

# Interpreting the Book of Revelation: the textual basis for a single approach

## Introduction

The Book of Revelation is a difficult book to understand and it always seems to have been like that. According to St. Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria in the 3rd century CE, even the faithful of the early Church kept away from this book: “*Some before us have set aside and rejected the book altogether, criticizing it chapter by chapter, and pronouncing it without sense or argument, and maintaining that the title is fraudulent. For they say that it is not the work of John, nor is it a revelation, because it is covered thickly and densely by a veil of obscurity*”.<sup>1</sup> St. Dionysius himself confessed he did not understand it.<sup>2</sup> Little more than a century later, the renowned Bible scholar, St. Jerome, also confided “*The Apocalypse of John has as many mysteries as words*”.<sup>3</sup> In the early 4th century Eusebius lists it as one of the texts whose inclusion into the New Testament canon was opposed, even by himself<sup>4</sup> and, although it met little resistance in the Roman Church,<sup>5</sup> the Eastern Churches did not accept it formally until at least the 7th century CE, a good 500 years after it was written. Henry Swete, the English Biblical Scholar, wrote that “*No book in the New Testament with so good a record was so long in gaining general acceptance*”, and suggested that the reluctance to accept it as canonical was due precisely to its obscurity.<sup>6</sup> More significantly, after nearly two millennia of exegetical effort, there is still no consensus among scholars about its interpretation. There are a variety of approaches and a multitude of different interpretations.

Nevertheless much progress has been made over the last 100 years. Against the text-splitting ‘source-criticism’ of a century ago, there is now a scholarly consensus on the literary, linguistic and

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<sup>1</sup> Reported by Eusebius in his *Church History*, VII, 25:1 (New Advent Version accessible at [www.newadvent.org](http://www.newadvent.org) based on *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, Eds Schaffer and Wace, Trans. McGiffert, Buffalo NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co. 1892; Revised and Edited by Kevin Knight).

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius quotes the following revealing admission from a lost work of Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria: “But I could not venture to reject the book, as many brethren hold it in high esteem. But I suppose that it is beyond my comprehension, and that there is a certain concealed and more wonderful meaning in every part. For if I do not understand I suspect that a deeper sense lies beneath the words. I do not measure and judge them by my own reason, but leaving the more to faith I regard them as too high for me to grasp. And I do not reject what I cannot comprehend, but rather wonder because I do not understand it”, *Church History*, VII, 25:4-5 (New Advent Version).

<sup>3</sup> *Letter 53, to Paulinus*, para 9 (New Advent Version; para 8 in Migne’s PL), dated to 394 CE.

<sup>4</sup> *Church History*, III, 25: 3-5 (New Advent Version), in which Eusebius expresses his opposition to the book by placing it in two entirely contradictory categories regarding apostolic authorship, both the ‘agreed-upon’ and the ‘spurious’, skipping over the ‘disputed’ category. His support for the ‘spurious’ label becomes evident in later passages.

<sup>5</sup> The main opponents were Marcion, the Alogoi, and Gaius of Rome; cf. H.B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices*, London: Macmillan and Co, 1906; cvi–cxiv. In reality, acceptance of the book in the Church owed more to belief in apostolic authorship than to an understanding of its contents, whose opacity impressed even St. Augustine: “Now in this book called Apocalypse there are, to be sure, many obscure statements, designed to exercise the mind of the reader; and there are few statements there whose clarity enables us to track down the meaning of the rest, at the price of some effort. This is principally because our author repeats the same things in many ways, so that he appears to be speaking of different matters, though in fact he is found on examination to be treating of the same subjects in different terms” (*City of God*, XX 17, London: Penguin Classics, 2003; 929).

<sup>6</sup> *The Apocalypse of St. John*, cxiii. In this context, it is highly doubtful that “the real historical horizons of the book were early lost” (R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920; Vol. I, clxxxiii), or that “the key to the interpretation disappeared with the generation to which the book was addressed” (H.B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, cxiii), or that “we may assume that its original readers understood its central message without undue difficulty” (Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT Series, Rev. ed., Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK, 1998; 24). It appears, rather, that this level of understanding was never attained in the early Church.

visionary unity of the Book of Revelation. Much more is known about the social and historical background of the text. Its language and literary genre have been described and defined. Its structure, composition and content have been analysed in many different ways. Important intertextual studies have clarified its use of canonical and non-canonical Scriptures. Classical sources and local archaeology have confirmed important details about the seven churches in Asia. Many monographs and commentaries have been written, some longer than a thousand pages.

And yet, despite this academic surge over the last century, the significance of the text as a whole, and many of its parts, still evades general clarification and consensus.<sup>7</sup> No other book in the Bible has given rise to such a variety of interpretive approaches. Moreover, this diversity has such a long and influential past that the history of the text's interpretation is now a flourishing field of research in its own right. Among other things, this research has shown that most interpretations can be grouped into four distinct approaches, according to how the visions in the text relate to each other and to the events of history. The four approaches have been called *Preterist*, *Historicist*, *Futurist* and *Idealist*.<sup>8</sup> A fifth group called *Mixed* is sometimes added for interpretations that combine different approaches. As the terminology indicates, the interpretations in each group differ according to whether the main part of the text is thought to be referring to events in the distant past (*Preterist*), the more recent past (*Historicist*), the future (*Futurist*), some combination of these (*Mixed*), or to no particular period, past or future, but instead to metaphysical realities that are always present (*Idealist*). In practice, this variety of approaches means that interpreters of the Book of Revelation *cannot even agree on what the main part of the text is about*. The main subject of the book is still an open question. As St. Jerome also said "*Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ*",<sup>9</sup> scholars and members of the Church may feel uneasy about this unresolved enigma at the conclusion of the biblical canon.

### The Origin of the Differences

"The Book of Revelation is one of the most sustained examples of symbolic reality in existence. The chief interpretive question is what the symbols refer to".<sup>10</sup> As most of the symbols in Revelation derive from the Old Testament,<sup>11</sup> their significance can be readily discerned by referring to these scriptures. What is most difficult to grasp is the new temporal and spatial contexts into

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<sup>7</sup> Reviewing two decades of research on the Book of Revelation prior to the year 2000, Pierre Prigent writes: "The history of exegesis is not one of guaranteed progress, as we know all too well... Interesting results have appeared here and there which should not be forgotten. Others have had to their credit (a merit that is temporary and surely less glorious, but perhaps just as useful) having opened paths that have led nowhere. Progress is also meaningful when it consists of posting signs to indicate impasses!" (*Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, Trans. Wendy Pradels, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001; 21). What follows in this paper seeks to identify the roots of this depressing situation and propose a new and different approach.

<sup>8</sup> According to Isbon Beckwith (*The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, New York: Macmillan, 1919; 334-36), the first to propose this classification was Samuel Davidson in his *Introduction to the Study of the New Testament* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Vol. I, London: Longmans, 1882; 297). Since then, many commentators, especially in the English-speaking world, have adopted it, e.g., R.H. Mounce (*The Book of Revelation*, 26-30), G.K. Beale (*The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999; 44-49), Alan F. Johnson (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Rev. ed., Vol. 13, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2006; 584-87).

<sup>9</sup> *Commentariorum in Isaiam*, libri xviii, Prol.: PL 24,17B, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, para. 133, and in the Vatican II Council's *Dei Verbum*, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Introduction to Revelation, *English Standard Version Study Bible*, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2008; 2456.

