in the Apocalypse does an author name himself “John” (Apoc. 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). The identification of John the son of Zebedee as the author of the Apocalypse was made very early by Justin Martyr. It continued in Irenaeus’s association of the Beloved Disciple of the Gospel of John with Jesus’ disciple John the son of Zebedee late in the second century CE (*Haer.* 2.22.5; 3.1.2; 3.3.4; 3.11.7; 5.30.3).

A few early authorities questioned the association of an apostle with the Apocalypse. The Roman priest Gaius (early third century CE) regarded the document as lacking in authentic Christian teaching and suggested that it may have been written by an obscure heretic, Cerinthus, influenced by the ascetical Jewish-Christian Ebionites. Dionysius of Alexandria (latter half of the third century) pointed out that it differed too radically from the Johannine Gospel and Letters. Both writers raised the possibility that the author was a figure known as John the Elder (*presbyteros*), whose activity in Asia Minor, and especially Ephesus, is sometimes acknowledged.<sup>10</sup>

The suggestions of Gaius and Dionysius are preserved as fragments reported by the first Christian church historian, Eusebius, in the fourth book of his *Historia ecclesiastica* early in the fourth century CE (ca. 322–26 CE).<sup>11</sup> About a third of that book discusses the authorship of the Apocalypse. In Eusebius’s interpretation of Christian history, the first Roman emperor to favor Christianity, Constantine (274–337 CE; reigned 306–37 CE), played a key role. Eusebius’s appreciation of Constantine as a God-sent figure who brought God’s rule to the kingdoms of this world influenced his interpretation of the Apocalypse. For Eusebius, the millenarian interpretation, generated by the exegetical puzzle of the “thousand-year reign” of those who had not worshiped the beast in 20:4–6, did not do justice to Constantine, the divinely appointed Roman emperor. Eusebius therefore is ambiguous about the authorship of the Apocalypse. He joins Gaius and Dionysius in raising

9. A unified point of view across Apoc. 1:1–22:21, no matter what its sources may have been, is central to Corsini’s interpretation. See also Schüssler Fiorenza, *Book of Revelation*, 160–64. For broadly based reflections on the issue of the incorporation of sources into a canonical document, see Moloney, “From History, into Narrative, and Beyond,” 23–27.

10. See the extensive analysis of the figure of John the Elder in Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage*, 96–150, 275–325.

11. For a documented and detailed discussion of this question, see Aune, *Revelation*, 1:xlvi–lvi; Giesen, *Offenbarung*, 45–48; C. Koester, *Revelation*, 65–68.

the possibility that it is the work of John the Elder of Ephesus, and not John the disciple of Jesus.

Nevertheless, these voices are rare exceptions. From earliest Christian times John, the son of Zebedee, has been regarded as the author of the Apocalypse. Some contemporary scholars continue to regard the apostle as the likely author.<sup>12</sup>

Majority scholarship, however, would claim that it is not possible for us to identify the person and the role of the author with any precision. Most would reject the suggestion that the same person wrote the Gospel of John and the Apocalypse of John. They would also reject that the apostle John the son of Zebedee wrote the Gospel or the Apocalypse. The author names himself “John,” and that name should be accepted. Given that much of the document contains visions of heavenly and earthly events, the author has often been given the name “John the Seer.” However, this was a widely used name, and there are no clear indications who this “John” might be. We simply do not have enough information from the world that produced the Apocalypse, or from the document itself, to make a firm decision about the precise identity of the John of the Apocalypse.

However, the location of the writing is less in doubt. There is no serious reason to question the location of his writing at Patmos, an island close to the eastern coast of Asia Minor. John reports that he is there “because of the

12. See, e.g., Corsini, *Apocalypse*, 12–14; Corsini, *Apocalisse*, 4–11. In his first edition, Corsini leans toward the traditional identification of John the son of Zebedee as the author but does not regard it as a crucial issue. In his second edition he rejects the arguments mounted by Giesen and Lupieri against the traditional view. Boxall is more sanguine. As he puts it, “His traditional association with John son of Zebedee and ‘son of thunder’ deserves serious consideration, at least as much as Eusebius’ alternative solution, which identifies him with the rather shadowy ‘John the Elder’” (*Revelation*, 5–7). See also Smalley, “John’s Revelation and John’s Community,” and Tonstad, *Revelation*, 30–34. Prigent (*Apocalypse*, 36–50) highlights significant Johannine features found in the Apocalypse. He suggests that there may have been a prophetic movement in Asia Minor, influenced by the Qumran tradition, locating the Gospel of John and the Apocalypse as “under the same patronage” (50). Justin M. Staller (*Apocalyptic Gospel*, 215–17) regards the work as from the disciples of the apostle John, loyal to his theological agenda. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (“Quest for the Johannine School”) has argued that John was part of a prophetic-apocalyptic school with access to the Johannine and Pauline “schools” in Asia Minor at the end of the first century. See also Schüssler Fiorenza, *Book of Revelation*, 85–113. For Austin Farrer (*Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 41–50), the author was Eusebius’s John the Elder, while the author of the Gospel was John the son of Zebedee. The Apocalypse appeared earlier than John’s Gospel and the Johannine Letters, and they drew from it in their own way. Jörg Frey (“Erwägungen zum Verhältnis der Johannesapokalypse”) argues that the author belongs to the school of the Elder, John. The Apocalypse appeared before the Gospel and the Letters, before the Johannine Christology led the school to move away from the apocalyptic literary form. For a recent extensive and aggressive affirmation of the apostle John’s authorship, see John Ben-Daniel and Gloria Ben-Daniel, *Saint John and the Book of Revelation*, 43–117. On pp. 292–96 they offer a chronology of the apostle’s life, from his birth in Bethsaida in 12 CE to his death in Ephesus in 98.

word of God [*dia ton logon tou theou*] and the testimony of Jesus [*kai tēn martyrian Iēsou*]” (Apoc. 1:9). These words are widely interpreted as indicating forced imprisonment in Patmos because of his Christian faith.<sup>13</sup> John the Seer’s use of the expression “testimony” (*martyria*) and its associated “witness” (*martyr*) suggests the introduction of a theme of witnessing that has wider ramifications across the Apocalypse. As we will see in our reading of 1:9–20, the Greek original could indicate that he was in Patmos as a consequence of his Christian missionary activity. That role brought tribulation and required patient endurance (1:9).<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the best we can do in our search for the identity of the author is to cite a modified version of David Aune’s description:

While the final author-editor of Revelation was named “John,” it is not possible to identify him with any other early Christian figures of the same name, including John the son of Zebedee or the shadowy figure of John the Elder. The otherwise unknown author of Revelation in its final form was probably a Palestinian Jew who had emigrated to the Roman province of Asia. . . . He regarded himself as a Christian prophet.<sup>15</sup>

## Literary Questions

What we have summarized to this point reflects mainstream contemporary scholarship. The author is an unknown “John,” using an apocalyptic literary form that also contains some letters to write prophetically.<sup>16</sup> The document as

13. See, e.g., A. Y. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 102–4; Boxall, *Revelation*, 39; Aune, *Revelation*, 1:75–82; C. Koester, *Revelation*, 250.

14. For a stimulating study of the multivalent and ambiguous nature of the use of “Patmos” in 1:9, and its potential to influence the interpretation of the whole document, see Boxall, *Patmos*.