<sup>11</sup> H.B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, cxxxii-cxxxiii.

which these symbols have been inserted in the vision narrative of Revelation.<sup>12</sup> However, whereas the spatial indicators in the text are fairly self-explanatory,<sup>13</sup> the temporal organization of the visions, and the events they refer to, is not. Above all, it is confusion over the temporal organization of the text and its visions that has spawned the variety of interpretations and the disagreement among interpreters. As we saw above, some interpreters see the text as referring to past events, others to future events, others to a mixture of past, present and future events, and others to no particular events at all; the five approaches to the interpretation of the Book of Revelation mentioned above all differ in their identification of the temporal events to which the visions of the main part of the text refer (Rev 4,1–22,5). Before going on to consider if there is nothing in the text itself that can bring about a convergence of these different approaches, it is surely important to reflect on what may have caused this variety of approaches to evolve in the first place.

Without entering the details of each approach, it is true to say that all are based upon a different assumption about the text, with each assumption having some rather loose connection with a particular feature of the text.

The modern, academic *Preterist* approach highlights the author's insistence on the imminence of Christ's Second Coming, referred to as "soon" (1,1; 22,7.12.20) and "near" (1,3; 22.10) and, guided by the classic use of the historical-critical method, then assumes that the entire text is addressed primarily to the contemporary Church, which is to say the Church at the end of the first century (around 95 CE).<sup>14</sup> The proponents of the late mediaeval *Historicist* approach assumed that the literary order of the book's visions represented the chronological order of the history of the Church from apostolic times (Rev. 2–3) up to the end of this age (Rev. 20,15) and that they themselves were close to the end. The *Futurist* approach, born in the early Church,<sup>15</sup> revived in the Catholic Counter-reformation and now the favourite of the evangelical churches, highlights the prophetic character of the book (1,3; 4,1; 10,11; 22,6-7), with its focus on Christ's Second Coming, and assumes that the greater part of the text refers to the events immediately preceding this event. The ever-present and ubiquitous *Idealist* approach looks at the vision of spiritual warfare in heaven (Rev 12) and assumes, on the basis of its non-literal language, that all the other visions described in the text refer to spiritual realities that are present in every age, in different circumstances, and not to actual physical events, past, present or future.

The point is that each interpretive approach is inspired by one specific aspect of the text and, generalizing from that particular aspect, goes on to adopt the most tenuous assumptions about the whole text and its temporal context or contexts. Each of the assumptions is too narrow to apply to the text as a whole and therefore inadequate to some extent.

The *Preterist* assumption that the Book of Revelation was addressed primarily to the early Church is contradicted by the fact, reported above in the Introduction, that the early Church found it

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<sup>12</sup> The strange symbolic world and its temporo-spatial dimensions are now recognized as defining characteristics of the literary genre called 'apocalypse'. The genre is named after the 'Apocalypse', the Greek title of the Book of Revelation, which is one of the finest examples of the genre. The implications for interpretation will be discussed later.

<sup>13</sup> The spatial features tend to follow the view of the cosmos in antiquity: heaven, mid-heaven, earth or land, sea, abyss, a third of the earth, the four corners of the earth, every tribe and race and tongue and nation, etc. Those spatial indicators that are less evident (Babylon, the Holy City, Mount Zion, the great city, Harmageddon, River Euphrates, the New Jerusalem, etc.) can be inferred either from details in the text itself, or from other parts of Scripture. The spatial description of heaven as a sanctuary will be discussed later.

<sup>14</sup> Although there are several different varieties of *Preterist* interpretation on the shelves, all concur in seeing the events described in the main part of the Book of Revelation (Rev 4.1–22,5) as happening in antiquity, in the first century CE or shortly thereafter.

<sup>15</sup> With e.g., Justin Martyr, Irenæus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, and Cyprian.

obscure and, on account of this, the Church in the East refused to accept it as canonical until at least the 7th century. The general incomprehension of the text at the time can be explained by the lack of correspondence between the text and the history of the early Church.<sup>16</sup> In these circumstances, the assumption that the Book of Revelation was addressed primarily to the situation contemporary with the author is untenable.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, since this book embraces such a vast horizon—nothing less than the complete fulfilment of the entire mystery of God at the end of history (cf. Rev 10,7)—the assumption that the main part of the text refers to the ancient past is clearly too narrow to apply to the interpretation of the text as a whole. Because of this limitation, we cannot and should not expect any of the ‘*Preterist*’ interpretations to give us the full significance of the Book of Revelation.<sup>18</sup>

The *Historicist* approach flourished in Europe around the time of the Reformation and Enlightenment, and regarded the history of that turbulent period to be symbolized by the text of the Book of Revelation. It was easily discredited, and later abandoned, when the assumption that the text accurately reflected contemporary events turned out to be false.

Up until the modern period, the *Futurist* approach remained the principle interpretive line towards the Book of Revelation, giving a new meaning to its Greek title ‘Apocalypse’ – a meaning synonymous with a future catastrophic ‘end’ to this world. It would be true to say, however, that even this approach is based upon an assumption: the assumption that the greater part of the text refers to future events. However reasonable this assumption may seem to be, it is still an assumption, because the text itself is not invoked to determine what is past and what is future. Moreover, in the form they are normally presented, *Futurist* interpretations suffer from a crucial weakness that often leads to rejection. When, on the basis of the same assumption, the ‘millennial rule of Christ with his saints’ (Rev 20,4-6) is presented as an entirely future interlude, occurring between the Second Coming (Rev 19,11-21) and the Final Judgment (20,11-15), it contradicts orthodox Church teaching and is denounced as a “millennialist”, or “chialist”, or “pre-millennialist”, interpretation.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, a persecution as severe or diffuse as the one described in the text (Rev 7,9-17; 13,5-10) never took place in the history of the early Church. The persecutors never performed miracles in order to induce the people to worship an image of the emperor, nor did they ever try to control them by giving them a mark, without which they could not buy or sell (13,11-17). Never did a Roman emperor destroy his imperial city in the definitive way the beast and his allies destroy the city called ‘Babylon’ (17,15-17; ch. 18), which is identified with imperial Rome in the *Preterist* interpretation. There has never been environmental damage on the scale described after the blowing of the first four trumpets in the visions recorded by John (ch. 8), nor has there ever been a ministry of two prophets like the one described between the blowing of the sixth and seventh trumpets (11,3-13).

<sup>17</sup> It should also be noticed that the only part of the text which is explicitly concerned with the situation prevailing around the time it was written (Rev 2–3), hardly mentions the problem of persecution: in the letters to the churches only one persecution is predicted, of brief duration and limited to a few people (2,10), and there is only one passing reference to a martyr (2,13). The main concern of the letters is not persecution, but the opposite: a tendency to avoid persecution through compromise with the prevailing society.

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted as well that the classic use of the historical-critical method, on which this approach is based, has been repeatedly criticised for its limitations, e.g., “To be sure, the classic use of the historical-critical method reveals its limitations. It restricts itself to a search for the meaning of a biblical text within the historical circumstances that gave rise to it and is not concerned with other possibilities of meaning which have been revealed at later stages of the biblical revelation and history of the Church”, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993; 40; and again: “Historical-critical exegesis has too often tended to limit the meaning of text by tying it too rigidly to precise historical circumstances”, *Ibid.* 80. The inadequacy of this approach has been apparent to scholars since the 1980’s: “All scholarly attempts to arrive at a definite interpretation of certain passages or of the whole book seem to have failed. This failure suggests that the historical-critical paradigm has to be complemented by a different approach that can do justice to the multivalent character of Revelation” (Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The New Testament and its Modern Interpreters*, eds E. J. Epp, G.W. Macrae, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989; 416).

The *Idealist* approach to the Book of Revelation assumes the visions described there do not refer to actual physical events, past, present or future, but rather to spiritual realities that occur in every age, and in different circumstances. The fundamental error of this approach is the assumption that the non-literal language and symbolism of the text do not have a literal meaning, since non-literal language only refers to non-literal activities. This is a fallacy, as pointed out by G.B. Caird many years ago: “Any statement, literal or metaphorical, may be true or false, and its referent may be real or unreal. . . . In short, literal and metaphorical are terms which describe types of language, and the type of language we use has very little to do with the truth or falsity of what we say and with the existence or non-existence of the things we refer to”.<sup>19</sup> Against interpretations that are wholly symbolical, it is also worth recalling C.S. Lewis’ dictum: “You cannot know that everything in the representation of a thing is symbolical unless you have independent access to the thing and can compare it with the representation”.<sup>20</sup> Independent access to the ‘thing’ would mean nothing less than direct experience of, or reliable documentation about the thing represented, and since the main ‘thing’ represented in the text is the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the age, this would be hard to prove or obtain. In fact, it is a delusion to believe that this has actually happened (cf. 2Thess 2,1-12).<sup>21</sup>

It is clear, then, that we should not expect any interpretation guided by the above approaches to yield the full significance of the Book of Revelation. They are all based on assumptions that have, at most, a partial relevance to the text as a whole. Perhaps, then, we should look more carefully at the *Mixed* approach, which applies different approaches to different parts of the text. A reasonable example would be to break the text down into several parts and apply the *Preterist* approach to chs 2–3, the *Historicist* approach to chs 4–6, the *Idealist* approach to the celestial scenes of Rev chs 7, 12 and 15, and the *Futurist* approach to the rest. However, the decision on how to divide the text and which approach to apply to each part is still based upon assumptions concerning the temporal context of each part of the text and about the most appropriate approach to apply to it. It is unacceptable to the conscientious reader that the interpretation of the sacred text should be based on one or more tenuous assumptions. Much more satisfactory would be the identification of a temporo-spatial framework within the text, uniting and ordering its visions, showing how they relate to each other and to the events which they represent.

### **A New and Different Approach**

The Book of Revelation is generally regarded as one of the finest examples of a genre of writings called ‘apocalypse’.<sup>22</sup> This term applies to a number of Jewish religious writings, composed between 250 BCE and 100 CE and sharing certain specific characteristics, from which the following generic definition has been proposed and widely accepted: “*a genre of revelatory literature with a*

<sup>19</sup> G.B. Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible*, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1980; 131. Also “Revelation is a symbolic book, but that does not mean the symbols do not depict literal events like the “great tribulation” (7:14) as well as the various depictions of the “three and a half” years in chapters 11–13 as symbols for the final period of history or the “beast” for the Antichrist”, Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002; 16.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Fern-seed and Elephants’, in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper, London: Fount, 1981; 206-7.

<sup>21</sup> Included here are those fully-realized eschatologies that spiritualize the end-historical Second Coming by regarding it as a continuous or ‘perennial’ coming in history, e.g., *The Apocalypse: The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ*, by Eugenio Corsini, Trans. Francis Moloney, Good News Studies 5, Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1983.

<sup>22</sup> This is not, by any means, a denial that it is a work of Christian prophecy. “Revelation is presented not only as *apocalypsis*, but also as a prophecy (1:3; 22:6-7), and its author is properly regarded as an early Christian prophet”, John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016; 338.

*narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world*".<sup>23</sup> This is important because it draws attention to the formal characteristics and transcendental concerns of 'apocalyptic' writings and, therefore, to those of the Book of Revelation. In addition, the importance of the temporal and spatial dimensions in defining this genre of writings should alert the interpreter to identify the features of the text that represent these dimensions and include them in his interpretation.<sup>24</sup>

Identification of these features in the Book of Revelation is not difficult. A cursory glance at the text is enough to find the 'spatial dimension of the supernatural world' represented as a heavenly sanctuary and to identify the 'temporal dimension leading to eschatological salvation' as the progress of the liturgy that takes place within the heavenly sanctuary, but also involving the whole creation, in heaven and on earth.

A closer look reveals a text replete with temple-liturgical imagery: in numerous passages the heavenly environment is explicitly referred to as God's sanctuary (ναός: Rev 3,12; 7,15; 11,1.2.19; 14,15.17; 15,5.6.8; 16,1.17)<sup>25</sup> or dwelling (σκηνή: 13,6). It contains many of the liturgical objects and furnishings that characterized the ancient Israelite temple cult: the seven-branched lampstand or *menorah* (1,12.13.20; 2,1.5; 4,5; 11,4), the altar of incense (6,9; 8,3.5; 9,13; 14,18; 16,7), the altar (11,1), the 'sea' (4,6; 15,2), the Ark of the Covenant (11,19), as well as harps (5,8; 14,2; 15,2), trumpets (8,2) and libation bowls (15,7; 16,1).

Similarly, words and actions described in these passages clearly represent liturgical activities corresponding to those performed in the former temple at Jerusalem: a lamb slain in sacrifice (5,6), the opening of scrolls (ch. 6; 8,1; 20,12); offering of incense (8,3-4), blowing of trumpets (chs 8-11), pouring of libations (chs 15-16), divine worship (4,8-11; 5,12-14; 7,10-12; 12,10-12; 16,5-7), thanksgiving (11,15-18; 19,1-8) and singing of hymns of praise (5,9-10; 15,3-4).

In the Christian tradition, it has long been recognized that parts of the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 10,19-20; 12,22-23) and the Book of Revelation (especially Rev chs 4-5, parts of chs 7, 14, 15 and 19) describe a heavenly liturgy, in which heavenly beings participate along with the community of the faithful on earth.<sup>26</sup> The heavenly temple is indeed described in other apocalypses, but this imagery is more highly developed in the Book of Revelation.<sup>27</sup> This liturgical dimension of the Book of Revelation has also been acknowledged and studied by modern scholarship.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.) 5, based on his article "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre", in *Semeia* 14; Missoula MT: Scholars Press, 1979; 9. This definition has stood up extremely well to the test of time and scholarly criticism (cf. *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 11-14). For the background and scholarly debate surrounding this definition, including the author's view of its continuing validity and value, see "Introduction: The Genre Apocalypse Reconsidered", by John J. Collins, in *Apocalypse, Prophecy and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2015; 1-20.

<sup>24</sup> For an excellent review of the methodology underpinning the interpretation of the text through the spatial and temporal aspects that characterize the 'apocalyptic genre', see 'The Structure of the Book of Revelation in Light of Apocalyptic Literary Conventions', Christopher R. Smith, *Novum Testamentum*, XXXVI, 4 (1994); esp. 389-90.

<sup>25</sup> Most of the current translations of the Book of Revelation translate the Greek word ναός by the word 'temple'. In the NT, however, ναός almost invariably refers to the central and most sacred part of the temple, most appropriately translated by the word 'sanctuary'. This confusion over terminology has probably helped to obscure the significance of the temple imagery in this book.

<sup>26</sup> E.g., *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paras 1137-39.

<sup>27</sup> The subject of the heavenly temple became a prominent feature in the apocalyptic tradition. In all of the following non-canonical writings the author ascends to heaven and proceeds to give a description of the temple there: the *Book of Watchers* (1*Enoch* chs 1-36), the *Testament of Levi*, 2*Enoch*, the *Similitudes of Enoch* (1*Enoch* chs 37-71), the

What has not been grasped sufficiently is the degree to which these liturgical elements are combined with temple imagery and correspond to specific liturgical activities in the former temple at Jerusalem. This is explained by an ancient logic that identifies the heavenly sanctuary that was revealed to the author of the Book of Revelation with the one that was revealed to Moses, as a plan for the tabernacle that he was asked to construct (Exod 25,8-9.40; 26,30; 27,8). There is, therefore, a true typological correspondence between the heavenly sanctuary described in the Book of Revelation, the tabernacle built by Moses, and the former temple in Jerusalem that was modelled on this.<sup>29</sup> It is a correspondence that embraces the whole of the legislation attributed to Moses concerning the organization, administration and liturgical activity of the ancient sacrificial cult.