15. Aune, *Revelation*, 1:lvii. I have modified Aune’s description by eliminating his identification of the author as a Jew fleeing during the first Jewish revolt in 66–70 CE, a suggestion supported by Elaine Pagels (*Revelations*, 7–8), and his claim that the book is directed to issues faced by Roman Asia. We cannot be sure of the first detail (although he was certainly a Jew and a newcomer to the Greco-Roman world). See also Labahn, “Book of Revelation,” 8. I will suggest that the audience of his message was larger than the seven cities of Roman Asia referred to in Apoc. 1–3. Aune regards John as an “author-editor,” responsible for the final edition of a document that had its beginnings in the author’s pre-Christian days in the 60s. For an assessment of John as an otherwise unknown early Christian prophet, without Aune’s details, see A. Y. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 25–53 (a precise survey of the discussion down to 1984); Thompson, *Book of Revelation*, 12–13; Beale, *Revelation*, 34–36; Giesen, *Offenbarung*, 36–40; C. Koester, *Revelation*, 68–69.

16. See esp. Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 38–91. Bauckham uses four case studies (Apoc. 14:20b; 6:9–11; 20:13; 8:1) to test the role of Jewish apocalyptic and rabbinic reflection in the formation of these texts (40–83). He concludes that John is the leader of a group of Christian prophets, in touch with traditions that come from similar apocalyptic groups. The influence on

we have it most likely appeared late in the first century, either in the final years of Domitian or earliest years of Trajan (i.e., 95–100 CE). It has some features of a letter, especially in its opening (1:4–6) and its closing (22:21). The use of the “letters” to the seven churches (2:1–3:22) links it to the genre of a letter, although those letters do not follow the traditional form of an early Christian letter (which does appear in the address of 1:4–5). The document was written by a Christian to be communicated to fellow Christians, and the use of letter features indicates that such was the case.<sup>17</sup> However, the Apocalypse cannot be formally identified as an early Christian letter. Its major literary characteristics are apocalyptic and prophetic.<sup>18</sup>

However, we must be clear about what we mean in our use of those labels when speaking of the NT Apocalypse. As is well known, the literary form that we name “apocalypse” has its biblical origins in the OT, especially (but not only) in Daniel 7–12. In addition to our document in the NT, it was a widely used literary form in nonbiblical literature, in Jewish (e.g., *1 Enoch*, *2 Enoch*, *2 Baruch*, and *3 Baruch*) and Jewish-Christian (e.g., *Testament of Levi* and *Testament of Abraham*) writings. It also appears in nonbiblical Christian literature (e.g., *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, and *Ascension of Isaiah*). John J. Collins has proposed a widely accepted and often-cited definition of an “apocalypse”:

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a

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John from the apocalyptic material is not direct, but traditions shared by John’s prophetic group and previous apocalyptic groups play an important part in John’s leadership in his prophetic exposition of the end of the ages (83–91). Lupieri (*Apocalypse*, 35–37) writes of the marriage between prophecy and the apocalyptic literary form. He suggests that in late Judaism, prophecy was already understood as foretelling future events. On the historical and religious setting of the author, see pp. 38–44. Lupieri suggests that *2 Baruch* (pre-135 CE) and the *Coptic Apocalypse of Elijah* (pre-115 CE) are polemic responses to the Apocalypse (p. 44). The “prophetic” nature of the document has nothing to do with foretelling future events, despite its being used as a biblical warning about people and events across the centuries. Against the use of “apocalyptic” and “eschatological” interpretations, see Malina, *Genre and Message of Revelation*, 10–12. On his approach, see 15n41 below. Pagels (*Revelations*, 73–102, 133–70) suggests that the literary “revelations” match the second-century (and later?) Gnostic literature that was excluded by the Constantinian church, especially under the leadership of Athanasius and the imposition of an “orthodox” canon. David Arthur (*Walls of Babylon*, 213–27 and passim) argues that the Apocalypse is a Sethian Gnostic “Trojan horse” (somewhat anachronistically), a subversive attack on the emerging proto-orthodoxy of late first-century Christianity.

17. Some suggest that the explicit letter characteristics of 2:1–3:22 and 22:20–21 were added to the document in the final stage of its composition. See, e.g., Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 633, 644.

18. On the letter characteristics of the Apocalypse, see Aune, *Revelation*, 1:lxxii–lxxv; C. Koester, *Revelation*, 109–12. For strong support for the Apocalypse as a circular letter, see Bauckham, *Theology*, 12–17.

transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisions eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.<sup>19</sup>

There is no doubt that John's Apocalypse corresponds well to the bulk of this general definition: revelation, mediation of a transcendent world, and the establishment of the new Jerusalem.<sup>20</sup>

However, as this commentary hopes to show, its genre differs from the bulk of apocalyptic literature in one critical point. John Collins suggests that an apocalypse "envisions an eschatological salvation." In other words, God's final saving intervention will mark the end of all time, the eschaton. The problem with labeling the Apocalypse as a Christian version of traditional Jewish apocalypticism is that this label determines the interpretation. To use a well-worn image: the tail wags the dog. This approach does not do justice to the fact that the victory of the Lamb is portrayed from the beginning of the document, and steadily, almost rhythmically, across the narrative, as *already* won. As is increasingly recognized, the Apocalypse offers consolation in its proclamation that God's victory is not located in the future. The victory has already been won. The results of that victory are effective for those who have eyes to see and who live according to what they see. The book becomes a lens allowing the audience to see the world from its foundation and for all its history in precisely that way (see 13:8).<sup>21</sup>

19. J. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 5. Collins's extensive work on apocalyptic literature and its genre reaches back to his essay in *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*. For a consideration of the strengths and limitations of the above definition of the genre, in the light of subsequent criticism and discussion, see J. Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy*, 1–20. He restates the above definition on pp. 4–5. It is beyond the scope of this study to outline the hefty debates that surround the identification, role, and function of apocalyptic literature. For excellent overviews, see Vielhauer, "Apocalyptic," and Aune, "Apocalypticism." For more expansive indications of the characteristics of apocalyptic literature, see Vielhauer, "Apocalyptic," 587–94; Aune, "Apocalypticism," 27; and Aune's more extended description of the genre in *Revelation*, 1:lxvii. See also Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 46–86, for a presentation of the development of apocalypticism that plays into their interpretation of the Apocalypse as a call to refuse to succumb to the allure of the Greco-Roman world.

20. See C. Koester, *Revelation*, 104–7; Boring, *Revelation*, 35–47. For a detailed analysis of John's work as an apocalypse, see Aune, *Revelation*, 1:lxvii–xc; Giesen, *Offenbarung*, 14–24. Bart D. Ehrman associates the Apocalypse with *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Apocalypse of Peter* in his chapter dedicated to "Christians and the Cosmos" (*New Testament*, 469–86).

21. See the important essay of Michael Labahn, "Gefallen, gefallen ist Babylon, die Grosse." With a strong focus on the Roman system, Labahn argues that the Apocalypse is not about the unknown future, but a powerful address to its readers to subvert all political and religious aspects of the Greco-Roman world. This is but one example of the correct application of the following point made by J. Collins: "To say that a text is an apocalypse is not to exclude the possibility that it may be simultaneously something else; or to put it another way, the fact that a text can be properly grouped with apocalypses does not exclude the possibility that it may

A fascinating sequence of genres follows, each with its own contribution to the argument of the book. After the salutation of 1:1–3, John presents Jesus Christ in the prologue to the document as part of a heavenly Trinity, the firstborn from among the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth (vv. 4–6). The audience participates in the letters to the seven churches, and the text may have a deeper meaning than seven letters of exhortations and warnings to seven churches in Asia (2:1–3:22). Behind the letters the audience senses allusions to Israel’s sacred history, beginning with the primeval history of Genesis (Apoc. 2:4–5, 7). They close with the message of Christ, standing at the door, knocking. The promises made to the victors across the letters (see 2:7, 11, 17, 26–28; 3:5, 12, 21) may be not eschatological prediction but rhetorical appeal summoning the audience to be a truly Christian people and church, “a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father” (1:6).<sup>22</sup>

Following the letters is the vision of a solemn liturgy that takes place in heaven (4:1–5:15). The climax of that vision is the appearance of a Lamb, already victorious, slain yet standing (5:6). The heavenly court sings his praise, recognizing that his death has ransomed all humankind (5:9–14). *Because of this* he is “worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals” (v. 9). The Lamb receives universal praise and worship (vv. 11–14). The narrative has only just begun, yet John proclaims that the victory took place in the slain yet standing Lamb.

This victory is narrated not only *before* the sevens of the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls; it is repeated as each seven closes. It is repeated first in the silence that characterizes the opening of the seventh seal (8:1), marking the end of the period from creation to Jesus’ death and resurrection (see 7:1–8) and the establishment of the period of universal salvation enabled by that death and resurrection (7:9–17).<sup>23</sup> It is then promised that, in the blowing

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also be profitably grouped with other texts for different purposes” (*Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy*, 6–7). The fact that John’s Apocalypse was “grouped with other texts” in the final determination of the Christian canon is a positive indication that, whatever its apocalyptic genre, it is “simultaneously something else.” Labahn has shown that, among other possibilities, it is a “subversive narrative” with a presentation of God that attacks all established worldly order (see “‘Gefallen,’” 321–23, 337–40).

22. Many of the promises to the victors in the letters of 2:1–3:22 return in the description and the role of the new Jerusalem in 21:9–22:5.

23. The description of two periods, the period from creation to Jesus’ death and resurrection and the period of universal salvation enabled by that death and resurrection, is a conscious rearticulation of Corsini’s often-used expressions “the Old Economy” (*l’economia antica*), summed up in the OT, and “the New Economy” (*l’economia nuova*), witnessed to by early Christianity. Corsini’s categories have to do with humanity’s fall into sin and God’s old manner of dealing with sin through the Law and the messianic promises, and God’s new manner of operating through the fulfillment of the promises in Jesus’ death and resurrection and the

of the seventh trumpet, “the mystery of God will be fulfilled” (10:7). The blowing of the seventh trumpet results in the opening of God’s temple, as “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah” (11:15).

Finally, the Lamb’s victory reappears at the conclusion of the pouring out of the bowls. John addresses the ambiguity of the human condition (12:1–18) and describes the action of Satan’s agents in spreading evil (13:1–18) and God’s initial intervention on behalf of the saints of Israel (14:1–20). Prefaced by a heavenly encounter, the seven bowls are poured out (15:1–16:21). The battle of Harmagedon tells of the definitive conflict between good and evil at the cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>24</sup> The victory is once more announced: “It is done” (16:17). John spells out the consequences of this definitive victory in detail. Babylon is destroyed (17:1–19:10), all evil power is definitively eliminated by God’s victory in the death and resurrection of Jesus (19:11–20:15), and the chosen ones are gathered into the messianic kingdom, which may not be otherworldly, but a God-given Christian community on earth (21:1–22:5). The audience is not given a road map for God’s otherworldly, eschatological victory. Rather, they are instructed repeatedly that life and light have been made available through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (see 22:1–5). Our understanding of the Apocalypse’s genre cannot be determined by a narrow focus on victory that is eschatological in character.

A look at the theme of persecution leads to the same conclusion. The Apocalypse does not hold its audience in anxious tension, dominated by exhortation to endure persecution and suffering or to resist false claims to divinity, waiting for God’s final saving intervention. These themes, especially the theme of resistance, are certainly present, but they are not the key to its secrets, as claimed by much commentary on the Apocalypse.<sup>25</sup> John repeats,

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life of the church. These categories, carrying more than a hint of supersessionism, are avoided in this commentary. The Christian view expressed by John claims that from all time the saints participated in the death and resurrection of the Lamb (5:6; 13:8). The historical events of Jesus’ death and resurrection are the literary and historical swivel that unifies, renders perfect, and gives full meaning to *both* periods. With variations, I will refer to the period of Israel and the period of the Christian community. This, of course, has its own difficulties, and is a confessedly Christian understanding of sacred history. Israel’s sacred history is an *essential* element in God’s design “from the foundation of the world” (13:8).

24. The transliteration of *harmagedōn* as “Harmagedon” respects the NRSV. In English commentary and in popular reference to an end-time battle, however, it is frequently rendered as “Armageddon.”

25. As indicated by its acceptance (with variations in detail) by the most reliable and the widely used introductions to the NT: R. E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 780–95; Schnelle, *History and Theology of the New Testament Writings*, 517–38; Ehrman, *New Testament*, 469–86; Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 519–37; Spivey, Smith, and Black,

over and over, that the victory has already been won by “the Lamb who was slain since the foundation of the world” (13:8). Among others, Craig Koester has recognized this odd aspect of the document when read as a thoroughgoing example of an apocalyptic literary form. He points out that “Revelation departs from the usual pattern” of apocalyptic literature, but he does not carry this recognition far enough. He states that “the eschatological struggle had already begun with the Messiah’s exaltation and would culminate at his return. Those events define the present time.”<sup>26</sup> However, this does not explain John’s repeated claim that the victory has *already* been won; indeed, “It is done” (16:17). For John, it has not “already begun” with the Messiah’s exaltation. It is not “in process” during the present time. It has already been realized in the perennially available saving action of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is available in the new Jerusalem, the Christian church. Like all Christian communities, however, John’s audience must live during the in-between time (see 22:20), resisting the allure of the corrupt abuse of religious and political authority.

The recipients of John’s Apocalypse faced difficulties. The widespread influence of the Greco-Roman religious practices within the powerful and universal political presence of the Roman Empire no doubt created many of these difficulties.<sup>27</sup> Some of them, if we are to judge by what is said to the seven churches (see 2:4, 14–16, 20–23; 3:1–3, 15–16), arise from the fragility of their own commitment. However, John does not ask them to wait in faith and hope for God’s final eschatological victory. The document is studded,

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*Anatomy of the New Testament*, 438–53. This paradigm is articulated in Bauckham, *Theology*, 6: “John’s apocalypse, however, is *exclusively* concerned with eschatology: with eschatological judgment and salvation, and with the impact of these upon the present situation in which he writes” (emphasis added).

26. C. Koester, *Revelation*, 107, with reference to J. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 271. See also Gorman, “Writings of the New Testament,” 92: “John writes about the present and the future reign of God and ‘the Lamb who was slaughtered’ (Christ) in order to strengthen, challenge, and reassure the churches in this situation.”