Owing to this ‘typological’ correspondence between the heavenly temple revealed to John and the former temples in Jerusalem, the basic features and theological significance of the temple-liturgical imagery in Revelation can be clarified by comparing it with references to the divine cult in the Old Testament (e.g., Lev 16; Sir 50,5-21), and also to the accounts in the tractates Tamid and Yoma of the Mishnah. Since the comparison is based on typology, it follows that we should not expect to find a simple identity between the liturgical forms or ‘types’ on earth (Mishnah tractates) and their original antitypes, or archetypes, in heaven (Book of Revelation), but rather a partial similarity that takes into account the coming of the Messiah and the differences between the earthly and heavenly settings. This analogy, or correspondence, between earthly type (Mishnah tractates) and the heavenly archetype (Book of Revelation) therefore exhibits similarities and differences, both of which are important in elucidating and interpreting the basic features and theological significance of the heavenly liturgy in Revelation.<sup>30</sup>

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*Apocalypse of Zephaniah, the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Ascension of Isaiah and 3Baruch* (cf. Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, Oxford: OUP, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> “L’Apocalisse ha una sua dimensione liturgica. È questo, un fatto che l’esegesi e la teologia biblica dell’Apocalisse possono considerare acquisito, specialmente dopo gli studi che si sono susseguiti sull’argomento in questi ultimi anni”, Ugo Vanni, *L’Apocalisse: Ermeneutica, Esegesi, Teologia*, Bologna: Centro Editoriale Dehoniano, 1988; 101 (the relevant bibliography is given in the footnote to this passage). Useful summaries of this research are to be found in H. Ulfsgard, *Feast and Future: Revelation 7:9-17 and the Feast of Tabernacles*, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1989; 21-27, and R. Nusca, ‘Liturgia e Apocalisse’ in *Apokalypsis* in onore di Ugo Vanni, eds. E. Bosetti and A. Colacrai, Assisi: Citadella Editrice, 2005; 459-72. Also Robert Briggs, *Jewish Temple Imagery in the Book of Revelation*, New York: Peter Lang, 1999; Andrea Spatafora, *From the Temple of God to the God of the Temple*, Rome: PUG, 1997; J.-P. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse: The Transformation of Prophetic Language in Revelation 16,17–19,10*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989; 84-89; Jon Paulien, ‘The Role of the Hebrew Cultus, Sanctuary and Temple in the Plot and Structure of the Book of Revelation’, *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2 [1995] 245-261 (see bibliography on p.247); Simon J. Kistemaker, ‘The Temple in the Apocalypse’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)*, 43 (2000), 433-41.

<sup>29</sup> Yves Congar expresses it thus: “If John thus sees the heavenly temple in the shape of the Temple of Jerusalem, it is not so much because he imagines the sanctuary on the model of the sanctuary he had seen on earth at Jerusalem, it is principally because the latter, as the successor of the Mosaic tabernacle, had been constructed according to the heavenly prototype shown to Moses on the mountain” (*The Mystery of the Temple, or the manner of God’s Presence to His Creatures From Genesis to the Apocalypse*, Trans R.F. Trevett, Westminster MD: Newmans Press, 1962; 209). Although it is unlikely that the Exodus passages (Exod 25,8-9.40; 26,30; 27,8) originally meant that the plan shown to Moses involved a vision of the heavenly sanctuary, this is certainly how they were re-interpreted later in the post-exilic period. Through this process of re-interpretation, these and certain other passages (Ezek 43,10-11; 1Chron 28,11-20) lie at the origin of the numerous apocalyptic temple visions (cf. R.H. Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse: Being Lectures Delivered before the University of London*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913; 166-67; George Buchanan Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament: Its Theory and Practice*, Oxford: OUP, 1925; 154-57).

<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that this correspondence is not an example of “intertextuality”, or any of its literary correlates, as it does not appear to be based on any text. Although a few Old Testament texts are echoed in various aspects of the temple-liturgical imagery of the Book of Revelation, this imagery goes well beyond anything found in Scripture. It may indeed be based on the author’s personal experience of the second temple and its sacrificial service. This is an unusual situation for interpreters, for even though the typology concerns the temple, a very biblical institution, there is no

In the context of exploring and interpreting these similarities and differences, the historical veracity, or ‘historicity’, of the accounts of second temple liturgy in the Mishnaic tractates, Tamid and Yoma, is important in a general way, but minute procedural details are not. The purpose of the comparison is certainly not to prove the historical accuracy of the liturgy represented in the Book of Revelation, but rather to establish the essential liturgical features and their significance. For these purposes, the detail presented in the tractates Tamid and Yoma is more than sufficient, and the rabbinical and scholarly consensus over their historical reliability is more than satisfactory.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple**

The results of the comparison between the heavenly liturgy described in the Book of Revelation and the liturgical procedures described in the Mishnaic tractates Tamid and Yoma can be summarized as follows:<sup>32</sup>

1. The opening vision of the ‘One like a Son of Man’ among seven golden lampstands and the subsequent messages to the churches (Rev 1,9-20; chs 2–3) represent the priest as he trimmed and refuelled the seven-branched lampstand (the *menorah*) inside the Sanctuary at the start of the morning service in the ancient temple (*m. Tamid* 3:6,9). The high status of this figure indicates he represents the High Priest and his attire suggests he is performing this function on the Day of Atonement (*m. Yoma* 1:2; 3:1-7; cf. Lev 16,4).
2. The slain Lamb that appears to the author, on entering through the open door in heaven, corresponds to the lamb slain as the continual whole offering (called the *tamid* sacrifice) at the start of the morning service in the temple (*m. Tamid* 3:1-5,7; 4,1). His appearance before the throne of God in heaven (Rev chs 4–5) corresponds to the entrance of the High Priest into the most sacred part of the Sanctuary on the annual Day of Atonement, with the blood of the sacrifices, in order to perform expiation for the Sanctuary (*m. Yoma* 4:2-3; 5:3-6; cf. Lev 16,1-19).<sup>33</sup> His reception of the Scroll of Life (Rev 5,7-14) evokes the giving of the Torah Scroll to the High Priest after the completion of the rite of expiation for the people at the end of the annual Day of Atonement in the second temple (*m. Yoma* 7:1-2).

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satisfactory parallel text in the Bible to explain it. The accounts in the tractates Yoma and Tamid of the Mishnah fulfil this role, since they deal at length with the same subject, second temple liturgy, despite having no literary connection with the Book of Revelation, as they were not published until a century later. Nevertheless, due to the typological relationship inferred before, the comparison between the second temple liturgy described in the Mishnah and the liturgy in the Book of Revelation can be informative, and even decisive. “Typological exegesis” is the best description of this process: premised on the unity of the two Testaments, it resembles the traditional use of Old Testament passages describing certain ‘types’ (persons, institutions or events seen as models or prefigurations) in the interpretation of New Testament passages describing the corresponding ‘antitypes’ or original ‘archetypes’ (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 128-130; 140). The result has been called the “spiritual”, “mystical” or “typical sense” (cf. Raymond E. Brown in *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer, R.E. Murphy; Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968, ch. 71, paras 71-79, pp. 618-619).

<sup>31</sup> For those who are interested, the issue of the historicity of these tractates is discussed in “The Historicity of the Mishnaic Tractates Tamid and Yoma”, in the ‘Academic Articles’ section at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org).

<sup>32</sup> The details are presented in the *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple: a New Approach to the Book of Revelation*, John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003, accessible at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org) and, at the same site, in the article “The Sacrificial Symbolism of the Lamb in the Book of Revelation”.

<sup>33</sup> This finding underlies the striking doctrinal agreement between the Book of Revelation and the Letter to the Hebrews (cf. Albert Vanhoye, ‘L’Apocalisse e la Lettera agli Ebrei’, in *Apokalypsis*, 275). In the absence of any literary dependence, both works present Christ as the high-priestly redeemer and sacrificial victim in a Day of Atonement liturgy “that sees the current period of afflictions as a *Mo’ed Kippur*, a period of atonement, which began with Jesus’ death and will end with his Parousia” (Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century*, WUNT 163, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003; 193).



3. Evoking the blessings and curses of the Torah (Lev 26; Deut 28), the opening of the first four seals of the Scroll and the missions of the first four horsemen (Rev 6,1-8) represent the part of the early morning service reserved for reciting the Ten Commandments, other parts of the Torah scroll and various blessings (*m. Tamid* 5:1; cf. Targums Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan to Exodus 20).<sup>34</sup>
4. The souls of the martyrs who appear under the altar in heaven (Rev 6,9-11) correspond to the members of the continual whole offering, after being transferred to the base of the outer altar in the former temple (*m. Tamid* 4:2-3).
5. The sealing of the 144,000 men (Rev 7,1-8) with the name of God and the Lamb (14,1) corresponds to the pronouncement of the priestly blessing, which causes the placing of God's name on the people of Israel (*m. Tamid* 7:2; cf. Num 6,24-27).
6. The offering of a great quantity of incense with the prayers of the saints on the golden altar in heaven (Rev 8,3-4) recalls the same action in the morning service of the former temple (*m. Tamid* 6:1-3), which was also considered as a time of prayer for all the community (cf. Ps 141,1-2; Jdt 9,1; Lk 1,10). Only on the Day of Atonement was a 'great' quantity of incense offered (*m. Yoma* 4:4, cf. Lev 16,12-13).
7. The angel who throws fire on to the earth from the altar in heaven (Rev 8,5) evokes the act of throwing the members of the whole offering on to the fire that was always kept alight on the outer altar (*m. Tamid* 7:3).
8. The sounding of the seven trumpets (Rev 8–11), the cereal offering (14,14-16; 15,2) and the outpouring of the bowls (Rev 15–16), together with the singing of the celestial choirs described in the Book of Revelation (7,9-17; 14,2-3; 15,3-4; 19,1-8), are analogous to the sounding of the trumpets, the placing of the cereal offering on the altar, and the pouring of the libation at the culmination of the morning service, the time when the Levitical musicians used to sing psalms and praise to God (*m. Tamid* 7:3-4). This liturgical climax was called "the presentation of the offerings before God."
9. At the end of the heavenly liturgy, the Scroll of Life, which had been given to the Lamb a long time previously (Rev 5,7-14, see above at 2), is opened and read out at the final Judgment (20,11-12), just as the High Priest used to read from the Torah scroll at the end of the special rite of expiation on the Day of Atonement (*m. Yoma* 7:1).<sup>35</sup>
10. In the Book of Revelation all the agents of iniquity, including Satan himself, are thrown alive into the lake of fire (Rev 19,20; 20,10), to bring an end to sin forever, whilst in the annual rite of expiation the scapegoat was thrown alive from a cliff, only temporarily removing sins from the community (*m. Yoma* 6:3-6,8; cf. Lev 16,10.20-22; *I Enoch* 10:4-6,8).

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<sup>34</sup> The link between the 10 commandments and the judgment plagues of the last 3 horsemen is made explicit in the targumic expansions to the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> commandments in Exodus 20 (though not in Targum Onkelos). Concerning allusions to the targums in the Apocalypse, Martin McNamara writes: "after consideration of the evidence for the relation of the targums... to the New Testament, the present writer has been led to express the view that the Apocalypse of John is the "New Testament book which shows the greatest number of contacts with the Palestinian Targum"', *Targum and Testament Revisited*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Grand Rapids MI /Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2010; 213.

<sup>35</sup> Stökl Ben Ezra includes the reading of the Torah at the end of the expiatory rite in his category of ritual details transferred from later synagogue practice and projected back into the memory of the temple service in order to justify these practices and reinforce the impression of a continuity between temple and synagogue (*The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity*, 25-26; cf. *m. Yoma* 7:1). However, finding this liturgical element in the heavenly liturgy described in the Book of Revelation, an independent source where the case for Day of Atonement allusions is strong, we suggest that it tips the balance in favour of understanding this Torah reading as part of the actual second temple ritual on the Day of Atonement.

In comparing the characteristics of the heavenly liturgy with liturgical practice in the former temple, we find that it corresponds to the daily morning service in order and content, but also includes features analogous to specific rites that were performed on the annual Day of Atonement.<sup>36</sup> The liturgical activity identified in the Book of Revelation can therefore best be understood as a simplification of the liturgy that used to take place annually on the Day of Atonement in the ancient temple: as the fulfilment of every kind of sacrifice, the slain Christ Lamb substitutes all the sacrifices that used to be offered on the Day of Atonement, except for the live sin-offering to Azazel (the ‘scapegoat’) whose role is fulfilled, in a modified way, by the false prophet.<sup>37</sup> The Lamb therefore corresponds to the first sacrifice on that day: the lamb chosen to be the continual whole offering (the *tamid*) for the morning service.<sup>38</sup> As a result, the heavenly liturgy described in the Book of Revelation corresponds closely to the morning service on the Day of Atonement, and includes important liturgical elements that recall the specific rite of expiation that was performed on that day.

In general terms, the atoning sacrifice, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ constitute the starting point of a liturgy that is currently being celebrated in the heavenly sanctuary, as described in the Book of Revelation; this liturgy continues up until the end of history and represents a synthesis of the liturgy that was performed on the Day of Atonement in the ancient temple of the Jews in Jerusalem. Being the principal activity in the heavenly sanctuary, the liturgy provides a temporal framework that embraces the entire sequence of visions and determines the course of events—mostly of a judgmental nature—on earth. In this way, the heavenly liturgy unites all of John’s visions into a single and coherent vision dominated by the theme of atonement—the love of Christ reconciling mankind with God.<sup>39</sup> The Book of Revelation, therefore, can be understood as the revelation of the course of this liturgy for reconciliation taking place around the throne of God in

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<sup>36</sup> The heavenly liturgy thus defined includes the majority of the liturgical elements mentioned in the text, but not all. For example, the filling of the heavenly sanctuary with the smoke of the glory and power of God (Rev 15,8) is not included, and neither are the allusions in the text to the Jewish Feasts of New Year (Rev 8–9), Tabernacles (Rev 7,9-17) and Weeks (Rev 14,1-5). These and other liturgical themes are identified in Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, 127-211.

<sup>37</sup> The false prophet is described as a beast “having two horns like a lamb and speaking like a dragon” (Rev 13,11)—a description that indicates the false prophet performs a diabolical counterpart to the expiatory role of Christ, the seven-horned Lamb. Compelling people to worship the beast (Rev 13,12-17) to whom Satan had given his power, throne and great authority (13,1-2), the false prophet does indeed cause the removal of sin, not in the way brought about by Christ the Lamb—through the sinner’s repentance and reconciliation with God—but by means of the tragic and eternal condemnation of the unrepentant sinner (14,9-11; cf. 2Thess 2,11-12). For confirmation that “ancient Jewish traditions appear to be in agreement with the interpretation which finds in the expulsion of the scapegoat a type or model of the eschatological defeat of demonic power”, see Robert Helm, ‘Azazel in Early Jewish Tradition’, *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1994; 217-26, quote from 226. Cf. also Lester L. Grabbe, ‘The Scapegoat Tradition: A Study in Early Jewish Interpretation’, *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, Vol. XVIII (1987); 152-67.