27. Corsini regularly indicates that the setting of the Roman Empire is important background for the Apocalypse. But his conviction that the fall of Babylon (18:1–24) refers to Jerusalem and not Rome leads him to downplay many of the close relationships that traditional scholarship finds between the document’s imagery and the events and personalities of the empire. For a thoroughgoing use of the Roman Empire, especially emperor worship, as an explanation of almost all features of the Apocalypse, see Bauckham, *Theology*, and Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*. For A. Y. Collins, the literary form of a cosmic combat, transposed to address the conflict between the followers of Jesus and the Roman Empire, the personification of a rebellion of chaos against the divine order, makes Rome and its dangerous allure something that John must resist (*Apocalypse*, x–xii [and elsewhere]). Although focused on Rome and its institutions, Labahn (“‘Gefallen,’” 319–41) sees the subversive nature of the rhetoric as reaching beyond Rome: “According to the Revelation of John, God lays claim to all worship” (338). He regards Rome as a “catalyst for the Johannine use of symbols” (355).

from beginning to end, with proclamations of the victory of God from all time in and through the slain and risen Lamb (see 5:6, 9–14, 8:1; 11:15–19; 16:17; 17:1–22:5). There must be a tension, as in all Christian literature, between what God has already achieved in and through Jesus Christ and his final return. However, the victory has been won. God’s saving history, revealed throughout Israel’s story and in the Christian church, rejoices in what God has done for humankind across history in and through the saving effect of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, from before the foundation of the world (see 5:6; 13:8).

Not alone in the writings of the NT, John’s Christians are being exhorted to recognize that they live in the light of a victory already won.<sup>28</sup> John the Seer, like the author of the Fourth Gospel, shares belief in a “realized eschatology” with his audience (see John 1:12; 3:14–15; 3:16, 18, 36; 4:23; 5:25, etc.). As the author of the Gospel of John was also aware, this does not do away with the need for a traditional belief in a definitive end time (see John 5:28; 6:39–40, 44, 45; 11:26, etc.).<sup>29</sup> This is the case for the Apocalypse. John instructs his audience on what God has *already* achieved. They are nevertheless exhorted to call out, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (22:20).<sup>30</sup> The use of the category “realized eschatology” does not indicate that all expectations of God’s final intervention in the return of Jesus Christ as judge have been eliminated from John’s understanding of sacred history. John exhorts the recipients of the Apocalypse to live confidently in the glitter of a Greco-Roman world, aware of the saving effects of the death and resurrection of Jesus. But they must still face the challenges of a world marked by the ambiguous presence of grace and sin: “Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy” (22:11; see also vv. 14–15). Such ambiguity will be finally resolved only when the Lord Jesus comes (22:20).

28. One can trace this move toward an emphasis on the already-won character of Christian salvation between the strong focus on eschatological expectation in the early Pauline literature (e.g., 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians) and the more realized eschatology of the deutero-Paulines (e.g., Ephesians and Colossians). The same is true of the development of the Gospel traditions. While current Jesus research, not without its opponents, focuses more and more on the historical Jesus of Nazareth as an eschatological prophet (see, e.g., the very different approaches of Dale C. Allison Jr., *Constructing Jesus*, and of John P. Meier, *Marginal Jew*), the Gospel traditions increasingly focus on the present effects of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

29. See Moloney, “God, Eschatology, and This-World Ethics in the Gospel of John.” This study is also available in Brown and Skinner, *Johannine Ethics*, 233–53.

30. In 1980 Corsini argued the case passionately for the perennial presence of the saving effects of the death and resurrection of Jesus. He rightly questioned the paradigm determined by God’s eschatological salvation but underplayed the presence of traditional end-time eschatology. However, in 2002 he demonstrated a greater awareness of the inescapably future elements in the message of the Apocalypse.

The literary notices present in the book itself suggest that John regards his work as prophecy (1:3; 19:10; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). He has a commission to prophesy (10:11). He is described as someone who belongs to a brotherhood of prophets (22:10; see v. 6). Scholars generally link this feature of John's work with his choice of the apocalyptic genre. Like John, the biblical prophets receive the heavenly communication of the word of the Lord (e.g., Mic. 1:1; Isa. 1:1–2; Jer. 1:1–2; Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1–2; Amos 1:1–2; Zeph. 1:1–2) and share visions of the heavenly realm, where they receive a message to speak to the people (e.g., Isa. 6:1–12; Ezek. 1:1–2:8; 8:1–9:11). Like John, the prophets see startling signs (four horsemen: Zech. 1:7–11; 6:1–8; cosmic portents in the sky: Isa. 13:10; 34:4; Joel 2:10, 30–31), and John shares with Ezekiel a commission to prophesy after eating a scroll written on two sides (Ezek. 2:1–3:1; Apoc. 5:1; 10:1–11). Like the visions in Daniel 7:1–14, John's visions are sometimes explained by an interpreting angel (Dan. 7:15–28; Apoc. 10:8–11; 17:1–3, 7–17; 19:9–10; 21:9–14; 22:1–6, 8–9).

This link with traditional biblical prophecy is certainly a major feature of John's practice; he interlaces his narrative with allusions to the biblical prophets, especially Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Unlike much commentary on the Apocalypse, the interpretation that follows takes it for granted that the Hebrew Bible, and not contemporary Jewish or Jewish-Christian apocalypses, forms the essential literary backbone to the Apocalypse, even though it is never directly cited.<sup>31</sup>

However, there was another understanding of the expression “prophet” in early Christianity, no doubt a prolongation of the spirit of traditional prophecy, that is not to be identified with OT prophecy.<sup>32</sup> Although there were most likely so-called prophets who dwelled on the fringes of the communities because of their ecstatic claims of access to the word of God, with Montanism as the best-known example,<sup>33</sup> early Christian prophecy was also a part

31. See Corsini, *Apocalisse*, 25–30, where this case is convincingly stated. Beale's *Revelation* is a significant contemporary commentary that supports Corsini's insistence on the primacy of OT allusions over Jewish apocalyptic. See Beale, *Revelation*, 76–99. See also Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*.

32. See Corsini, *Apocalypse*, 21–23, on John as a continuation of prophecy as “an activity of the Spirit of God among men, in which a man is given the power and authority to receive the word, the divine revelation, and charged to communicate it to others” (21). The exclusive language reflects the English translation of the Italian *uomo*, an expression less exclusive in the original.

33. Named after its founder, Montanus, in Phrygia (today's western Turkey) in the latter half of the second century CE, this so-called New Prophecy was an ascetical form of orthodox Christianity. However, its members believed that new revelations were made by means of prophetic ecstasies and teachings. Its most famous adherent was the church father Tertullian (160–220 CE). See Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, 253–57.

of the ongoing interpretation, development, and articulation of the teaching of Jesus. It is an outgrowth of OT prophecy. As has been so often shown in Gospel studies, many of the so-called words of Jesus are in fact “words of early Christian prophets.” John the Seer fits into both. In his important study of early Christian prophecy, David Aune points out that “the distinctive feature of prophetic speech was not so much its *content* or *form*, but its *supernatural origin*.”<sup>34</sup> John’s prophetic utterances would all claim to be supernatural in their origin, but they are more: they address Christians at the end of the first century with the message of the saving effects of the death and resurrection of Jesus. As M. Eugene Boring puts it, “Christian prophets were thus those who spoke the message of the risen Lord directly to the Christian community.”<sup>35</sup> Despite the use of the apocalyptic *literary form* to communicate the central message of early Christian prophecy, Jesus’ saving death and resurrection lie at the heart of the uniqueness of John’s Apocalypse.