<sup>38</sup> According to the Law, the blood of a whole offering did indeed have expiatory properties (Lev 1,4; 16,24; in combination with other sacrifices: Lev 9,7; 14,20; cf. Job 1,5; 42,8) and in *Jubilees* the expiatory effect of the *tamid* sacrifice is described twice as a continual means of atonement for the Israelites (Jub 6:13-14; 50:11). More than any other type of sacrifice, the *tamid* formed the basis of the ancient sacrificial cult of the Jews: “It was the true heart and centre of the entire sacrificial worship. In no circumstances could it be dispensed with. In AD 70, when Jerusalem had for long been besieged by the Romans and famine was at its peak, the daily sacrifice was nevertheless regularly offered, and it counted as one of the heaviest of blows when, on the 17th of Tammuz, it had at last to be discontinued” (Emil Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, vol. II, 300). Under the form of the *tamid* at the centre of a liturgy corresponding to that of the most important day of the Hebrew calendar—the Day of Atonement—Jesus Christ reveals himself in the most emphatic way as the fulfilment of the ancient sacrificial cult of the Jews (cf. Mt 5,17-19).

<sup>39</sup> The dominant theme of atonement in the Book of Revelation, expressed through its liturgical symbolism, merely subordinates, but does not invalidate, the exodus imagery in the text. In this way the full significance of the final messianic redemption is conveyed—a redemption (exodus typology) from sin through divine reconciliation (atonement).

heaven, and of its consequences for the lives of the peoples, believers and non-believers, on earth. Focussing on the liturgical activities around the throne of God, this approach may appropriately be called ‘theological’.

### Three Implications

From this ‘theological’ approach to the Book of Revelation, three implications arise that specifically concern the interpretation of the text.

The first implication is that, on the analogy of the liturgy of the former temple, the liturgy revealed in the Book of Revelation follows a very precise chronological order, beginning with the sacrifice of Christ and ending with the final judgment at the end of history. Since the events described in the visions of Revelation are determined by the order of this heavenly liturgy, it follows that the events also succeed one another in a definite temporal order or sequence.<sup>40</sup> There is therefore no place for the circular theories of ‘recapitulation’, which assume the opening of the seals, sounding of trumpets and pouring of bowls are parallel versions of each other.<sup>41</sup> The precise sequence of the visions and their relation to each other can now be clarified by careful examination of the structure and composition of the text.<sup>42</sup>

The second implication derives from the fact that the conclusion of the liturgy in the former temple coincided with its culmination, a composite and inseparable series of actions including the blowing of trumpets, the presentation of the offerings on the outer altar, the outpouring of the libation and the singing of praises by the Levites. All these actions are represented in the Book of Revelation: the sounding of trumpets, the presentation of the offerings, the outpouring of libation bowls and the singing of praises dominate the liturgical activity described in the main part of the text, from chapter 8 until the end. In an analogous way, this part corresponds to the conclusion and culmination of the heavenly liturgy, which takes place at the end of history. The fact that the greater part of the text of Revelation is concerned with this conclusive part of the heavenly liturgy indicates that the greater part of the text is a prophecy of what will happen at the end of history. This part of the prophecy, at least, should be interpreted as an eschatological prophecy, which is to say, as a prophecy of the events which lead up to the Final Judgment at the end of history.

The third implication concerns the problematic millennial reign of Christ described in Rev. 20,4-6 (called ‘the millennium’), which many interpreters are expecting in the future. In addition to the arguments of various scholars against this futuristic position,<sup>43</sup> we can add the finding that, from beginning to end, the heavenly liturgy described in the Book of Revelation represents a synthesis of the liturgy that was performed in the ancient temple on the Day of Atonement. It therefore represents a day in heaven and, since “one day with the Lord is like a thousand years” (2Pet 3,8; cf. Ps 90,4), the

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<sup>40</sup> As noted by Jon Paulien, the liturgical development in Revelation suggests a “linear plot to the Apocalypse” (‘The Role of the Hebrew Cultus’, *AUSS*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1995; 261).

<sup>41</sup> Following the commentary of Victorinus of Pettau in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. For a clear presentation of the issues and other arguments in favour of progression, see the excellent article by Marko Jauhainen ‘Recapitulation and Chronological Progression in John’s Apocalypse: Towards a New Perspective’, *New Testament Studies*, 49 (2003); 543-59.

<sup>42</sup> For our proposal, please see the final part of this paper: Applying the new approach to the text.

<sup>43</sup> E.g., R.F. White, ‘Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20:1-10’, *Westminster Theological Journal* 51 (1989); 319-44; idem, ‘Making sense of Rev 20:1-10? Harold Hoehner Versus Recapitulation’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)*, 37 (1994); 539-51; idem, ‘On the Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Revelation 20:1-3 A Preconsummationist Perspective’, *JETS*, 42 (1999); 53-66; G.K. Beale’s commentary on Rev 20 in *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999; 972-1038; Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003; and Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Coelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2nd Edition, Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2001.

thousand years of Christ's reign presents itself as the period of time on earth that corresponds to the duration of the liturgy in heaven, which is the present time.<sup>44</sup> The author's vision of this 'millennium' should therefore be interpreted as a retrospective vision of the current era of salvation.

These general implications flow directly from the understanding of the liturgical dimension of the Book of Revelation, which forms the temporal framework for the entire text. They are particularly significant because they define a general approach which is based on the fine detail of the text itself, and not on assumptions, like the other approaches we have examined. More significantly, acceptance of these principles would promote a far greater consensus over the interpretation of the text and eliminate many of the unfruitful lines of interpretation currently proposed. More precisely, if these principles were followed by interpreters, all millennialist interpretations of the text, including the notorious dispensationalist interpretation of the fundamentalist school, would be excluded by the third implication mentioned above, and the *Preterist* approach, beloved by many biblical scholars and commentators, would be excluded on the basis of the first and the second. Finally, the application of this 'theological' approach to the compositional structure of the text yields further important insights, as outlined in the next section.

### **Applying the new approach to the text**

The lack of clarity and scholarly consensus regarding the interpretation of the Book of Revelation is nowhere more apparent than in attempts to understand how the main part of the text is composed and structured. The famous observation of Adela Yarbro Collins is as pertinent today as it was when it was written in the 1970's: "In current research on the book of Revelation, there is very little consensus on the overall structure of the work and how that structure should be interpreted. There are as many outlines of the book as there are interpreters".<sup>45</sup> Except for wide agreement on the presence of a Prologue (Rev 1,1-8), an Epilogue (22,6-21) and a preliminary part consisting of the inaugural vision (Rev 1,9-20) and the messages to the seven churches (chs 2-3), there is a total lack of agreement on the basic structure of the main part of the book (Rev 4,1-22,5). This is evidently an area where subjectivity and arbitrariness are rampant.<sup>46</sup>

However, as with the clarification of the temporo-spatial framework of the text above, the liturgical imagery of the heavenly Sanctuary also imparts some degree of clarity and objectivity to the determination of literary structure, due to its precise chronological order. So when we move from the image to the word, that is to say from temple-liturgical imagery to the literary composition and structure of the text itself, we can start by defining this orderly sequence of liturgical actions and events.

#### *1. The 'Baseline Prophetic Narrative'*

The first thing to note is that the visions of the main part of the text (Rev 4,1-22,5) are structured in three successive series of judgments; the breaking of the 7 seals leads to the blowing of the 7 trumpets which ends in the outpouring of the 7 bowls of libation, all of which are determined

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<sup>44</sup> The application of this formula, derived from Ps 90,4, conforms exactly with its use in 2Pet 3,8, as a way of explaining the delay in Christ's Second Coming, in this case softened by the vision of his messianic interregnum (cf. Richard Bauckham, 'The Delay of the Parousia', *The Tyndale Bulletin*, 31, 1980; 19-36).

<sup>45</sup> *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2001; 8.

<sup>46</sup> Here, following Pierre Prigent, we enter "this overly plowed field with the hope of gleaning some fruits" (*Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, 93), hoping to avoid "the troubling sphere of subjectivity" by adhering to his caution: "A structure, an outline (and therefore an intention) should only be identified if it appears clearly" (op. cit. 96).

by the progress of the liturgy in heaven. The text is indeed written as a narrative of successive events, which departs from the Ascension of Christ and extends up to, and just beyond, the end of history. Although punctuated with a few interruptions, which we will deal with later, the orderly structure of this narrative, which we will call the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’, can be clarified in the following way:

4,1-11	Initial vision of the throne of God in heaven	
5,1-14	Preparations for the breaking of the 7 Seals of the scroll	
6,1-2	Breaking of the 1st Seal	
6,3-4	Breaking of the 2nd Seal	
6,5-6	Breaking of the 3rd Seal	
6,7-8	Breaking of the 4th Seal	
6,9-11	Breaking of the 5th Seal	
6,12 – 7,1	Breaking of the 6th Seal	
7,2-17		INTERRUPTION
8,1	Breaking of the 7 <sup>th</sup> Seal	
8,2-6	Preparations for the blowing of the 7 Trumpets	
8,7	Blowing of the 1st Trumpet	
8,8-9	Blowing of the 2nd Trumpet	
8,10-11	Blowing of the 3rd Trumpet	
8,12-13	Blowing of the 4th Trumpet	
9,1-12	Blowing of the 5th Trumpet	
9,13-21	Blowing of the 6th Trumpet	
10,1 – 11,14		INTERRUPTION
11,15-19	Blowing of the 7th Trumpet	
12,1 – 15,5		INTERRUPTION
15,6-8	Preparations for the outpouring of the 7 Bowls	
16,1-2	Outpouring of the 1st Bowl	
16,3	Outpouring of the 2nd Bowl	
16,4-7	Outpouring of the 3rd Bowl	
16,8-9	Outpouring of the 4th Bowl	
16,10-11	Outpouring of the 5th Bowl	
16,12-16	Outpouring of the 6th Bowl	
16,17-21	Outpouring of the 7th Bowl	
17,1 – 19,5		INTERRUPTION
19,6 – 22,5	The fulfilment of the Plan of God:	
19,6-10	The announcement of the wedding of the Lamb	
19,11-16	The manifestation of the ‘Lord of lords and King of kings’	
19,17-21	The Battle of the Great Day (at Harmagedon, cf. 16,16)	
20,1-10	The history and condemnation of Satan	
20,11-15	The final Judgment	
21,1-8	The new Creation	
21,9 – 22,5	The new Jerusalem – the Wife of the Lamb.	

There is no question here of the repetition or ‘recapitulation’ of the series of seven seals, trumpets or bowls. Instead, reflecting the temporal progression of the heavenly liturgy, the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’ progresses in a linear fashion, like a telescope extending and giving greater attention and detail to the final elements. The seventh and last member of each series of seven judgments not only brings us up to the verge of the eschatological climax, but also gives rise to the next series. As we approach the final consummation, the pace and

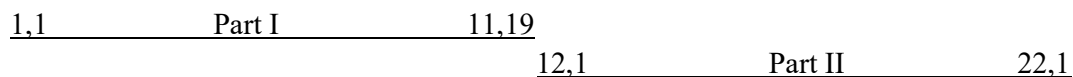
severity of these judgments increases and their terrestrial effects overlap and merge. This explains the similarity of some of the judgments in the different series (especially between Rev 8,8-9 and 16,3), without resorting to theories of repetition or recapitulation.

Before going on to examine the interruptions, a few words are needed on the end-point of the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’, which we have called the ‘fulfillment of the Plan of God’. This final section describes traditional eschatological events such as the Second Coming of Christ, the defeat of the devil and his agents, the Final Judgment and the new creation. It is straightforward in all respects except for one: after the final Battle, but before the Final Judgment, a thousand year interval is described, in which the devil is said to be chained and the saints and martyrs reign with Christ in the ‘first resurrection’ (Rev 20,4-6). This is the problematic ‘millennium’, which we have already briefly considered as the period of time on earth corresponding to the duration of the liturgy in heaven. We proposed that the key to understand this ‘thousand year’ period is to be found in Psalm 90,4, where it is written: “*In your sight (Lord), a thousand years are like a day, a yesterday that is passing*”. The wording here suggests that the thousand-year reign of Christ, or ‘millennium’, will not be established after the Second Coming, but will be revealed then ‘as a day that is passing’ to those who have not already accepted it.

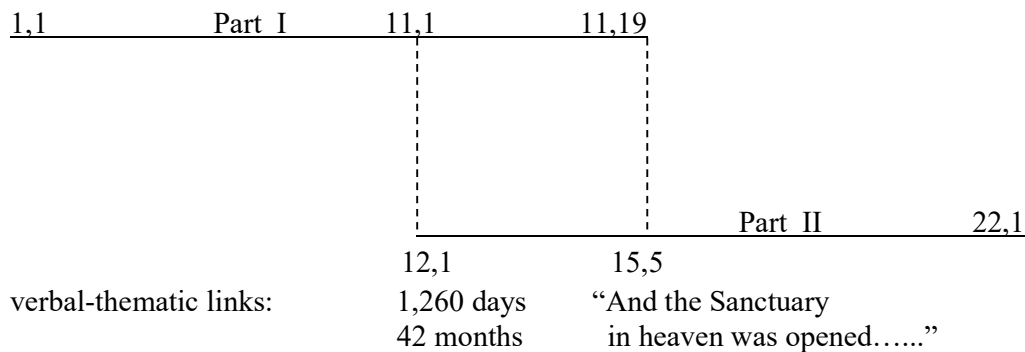
## 2. Interruptions in the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’

We come now to the four substantial interruptions, or intercalations as they are sometimes called, which disturb the orderly sequence of judgments described in the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’. By disrupting the continuity of the visions, these interruptions have caused a lot of confusion among interpreters, so it is essential to make sense of them.

The largest of these interruptions (Rev 12,1–15,4) breaks the continuity of the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’ at the mid-point of the book, and divides it into two more-or-less equal parts:



By means of certain verbal-thematic links between these two parts, and a doublet at 11,19 and 15,5, we discover that the end of Part I overlaps the beginning of Part II, creating a section of overlap:



This overlapping section (11,1–15,5) is connected to the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’ at 11,15-19, and includes those passages which interrupt it at 11,1-14 and at 12,1–15,5. By means of other verbal-

thematic links, we can confirm that all the other interruptions in the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’ are related to this centrally-placed overlapping section:

- a) 7,2-17: the numbered group of 144,000 men (7,2-8) is identical to the assembly of 144,000 men seen on Mt. Zion (14,1-5) and the innumerable crowd of martyrs who pass through the great tribulation (7,9-17) can be identified with the conquerors of the beast (14,2-3; 15,2-4).
- b) 10,1-11: the encounter between the author and the mighty angel forms the background and introduction for the overlapping section (11,1–15,5).
- c) 17,1–19,5: the detailed description of the condemnation and destruction of Babylon refers to the event announced beforehand in the overlapping section (14,8; cf.18,2).

It appears, then, that all four interruptions in the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’ are directly related to the central overlapping section (11,1–15,4), and together they form a prophecy that stands on its own within this narrative. This surprising conclusion brings us to our final task, which is to identify the main purpose and content of this self-contained ‘prophecy within the prophecy’.