In his 2001 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, Harold W. Attridge suggested that the author of the Fourth Gospel regularly used traditional genres that lead an audience to expect usual outcomes. But he “bends” them, thus taking an audience into unexpected and unexplored possibilities.<sup>36</sup> Attridge describes the practice as follows: “In many cases where it is possible to identify significant generic parallels, and therefore presume that the form in question generates regular expectations, the reader encounters something quite odd about the way in which the generic conventions seem to work.”<sup>37</sup> John the Seer’s marriage of letter-prophetic-apocalyptic literary forms, with the dominant form being apocalyptic, “bends” expectations. For Attridge, this practice leaves the reader of the Gospel of John “baffled by a bent identity form and a transformed gospel genre.”<sup>38</sup> To borrow from Attridge, perhaps the Apocalypse is a bent identity form and a transformed *apocalyptic genre*.<sup>39</sup>

34. Aune, *Prophecy*, 338.

35. Boring, *Revelation*, 25. See his excellent treatment of John the Seer as a continuation, in the postresurrection period, of biblical prophecy (23–26). See also the survey of the nature and message of the prophetic aspect of the Apocalypse in Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 79–84, and Tonstad, *Revelation*, 29–30. On the radical nature of John’s prophetic role, see A. Y. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 134–38.

36. Attridge, “Genre Bending.”

37. Attridge, “Genre Bending,” 11.

38. Attridge, “Genre Bending,” 20.

39. For a historical overview of the interpretation of the Apocalypse from 100 CE until the present, see C. Koester, *Revelation*, 29–65. See also Lupieri, *Apocalypse*, 1–12. For a sketch of the ways the Apocalypse differs from late Jewish apocalypses, despite its belonging to that genre, see Giesen, *Offenbarung*, 31–34. The recent study of Michelle Fletcher, *Reading Revelation as Pastiche*, healthily questions all attempts to categorize the Apocalypse as apocalyptic and/or

For Attridge, the key to the Fourth Gospel's genre-bending is its teaching on the incarnation that defies all categories: "Genres are bent because words themselves are bent."<sup>40</sup> Perhaps a parallel bending of genres is going on in the Apocalypse. The dominant genre is apocalyptic, as (among many) David Aune has shown.<sup>41</sup> However, the genre is "bent." The expectation is that an author's use of the apocalyptic genre "envisions an eschatological salvation." But for John the Seer, though the message of God's intervention in the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem remains future-oriented, God is already victorious in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The gift of the heavenly Jerusalem may refer to the earthly reality of the Christian church, not an end-time "eschatological salvation." This means that the notion of the new Jerusalem may not be eschatological, in the traditional sense of an otherworldly destruction of evil and reward for the faithful. The key to the Apocalypse's genre-bending is the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, a consequence of the incarnation, an event that took place once and for all within the human story. For John, this event transformed human history, from the beginning of time until the present age. It is the centerpoint of God's perennial saving presence, giving meaning to the whole of human history.<sup>42</sup>

Five matters external to the document are crucial for, and taken for granted by, the mainstream interpretative paradigm. As is clear from the following interaction with both classical and contemporary interpretation, scholarship is now asking questions about these matters, and the study that follows joins in that questioning.

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prophetic. For Fletcher, both the original recipients and contemporary readers find there an imitative "pastiche" of sources and genres.

40. Attridge, "Genre Bending," 21. He has revisited this question in Attridge, "Genre," an erudite survey of genre-bending in antiquity. Attridge uses the image of an "arabesque" to describe the combination of genres used by the Fourth Gospel to "bedazzle and perplex but ultimately transform the attentive reader" (21).

41. See Aune, *Revelation*, 1:lxvii–xcix. Although Lupieri locates and interprets the Apocalypse in the context of late Jewish apocalyptic literature (and especially the Dead Sea Scrolls), in his *Apocalypse* (13–35) he maintains that this is the means used by John "to expect his work to be read at several levels, and to demand from his reader allegorical reading and reflection" (13). Malina transcends all the above discussions to claim that the author of the Apocalypse looked to Greco-Roman astral myths but read them in terms of what had taken place in Jesus Christ (*Genre and Message of Revelation*, 1–64). In the study that follows, a case will be made that the Apocalypse is written to warn Christians against an uncritical and compromising acceptance of Greco-Roman life and practice. From that perspective, it appears unlikely that John would use complex Greco-Roman astral mythology as his starting point to communicate a Christian message. There is, moreover, little evidence for this practice in other early Christian literature. For a similar negative assessment of Malina's work, see Beale, *Revelation*, 42–43.

42. See above, n. 40. Morton surveys scholarly assessment of the document's genre, concluding that it cannot be regarded as a traditional apocalypse (*Recent Research on Revelation*, 13–28).

1. There is no evidence that Patmos was ever used as a penal settlement for persecuted Christians.<sup>43</sup> The only piece of evidence is Apocalypse 1:9. Perhaps John's self-introduction may be more about his missionary and prophetic role than his endurance as a persecuted Christian.
2. There is little or no evidence that Christians suffered a systematic persecution under Domitian.<sup>44</sup> This is nowadays widely acknowledged. As an alternative background, many claim that Domitian imposed the emperor cult on the whole empire and that the Apocalypse is a response to this false claim to divine authority.<sup>45</sup> However, this aspect of Domitian's reign is also questionable. Evidence for the practice of emperor worship in Asia is widespread, but evidence for the persecution of the Asian Christians for lack of observance of the cults is hard to find.<sup>46</sup> As Ramsay

43. See, e.g., C. Koester, *Revelation*, 239–43.

44. See Thompson, *Book of Revelation*, 107–15; C. Koester, *Revelation*, 77. The evidence for persecution is “sketchy at best.” Beale (*Revelation*, 5–16) provides an overview of the available evidence for some forms of persecution and emperor worship. There is ample evidence for the presence of emperor worship in Asia late in the first century (see the helpful analysis of Thompson, *Book of Revelation*, 158–64), but not of people being dragged before courts and executed because they failed in this regard. See below, n. 46. See also Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 115–19.

45. See, e.g., Giesen, *Offenbarung*, 25–30, 34–36. Giesen insists throughout that the imperial cult was a perennial and major threat to Christians in Asia. John's message of steadfast loyalty to the unique lordship of God and his Christ addresses all threatened Christians. But the idea of late first-century Christians dragged before courts and executed for not participating in these cults is a caricature. As indicated in the following note, such reconstruction of the setting of the Apocalypse is anachronistic.

46. Thompson dismisses the tradition that Domitian asked to be known as *dominus et deus noster* (*Book of Revelation*, 104–7; see also C. Koester, *Revelation*, 76–77; Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 25–131; Brodd and Reed, *Rome and Religion*). The Roman historian Karl Galinsky (whose essays are contained in Brodd and Reed, *Rome and Religion*, and generated and concluded that volume) argues that there is little evidence for a clash between emerging Christianity and the imperial cult in the first century. He suggests that Christianity generated the conflict and read it back into its foundational documents (“The Cult of the Roman Emperor: Uniter or Divider?,” in *Rome and Religion*, 1–21; “In the Shadow (or Not) of the Imperial Cult: A Cooperative Agenda,” in *Rome and Religion*, 215–25). See also Klauck, *Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 250–330, esp. 329: “In the case of persecution of Christians too much importance is usually attributed to the imperial cult, which does not appear in isolation, but as part of the entire polytheistic system.” Klauck, in common with most contemporary commentators, associates the emperor cult with such passages as Apoc. 13:1–4, 14–15; 17:8 (see pp. 307, 317). However, he sees it as a problem that liberal Christian groups were to accept a “soft” emperor worship as part of the social fabric. He rejects as an “anachronism” that Christians were being tested on their readiness to worship an image of the emperor (329–30). See also Klauck, “Das Sendschreiben nach Pergamon”; Thompson, *Book of Revelation*, 163–64. Labahn likewise questions the appeal to the emperor cult and suggests a more broadly based description of problems facing Christians from the empire (“Book of Revelation,” 6–8). See also the helpful critical survey of the practice of Roman persecution in this period by Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 23–36. Recently, Bruce W. Winter has restated the case for a “hard” emperor worship.

MacMullen puts it, “Had the church been wiped off the face of the earth at the end of the first century, its disappearance would have caused no dislocation in the empire, just as its presence was hardly noticed at the time. . . . Simply, it did not count.”<sup>47</sup> Adela Collins rightly recognizes this historical reality; she suggests that the setting was not so much the experience of persecution and the dangers of emperor worship but the expectation that this might happen, and that the Apocalypse is John’s call to Christians to recognize how they must behave and believe in that setting.<sup>48</sup> “Certain trends are distinguishable in the evolving discourse during the first and early second century, but these are not dramatic enough to require that Revelation is a response to them.”<sup>49</sup>

3. Almost all interpreters read 1:10–11, 19–20, and 2:1–3:22 as an indication of the recipients of this apocalyptic circular letter and the reason why John

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The Christians “faced the requirement to give divine honours to the Julio-Claudian Caesars” and were persecuted for not doing so (*Divine Honours for the Caesars*, 5). Warren Carter has denied this, detailing Winter’s uncritical use of the evidence (review of *Divine Honours for the Caesars*, in *Review of Biblical Literature* [June 28, 2017, <http://www.bookreviews.org/>]).

47. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, viii. For a negative assessment of the historical credibility of Eusebius’s presentation of Domitian as “deeply ambiguous,” see Moyise, *Old Testament*, 48–50.

48. After reviewing the evidence, A. Y. Collins (*Crisis and Catharsis*, 54–83) accepts that there is no evidence for persecution of Christians or imposed emperor worship under Domitian, but rightly suggests that John wrote “to point out a crisis that many of them did not perceive.” She is correct in identifying the occasion for the writing as a “call for intensified Christian exclusiveness over against the surrounding Greco-Roman culture” (77). For Collins, John’s perceived crisis is closely linked with Rome, reflecting and perhaps depending on the anti-Roman stance of the *Sibylline Oracles* (84–110). John resorts to his use of the ancient combat myth within the setting of the Roman Empire. Collins’s notion of John’s perception of what his audience needs to be aware of is helpful. But the present study will suggest a more universal background for the Apocalypse. The earlier Synoptic Gospels certainly reflect an awareness of the suffering that Christians will face. See, e.g., Mark 13:9–13; Matt. 24:9–14; Luke 21:12–19. The same forward-looking prophecy appears in John 16:1–3. For an intense association with the narrative of the Apocalypse and first-century Rome and its authority, despised and rejected by a Jew who had experienced the horrors of 70 CE, see Pagels, *Revelations*, 4–35. The documented situation of Asian Christians at the end of the first century does not reflect such a situation. See, for a balanced assessment, Thompson, *Book of Revelation*, 128–32; and Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 25–131, 165–66 (summary). Friesen writes, “I conclude that the imperial cult evidence gives us access to various levels of the dominant discourse in Roman Asia. John’s text provides an opposing mythic interpretation of Roman imperialism” (167). See also Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 223: the Christian myths “subvert the imperial view of reality in favour of the alternative reality of Jesus” (see 87–119, 223–35). What follows will argue that while the Roman situation and its all-pervading myth provides the catalyst, John’s narrative provides a discourse that *opposes all false empires and all false gods*.

49. Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 150. Craig Koester’s outstanding recent Anchor Yale commentary on Revelation refers to Friesen’s work eighty-five times but regularly reads the Apocalypse as a response to the imperial cults.

wrote it. Clearly there are strengths and weaknesses in the Asian churches, spelled out in the so-called letters of 2:1–3:22. John addressed those weaknesses, mostly the result of a lukewarmness among Christians in the midst of a false, godlike authority in the Roman Empire and the problems generated for young Christian churches by the Greco-Roman world and its culture. Essential to that culture was the worship of many gods, and thus the imperial cults were part of that problem for the infant Christian church. The issue was religious and not primarily political, although the two are difficult to distinguish.<sup>50</sup> While all of this is true and important, there are major questions surrounding John's choice of these "seven" churches, as there were other (more important?) cities in the regions where Christian communities were located that are not mentioned (e.g., Colossae). Indeed, apart from Ephesus, there is little or no reference to Christian communities in other cities mentioned in the NT. Perhaps the "seven" churches are a symbol of the whole church, and not only the names of churches to which the Apocalypse was sent.<sup>51</sup> As such, the author is not writing to seven individual churches in Asia, but challenging the Christian church itself.

4. Also in terms of the interpretation of the letters to the churches, so important for understanding the motivation for the writing and sending of the Apocalypse, critics strain to identify people and problems explicitly mentioned in the letters (e.g., Nicolaitans, Antipas, Jezebel, Balaam, Balak, and the synagogue of Satan).<sup>52</sup> It is equally difficult to identify why certain strengths and failures are credited to given communities, and not to others. As we know very little of the concrete situation and the Christian practices of these communities, scholarly suggestions are often hypothetical. As is increasingly recognized, the interpretative focus on the named Asian churches and their failures in the face of Roman persecution and the imposition of the emperor cult as the dominant motivation for the writing of the Apocalypse calls for rethinking.<sup>53</sup>
5. Largely (although not only) on the basis of the "seven mountains on which the woman is seated" (17:9), "Babylon the Great" is identified

50. See Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 122–31, esp. 122: "Imperial cults did not compose an independent mythic worldview: they were a distinguishable part of the broader, polytheistic cultural context."

51. See Bauckham, *Theology*, 114–17.

52. Warren Carter ("Roman Imperial Power," 142–46) attempts to identify these named characters to show that Jesus' followers did not negate the empire and its cult in a monolithic fashion. He correctly describes his speculations on their roles as "reasonable guesses" (145).

53. This would also apply to the recent interpretation of the Apocalypse by Pagels as a defense of the traditional Jewish nature of the Christian movement against the move into the gentile mission credited to Paul in the NT (*Revelations*, 37–72).

with Rome. This identification is fundamental for an interpretation of the Apocalypse as a book of consolation to those under Roman persecution. But a case has long been made for the identification of “Babylon the Great” with the now destroyed former Jerusalem, unfaithful Israel, “drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus” (17:6), the holy ones of the Most High, and those who testified to the messianic expectation realized in Jesus Christ. The possibility that the new Jerusalem, faithful “Israel” understood by John as the Christian church, replaces the former Jerusalem deserves further investigation.