### 3. *The prophecy of the overlapping section (11,1–15,5)*

The main characteristics of this part of the text are as follows:

- a) The first point to make is that the overlapping section clearly refers to events that immediately precede the sound of the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet (the last) at the end of history (11,15-19).
- b) Secondly, it occupies the central part of the text (11,1–15,5), and in ancient documents this central part was reserved for the most important information. For example the central part of the Pentateuch, Lev ch.16, contains the description of the most significant event in the ancient Hebrew calendar—the Day of Atonement.
- c) The overlapping of the two parts of this section allow the transmission of a greater amount of information than in one part only, although in a less obvious way.

We can summarize these three points by saying that the overlapping section contains an eschatological prophecy that is presented as the central message of the whole book. To discern the significance of this prophecy, we must examine its opening verses, which scholars consider to be among the most puzzling parts of the text. After his rapture into the heavenly sanctuary in Rev 4, the author finds himself on earth again, in front of a mighty angel telling him to take a little scroll from his hand and eat it:

*“And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey, and when I swallowed it my stomach was made bitter. And they say to me: You must prophesy again about many races and nations and tongues and rulers. And a cane similar to a rod was given to me while saying: Get up and measure the sanctuary of God and the altar and those who are worshipping in it. And reject the court which is outside the sanctuary and do not measure it, because it was given to the nations, and they will trample the Holy City for forty-two months. And I will give to my two witnesses and they will prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days dressed in sackcloth.”* (Rev 10,10–11,3).

Here the author, John, describes a renewal of his prophetic calling, in a way that recalls the vocation of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 2,8–3,3): he is asked to swallow a scroll and is then told he will have to prophecy again. Curiously, though, instead of being commanded to write the prophecy, he was given a measuring rod and was commanded to measure the inner part of the temple,<sup>47</sup> and to

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<sup>47</sup> The Sanctuary God, the altar and those worshipping there correspond to the three main elements of the inner court of the ancient temple at Jerusalem (cf. Ezek 40,47).

reject the outer part. Immediately after this command, the theme of prophecy returns with the prophetic mission of the two witnesses.

To be coherent with its prophetic context, the only way to interpret the divine command to measure the temple is as a metaphor for the command to prophesy again. This is certainly not the only instance of a metaphorical command in the NT: another example is when Jesus asked Peter three times whether he loved him, and then commanded him “*Feed my sheep*” (Jn 21,17). Just as neither Jesus nor Peter were sheep farmers, we must not assume that John was a construction worker. We can only start to make sense of these commands when we realize they are metaphorical expressions, and as such they convey a deeper, more spiritual meaning than would be possible with ordinary speech. As Peter received his pastoral role in a metaphorical way, so here John is being given a prophetic role in metaphorical terms that convey its spiritual purpose and significance.

As an aside, please note that immediately following the above passage in John’s Gospel, where Peter receives his pastoral commission from the risen Lord, he turns to the beloved disciple and asks “*what about him?*” The Lord’s answer has puzzled generations of Christians: “*If I want him to remain until I come, what is it to do with you?*” (Jn 21,22). It is of great significance that the metaphorical command given to John in this part of the Book of Revelation explains exactly how and, in what sense, ‘he remains until Jesus comes’: John will be engaged in the task of measuring the temple until Christ comes at the end of history. This link also confirms the identification of the beloved disciple in John’s Gospel with John, the author of the Book of Revelation.

Returning to the command given to John, we note that it refers metaphorically to his participation in the construction of the new temple, which, as in other parts of the NT (cf. Eph 2,19-22; 1 Pet 2,4-10; Heb 12,22-24; Rev 3,12), is a metaphor for the People of God, the Church. The measuring rod he is given is a metaphor for the prophecy and the act of measuring represents the act of witnessing the prophecy. The spiritual purpose of witnessing the prophecy given to John is therefore to help in the edification of the more holy, inner part of the Church, and to bring about its separation from the profane outer part of the Church.<sup>48</sup>

There is more to follow: clearly John witnessed this prophecy by writing it down, but the first event he recorded describes how it will be publicly announced by two witnesses, or prophets. As the first event recorded in John’s prophecy, the mission of these two prophets will therefore have the effect of ‘realizing’ the prophecy and with the ‘realization’ of the prophecy, there will be no further need to witness it. So the mission of the two witnesses, and their public announcement of the prophecy, will complete precisely what John was commanded to do: to measure the inner part of the temple, and to reject the outer part, which is to say that this mission helps to complete the preparation of the Church for the last days.

The part of the prophecy with this function terminates with the completion of the new temple, which is indicated in the text, as in the Old Testament (Exod 40,34-35; 1 Kgs 8,10-13), by the filling of the sanctuary with the smoke of the Power and Glory of God (Rev 15,8). This event coincides with the opening of the heavenly sanctuary, which is described at the conclusion of the overlapping section (11,19 and 15,5).

So without going into the more complex issues of exegesis at this stage, let us sum up by saying that this central section of text brings together all the various interruptions in the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’ and defines them as a self-contained ‘prophecy within a prophecy’. The prophecy relates to events in a final but brief period of history, immediately preceding the seventh

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<sup>48</sup> The prophecy therefore acts as a ‘canon’ within the canon.



and last trumpet. It has a specific role in the edification and perfecting of the Church, and will be publicly announced at a certain time by two witnesses of Christ. The content of the prophecy is given in the part we have called the overlapping section (11,1–15,4) and in the two other interruptions linked to this (Rev 7 and 17–18). If you study these passages, you will see that the prophecy deals with the brief and imminent reign of the ‘beast from the sea’ (11,7; 13,1-8; ch 17), aided by a false prophet (13,11-17), their persecution of the faithful (7,9-17; 15,2-4), their consecration of the third temple in Jerusalem (13,13) and their destruction of the historical centre of Christianity in Rome (17,15-18). This prophecy constitutes the central message of the Book of Revelation.

### Summary

The Book of Revelation is one of the most difficult books in the biblical canon. Because of its obscurity, many centuries passed before it was fully accepted into the biblical canon of the Eastern Church. Despite concerted exegetical effort up to the present time, there is still no consensus on what the text is about: a multiplicity of diverse interpretations have been proposed representing a variety of approaches, all based on different assumptions about its temporal context. Underlying this variety of approaches is the question of how the visions in the text relate to each other and to the events of history.

The way out of this interpretive impasse is to identify within the text a temporal framework which can indicate the way the visions relate to each other and to the events they portray. With the help of the tractates Tamid and Yoma in the Mishnah, this temporal framework can be identified as the progress of a liturgy that takes place in the Sanctuary surrounding the throne of God in heaven: a liturgy that corresponds to the service on the Day of Atonement in the second temple. Among the general implications of this ‘theological’ approach are three principles which can help to guide further interpretation of the text: 1) the basically linear progression of the vision narrative; 2) the yet-to-be-fulfilled, eschatological prophecy of the main part of the book, from chapter 8 to the end; 3) the ‘inaugurated millennial’ (often called the ‘amillennial’) interpretation of the thousand year reign of Christ described in Rev 20,4-6.<sup>49</sup> Adoption of these three principles would help to bring about greater consensus among scholars involved in interpreting this challenging text and when applied to the main part of the text, this ‘theological’ approach yields further insights into its central message, as outlined in the final part of this paper.

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<sup>49</sup> The term ‘amillennial’ is slightly misleading in that it implies that advocates of this approach do not believe in the millennium. They do indeed believe in the millennium, but not as a specific period of time in the future, as premillennialists do. As a more accurate term for ‘amillennialism’, G.K. Beale has proposed ‘inaugurated millennialism’ (G.K. Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, *JSNTSup* 166, Sheffield: Academic, 1998; 356-57).