### The Challenge of a Literary Design

As with almost everything associated with the interpretation of the Apocalypse, the determination of its literary structure is devoid of unanimity.<sup>54</sup> Proposed literary structures are generally formulated to capture a message that would provide a suffering Christian audience with hope and endurance, promising God’s eschatological victory in the second coming of Jesus Christ. The bulk of the document contains an apocalyptic presentation of the struggles that the members of the Christian church must face with confidence in God’s final victory. A relatively simple model for a structure that looks through the troubles of the present time to its eschatological resolution is found in the excellent and widely used seventh edition of *Anatomy of the New Testament*.<sup>55</sup>

- 1:1–20: *Introduction*: The vision of the prophet on Patmos
- 2:1–3:22: *The present time of the church’s struggle*: The letters to the seven churches
- 4:1–18:24: *The time between the present and the end*:
  - 4:1–5:14: The vision of heaven
  - 6:1–8:1: The opening of the seven seals

54. See Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 170: “Nearly every commentator produces a different schema that purports to reflect the development within the material.”

55. Spivey, Smith, and Black, *Anatomy of the New Testament*, 440. I am using the structure suggested by this fine volume *as an example* because of its clarity and because it reflects a model that has been variously adopted over the centuries. Different structures, all pointing toward an eschatological end time, could be used, as indicated in the further examples offered in the next paragraph. As contemporary commentaries on the Apocalypse multiply, so do suggested literary structures. For an outstanding presentation and assessment of major suggestions, see Beale, *Revelation*, 108–44. Beale provides an overview of his own structure on pp. 144–51, considered in more detail below.

- 8:2–13:18: Apocalyptic visions of happenings on earth
  - 14:1–20: Preparatory vision of the end
  - 15:1–18:24: The pouring out of the seven bowls of wrath
- 19:1–22:5: *The end*: The future victory
  - 22:6–21: *Conclusion*: Present time and the prophet on Patmos

This is not the place to enter into detailed discussion of one literary structure or another, but the above outline makes nothing of the “seven” trumpets of 8:2–11:19. They are included in a section vaguely described as “apocalyptic visions of happenings on earth” that runs from 8:2 to 13:18. This hardly respects the heavenly events of 12:1–13, where events “in heaven” (vv. 1–3 [the woman “in heaven”] and vv. 7–12 [Satan and the war “in heaven”]) culminate with both the woman (vv. 6, 13) and the dragon (v. 13) locked in enmity “on earth.” Heaven and earth are entwined across this section of the narrative. These remarks are only an example of the challenges that *any literary structure* of John’s Apocalypse will encounter.<sup>56</sup>

The use of the number seven, already established in the biblical tradition beginning with the seven days of creation (Gen. 1:1–2:4) as representative of a totality, is clearly important for John the Seer.<sup>57</sup> There are seven letters to seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. However, establishing a literary structure on the basis of the sevens proves difficult. After the seven letters (2:1–3:22), the seven seals (6:1–8:1), and the seven trumpets (8:7–11:19), in 12:1–14:20 there is no series of seven, resumed only in 15:1–16:21 with the pouring out of the seven bowls. Once interpreters have accepted the traditional interpretative paradigm that the Apocalypse is a story of the suffering the church must encounter until God’s final eschatological intervention, they face a structural challenge in assessing the literary and theological function of 12:1–14:20 within the narrative.<sup>58</sup>

Several examples will establish this point. For Eugene Boring, 12:1–15:8 reports “visions, reassurance, and serves as a preparation for the final series

56. On the challenges of tracing an outline of the Apocalypse, see Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 93–98. For a survey of fifteen major proposed literary designs, from R. H. Charles (1920) to J. de Vuyst (1968), see Vanni, *La Struttura Letteraria dell’Apocalisse*, 19–99.

57. See Corsini, *Apocalypse*, 42–44. It is important to note that the number seven indicates fulfillment, and not necessarily perfection, which is generally associated with the number three. See also Vanni, *La Struttura Letteraria*, 121.

58. Bauckham observes, “Most attempts to discover the structure of Revelation have found it particularly difficult to see how chapters 12–14 fit into the overall structure” (*Climax of Prophecy*, 15).

(the seven bowls).”<sup>59</sup> David Aune forms a long section by linking the final trumpet (11:15–18) and the seven bowls (15:1–16:21). Between them he locates 12:1–14:20 under the headings “The Woman, the Child, and the Dragon” (11:19–12:17), “The Two Beasts” (12:18–13:18), and “Visions of Eschatological Salvation and Judgment” (14:1–20).<sup>60</sup> Richard Bauckham regards 12:1–16:21 as “the story of God’s people in conflict with evil.”<sup>61</sup> Raymond E. Brown abandons all reference to the series of “sevens,” suggesting that a division of the Apocalypse “according to contents” has a prologue (1:1–3) and an epilogue (22:6–21). After the seven letters that indicate the recipients of the document, there is a two-part “revelatory experience” made up of 4:1–11:19 and 12:1–22:5.<sup>62</sup> Ian Boxall traces seven unnumbered visions across 11:19–15:4, in order to maintain a structure based on seven.<sup>63</sup> Craig Koester suggests that 11:19–15:4 is the fourth in a series of six cycles that run from 1:9 to 22:5. The first, second, third, and fifth cycles feature the number seven.<sup>64</sup> There is excellence in all these studies, but another possibility emerges once one questions the traditional interpretative paradigm with its focus on God’s eschatological salvation.

On the basis of his research on Christian writings of the first two centuries, especially the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity*, the *Acts of the Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne*, and Origen’s scattered uses of the Apocalypse in his voluminous output, Eugenio Corsini claims that the predominant interpretation of the narrative prior to Constantine was not millenarian but christological and ecclesiological.<sup>65</sup> Despite the millenarian interpretation of

59. Boring, *Revelation*, 120–21. His overall structure of the Apocalypse (30–33) has a letter opening (1:1–8) and closing (22:20b–21) and three major sections: 1:9–3:22 (God speaks to the church in the city), 4:1–18:24 (God judges the “Great City”), and 19:1–20:20a (God redeems the “Holy City”).

60. Aune, *Revelation*, 1:cii–ciii. In his detailed commentary Aune has recourse to a source theory to smooth out some of the apparent inconsistencies in this passage.

61. Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 15–18, 21–22, here 22.

62. R. E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 774. A similar structure is suggested by Bauckham, *Theology*, 57–58; Giesen, *Offenbarung*, 48–53.

63. Boxall, *Revelation*, 216–17. For others who have identified this unnumbered seven, see Beale, *Revelation*, 108–9, 109n2. For A. Y. Collins (*Crisis and Catharsis*, 111–12), the book is also structured around both the seven unnumbered visions across 12:1–15:4 (the church in a cosmic conflict) and seven further unnumbered visions in 19:11–21:8 (the destiny of the world). These two series of visions play a key role in the document’s bipartite structure of chaps. 1–11 (the gift of the revelation) and 12–21 (the content of the revelation). For more detail, see A. Y. Collins, *Apocalypse*, xii–xiv, 3, 79–107, 113–50. See also the suggestions for identifying a structure for the Apocalypse in Schüssler Fiorenza, *Book of Revelation*, 170–80. Bauckham rejects these unnumbered uses of *kai eidon* as textual markers (*Climax of Prophecy*, 5–6, 17–18).

64. C. Koester, *Revelation*, x–xi.

65. Although not focused on the relevance of the Apocalypse, L. Stephanie Cobb’s *Divine Deliverance: Pain and Painlessness in Early Christian Martyr Texts* supports this overall

some early Christian leaders, Origen regarded the millenarian interpretation of Papias and Irenaeus as too literal, missing the theological depth of the Apocalypse.<sup>66</sup> Thus, it was used not only to exhort Christians to patience and firmness in the face of suffering and death, with the promise of a glorious intervention of God, but also and primarily to direct them to the saving efficacy of the death and resurrection of Jesus found in the Christian church. Corsini even suspects that the Apocalypse may have been a catechetical text, focusing on Jesus Christ and the Christian church in those earliest years.<sup>67</sup>

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impression in her study of martyr texts, mainly from the second and third Christian centuries. She convincingly shows that these narratives were used as rhetorical conventions in an oral world to instruct their early Christian audiences that God and Christ were already victoriously present in the painlessness of the martyrs (31–92). The message conveyed by this rhetoric was one of victory, not eschatological rage against the corruption of the persecutors. Apostates and those who inflicted pain on others would be defeated, either in this world or the next (99–107). There is no suggestion that suffering Christians must wait for the end time for their victory (124–47). Eschatological themes, especially cosmic dualism (influenced by *1 Enoch*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, and John's Apocalypse), are reinterpreted in this rhetoric. The victory has already taken place, as the martyr tramples on the head of the Devil (124–26). Cobb summarizes the martyrological narrative: “The narrative description of the martyrs as experiencing torture without the anticipated pain may be understood as the realization of the vindication of those who remain faithful to God” (130). She points to the narratives' use of the four horsemen of Apoc. 6:1–7; the victory over Satan in 12:1–18 (with possible allusion to Gen. 3:15), 13:1–18, and 20:9–10; and the promise of no pain in 21:4 as the scriptural promise of this experience. It acts as a counternarrative: “Martyr texts destabilize the entire system that supports social, political, and religious life in imperial Rome. . . . In the unharmed bodies of the martyrs, the power of Rome—animated by Satan—is forcefully rejected” (144, 145). The narrative of a cataclysmic end-time victory of God over Roman persecution and enforced emperor worship that drives much interpretation of the Apocalypse is not called for in the rhetoric of these early narratives.

66. This is not the place to develop this discussion. On Justin Martyr, see above, 3n8. For Irenaeus, see *Haer.* 5.33.3 (Latin text in Harvey, *Sancti Irenaei Episcopi Lugdunensis Libros Quinque Adversus Haereses*, 2:416–18) and *Epid.* 61 (translation from the Armenian in Armitage Robinson, *St. Irenaeus*, 124–25). Against this interpretative tradition, see Origen, *Princ.* 2.11.2 (translation in Butterworth, *Origen on First Principles*, 147–48), and Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.11–13, referring to Papias (English text in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 732–41; see fragment 5 [p. 743] on the Apocalypse). Origen complains, “Because they understand the divine scriptures in a Judaistic sense, they extract from them nothing that is worthy of the divine praises.” Eusebius adds, “These ideas I suppose [Papias] got through a misunderstanding of the apostolic accounts, not realizing that the things recorded in figurative language were spoken by them mystically” (*Apostolic Fathers*, 739). For the genesis of Eusebius's negative opinion of the millenarianism of Papias and Irenaeus, see Grant, “Papias in Eusebius' Church History.”

67. Corsini, *Apocalisse*, 11–24. In addition to the acts of the martyrs and Origen, he looks at other possible support for his case. These pages develop further what appeared in *Apocalypse*, 17–21, especially in the light of criticism from Giesen and Lupieri. If Corsini is entirely wrong in this assessment of the earliest interpretation of the Apocalypse, his case is greatly weakened. It becomes a creative personal Christian interpretation without any early support. This does

Writing in the first flush of the approval of the Christian faith by the emperor Constantine, and probably influenced by Origen's opposition to a millenarian reading, Eusebius opposed readings that focused intensely on the promise of the thousand-years reign that would end in the final appearance and destruction of evil in Apocalypse 20:2–6. Nevertheless, Augustine's *De civitate Dei* 20.7–17 (426 CE), written in very different circumstances after the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410 CE, was dedicated almost entirely to the question of the final judgment and the question of the millennium. Augustine devoted most of his attention to speculations on Apocalypse 20, largely disassociated from the argument of the rest of John's document.<sup>68</sup>

Thus began the tendency to read the passages upon the reign of a thousand years as if they did not belong to an immediate context and the broader context of the whole book. Then followed the tendency to look for eschatological messages and images at every turn, causing the profound contributions which John's Apocalypse has made upon God, Christology, and the Church to fade in importance. The Apocalypse came to be judged as a "prophecy" of the end of time, a foreseeing and a prediction of what will happen in the future.<sup>69</sup>

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not mean that the case should not be made, but it lacks the pedigree claimed by Corsini. To the best of my knowledge, the only extensive work done in this area is in Italian, from one of Corsini's junior colleagues in Turin, Clementina Mazzucco. See Mazzucco, "Il rapporto"; Mazzucco, "L'Apocalisse di Giovanni"; Mazzucco, "L'Apocalisse: testimonianze patristiche"; Mazzucco, "Il millenarismo Cristiano"; Mazzucco, "L'Apocalisse nel Commento a Giovanni di Origene." For her more general appreciation of Corsini's work, see Mazzucco, "La passione di Eugenio Corsini," 29–35. Corsini offers a sketch in *Apocalisse*, 11–24. However, Cobb suggests that Corsini (and Mazzucco) are on the right track. Corsini's suggestion that the Apocalypse was used for early catechesis is speculative, but Cobb makes a good case for the formative effect of early martyrdom texts on those who heard them (*Divine Deliverance*, 31–92). For general works on this period, see Matter, "The Apocalypse in Early Medieval Exegesis," and Gryson, "Les commentaires patristiques latin de l'Apocalypse."

68. See Saint Augustine, *City of God*, 398–418. The editor remarks in his introductory note to book 20 that Augustine's use of the Apocalypse is remarkable as "it rarely received such extended treatment in the early Church" (389). The subsequent authority of Augustine's large-scale interpretation of Apoc. 20 was only to be expected.

69. Corsini, *Apocalypse*, 21. See also the important essay of Paula Fredriksen, "Tyconius and Augustine on the Apocalypse." She points out that, as we no longer have Tyconius's writings on the Apocalypse, it is possible that he also supported a theological (rather than millenarian) interpretation (see pp. 24–29). Fredriksen summarizes her assessment of Tyconius in this way: "The time of the end is unknowable in principle; and until it comes, the church must remain a *corpus permixtum*, containing both sinner and saint" (29). It is important to recognize that early millenarian interpretations of Apoc. 20 (e.g., Papias and Irenaeus) do not exclude the possibility of a christological interpretation of the Apocalypse on the part of these early witnesses. They applied a millenarian solution only to the exegesis of Apoc. 20. For a strong hint of a Christology arising from texts in the Apocalypse (Adam was saved by the action of Jesus Christ) in Irenaeus, see *Haer.* 3.23.7. Corsini's complaint is that after Augustine's focus on